

Victor BK4: Ch14

Book 4: Chapter 14: Cultivation Chamber

Tronk stepped to the side, leaning against a nearby garden sculpture—a stone depiction of a bird with expansive plumage, sort of like a peacock. Valla also moved off the path, looking at Victor. He shrugged and approached the porcelain lady, fishing one of his prize tokens out of his storage ring.

“Ahh, yes. You may proceed, though please do not dally. People will be lining up to use the Stone soon.” Her lips hardly moved on her smooth, painted face, and she spoke before Victor was within five feet of her, apparently able to confirm the token from a distance.

“Um, can my friend come with me?”

“You may bring a companion. Though, again, please do not linger long with the Stone.” She gestured with one of her fragile-looking arms toward the open gateway, and Victor glanced from one silent, armored guard to the other. They didn’t move at all, and he began to wonder if people were inside those shiny metal carapaces or if they were some sort of automatons; the woman’s strange nature added some weight to that theory in his estimation.

“Come on, Valla.” Victor motioned her forward as he walked past the lady’s stool, stepping under the wrought metal of the gate’s archway. He could hear her behind him as he continued up the path toward the giant, dark monolith. “This one’s bigger than the one inside the Greatbone Mine.”

“It’s bigger than the ones in Persi Gables and Gelica, too,” Valla said from behind him, her voice hushed.

“Do you think those guards were people? How would they stand so still?” Victor spoke over his shoulder as he continued up to the looming pillar, eyes struggling to follow the shifting, strange runes beneath its surface.

“I don’t know, Victor, but nothing would surprise me in this place. Can you believe the scale of it?” Valla moved next to him as he stopped before the monolith.

“Yeah, this citadel is ridiculous. So, in the mine, I just had to put my hand on it. Guess this one’s the same?”

“They all work that way.” Valla nodded, reaching toward the stone. When her pale blue hand touched the dark surface, it crackled and popped, and she yelped, yanking her hand back. “It shocked me!”

“Well, you don’t have one of these.” Victor held up his token and winked at her; then he touched his palm to the stone. A System menu appeared in his vision,

but this one was very different from the one he'd seen from the Stone in the Greatbone Mine.

Coloss Prize Token Exchange

Current Treasures Available for Exchange Services

"Huh. It's a really limited menu. Can the ruler of a town or city change how the stone works?"

"Oh yes. Whoever founds a settlement gains full control of the Stone and its services. As they grow the community, the System grants them more and more services, but they don't have to share any of it with the populace."

"Well, this one only lists two options—current treasures in exchange for tokens and 'services.' I'll see what kind of services there are first." Victor touched the second option, and another menu opened:

Coloss City Services

Acquire Coloss City Citizenship - 2 Prize Tokens, revocation of current citizenship. City-to-City Transportation - Varied.

Victor grunted and touched the second option.

City-to-City Transportation - Concentrate on your destination.

"Huh," Victor said again, his brow creasing as he tried to concentrate on Fanwath. His mind immediately pictured Persi Gables and the way it had looked from the hilltop out on the plains when he and Valla had first approached it.

Transport to Fanwath

Largest Hub - Tharcray - 3 Prize Tokens Specified Hub - Persi Gables - 5 Prize Tokens

"How far is Tharcray from Persi Gables? Would it be hard to get back to Persi Gables from there?"

"It's far, but we could afford airship transport. We'd make it in less than a week. Why?"

"Sec," Victor replied, then he backed out of the menu and selected the option again, this time focusing on Tucson. He pictured the University of Arizona campus, at least the parts you could see from Speedway, where he'd driven by so many times with friends and family members. Before he could let his mind drift down memory lane, the screen changed, and a message appeared:

Invalid Selection - This location is not a System world.

"Figures," he muttered, moving back through the menu to the first page and selecting the "current treasures" option.

Available Treasure Exchange

Elixir of Regeneration - 1 Prize Token Racial Boost - Basic - 1 Prize Token Racial Boost - Improved - 2 Prize Tokens Alchemical Ingredient - Advanced - 2 Prize Tokens Racial Boost - Advanced - 3 Prize Tokens Cultivation Breakthrough - 3 Prize Tokens Alchemical Ingredient - Epic - 5 Prize Tokens Racial Boost - Epic - 5 Prize Tokens (2 Available) Stone of Sentience - 5 Prize Tokens Alchemical Ingredient - Legendary - 10 Prize Tokens Stone of Consciousness - 10 Prize Tokens (3 Available) Epic Light Weapon - 10 Prize Tokens Epic Heavy Weapon - 10 Prize Tokens Epic Ranged Weapon - 12 Prize Tokens Epic Energy Focus - 12 Prize Tokens Random Legendary Treasure - 20 Prize Tokens

“Chingado,” Victor breathed.

“What? Tell me!” Valla nudged Victor’s shoulder roughly, and he pulled his hand away from the stone.

“Here,” he said, holding out the prize token. “Check it out.”

While Valla tentatively touched the Stone and then her eyes went glassy, Victor thought about the options. He could return to Fanwath immediately if he wanted, but that would leave Valla high and dry. He figured the two of them ought to be able to earn another three prize tokens fairly easily, so he felt some relief knowing there was a bright light at the end of the tunnel. Still, Victor was very curious about some of the more expensive items.

It seemed like the stones of sentience and consciousness were meant to awaken a weapon or, maybe, another item. What would happen if he used one on his helmet, for instance? He wondered why the Warlord didn’t offer specific weapons rather than just categories of weapons as prizes. “Nah, it’s obvious—he wants more people to spend more tokens trying to get the perfect prize.”

“Hmm? Oh, the categories? I agree,” Valla mumbled, still deeply engrossed in her study of the lists.

“I wonder what a legendary treasure is like, hmm?” Victor asked, nudging her.

“Oh, me too. I don’t even know how to categorize treasures into tiers like that. What makes a weapon epic or legendary?”

“Good question.”

“I’d sure like to get a stone of consciousness for Blue Razor. Even the sentience one; if she could feel, she might grow in power.”

“Is that how that works?”

“I think . . .” Valla said, her words soft and trailing away as she continued to stare into space. “If you select the reward, it gives a brief description. Did you notice that?”

“What? No! I was afraid it would take my token if I touched the options.”

“Well, I was right; it says that sentient weapons and other items can grow in power ‘through their experiences.’ Conscious items are the same, though they grow more quickly and can communicate. Lifedrinker must be conscious!”

“I coulda told you that,” Victor scoffed. “She’s real, Valla.”

“I never questioned that . . .”

“Right, right. Sorry.” Victor shook his head and added, “Thayla was always messing with me about Lifedrinker. You’ve never given me any shit.”

“Correct.” Valla smiled as she spoke, and a few seconds later, she said, “The racial advancement items all have the same description, though the higher-tier ones are supposedly more potent. I have a feeling there are myriad items in each category; the warlord must have experts able to tell the strength of the treasures he puts in the exchange.”

“Well, yeah, that would make sense.”

“They seem quite reasonably priced, the racial boosts. How many ranks do you think an epic one would give?”

“No idea, but, yeah, I wish I had around fifty tokens so I could mess around with this stuff. Anyway, we better head out before that porcelain lady gets pissed.”

“Right,” Valla said, shaking her head slightly as she pulled away from the stone. She passed Victor’s token back to him and added, “At the very least, we need to earn three more tokens. Unless we find another way home in the meantime.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Victor turned and walked down the path and through the gate in the fence. Tronk straightened up and lifted his thick lips into a smile at their approach.

“Done?” he rumbled, reaching up to rub at the stubble on his heavy chin.

“Yeah, we need to earn more tokens.” Victor laughed and shook his head ruefully. “Some cool stuff available in there.”

“Oh, aye. The warlord knows ‘is people; everyone works for ‘is prize tokens, tradin’ their greatest treasures away. Well, not everyone. You’ll find plenty o’ nice things for sale in Coloss.” He shrugged and then added, “Where to?”

“How long until the warlord’s celebration? I’m supposed to show up for that.”

“Hrmm. Sun’s just set. Maybe three hours, maybe four.”

“Do you know of a secure place where Victor can consume the heart he won? He’d like to use a rather dangerous spell when he does it.” Valla stepped forward, glancing sidelong at the silent porcelain lady as she approached Tronk.

“Wait. Valla, I can’t eat that now. Last time I advanced my race, I was out for days.”

“What’s yer racial rank?” Tronk asked, peering quizzically at Victor from beneath the heavy rim of his helmet.

“Uh,” Victor glanced at Valla, and she shrugged, so he said, “Improved-four.”

Tronk frowned, noisily clearing his throat and then swallowing. “You could use the warlord’s cultivation chamber—nothin’ you could muster would hurt that place, and the Energies in there would have ya up on yer feet in no time.”

“He wouldn’t mind?” Victor stared at the giant skeptically.

“Nar, he said ta give ya a tour an’ ta keep ya busy.” Tronk shrugged, and a slow smile spread on his face as he kept rubbing at his chin. “He lets Tronk use it.”

“Well . . .” Victor began, but Valla nudged him and interrupted.

“That’s a very kind offer, Tronk. Victor would love the opportunity.”

Tronk nodded and grunted, straightening up, “Follow me.” He turned and started stomping down the garden path, away from the City Stone and toward one of the side exits.

Victor glanced at the completely still porcelain lady and her two silver-plated guards, then waved awkwardly. The porcelain lady’s painted eyes swiveled in their sockets and fell upon him, then her red-painted lips curled up into a smile. Victor returned the smile, though his looked more like a grimace, and hurried after Tronk.

“Kinda weird, don’t you think?” he asked Valla as they followed after the giant.

“That a great master would let a near stranger use his cultivation room? Yes.”

“No, I meant that the porcelain lady didn’t say anything or even move when we came out.”

“I’m fairly certain she’s a construct, built to serve a purpose and not to have a personality.”

“I don’t know . . . she smiled at me. Did you mean that about the cultivation room? Is it weird that Tronk’s taking us there? Do you think the warlord will be pissed?”

“Nar,” Tronk rumbled from up ahead, and Victor frowned, thumping his fist against his forehead. Of course, a powerful Energy user would have good

hearing. “He don’t care. Warlord’s been takin’ a break from cultivatin’. His chamber’s brim full; he even let’s some o’ the other Fists use it.”

Victor looked at Valla and shrugged, and they continued to follow Tronk through the vaulted, highway-wide hallways and up massive stone stairwells where high steps were laid out next to ones half as tall. Victor and Valla climbed the shorter steps, and Tronk lumbered up the giant-sized flight. They continued this way, meandering through seemingly endless tunnels and climbing six more flights of stone steps before they came to their first doorway; a Degh-sized pair of bronze, rune-inscribed doors shimmering slightly with the Energy that held them secure.

“Are we at the top?” Valla asked.

“Near ‘nuff,” Tronk nodded.

“We didn’t pass any rooms! Just massive corridors . . .” Valla’s voice trailed off as Tronk rumbled a reply, interrupting her.

“Oh, there are plenty ‘o rooms in this great building. We took the soldier path, though, where the warlord’s troops move when ‘tis time to fight invaders.”

“Does that happen often?” Valla pressed.

“Nar; every ‘undred years or so.”

“How old are you?” Victor asked before he could stop himself.

“Me? Three ‘undred and some.” Tronk shrugged, his metal pauldrons scrapping noisily against his breastplate with the movement.

“Damn.” Victor nodded, figuring it made sense. If Rellia was sixty or so and tier-five, the high-tier people in Coloss must be quite a lot older. Then he thought about his own rather meteoric rise and amended his estimation—it would take someone centuries unless they had high Energy affinity. Putting his thoughts together like that, he gave Valla an appraising look, really consciously appreciating her accomplishment for the first time; she had to be one of the youngest tier-five people on all of Fanwath. Even Lam was near twice her age.

“Tronk, where are all the soldiers?” Valla asked, and Victor realized she’d made a good point; they’d hardly passed anyone as they traversed the citadel, only a scurrying servant here or there, usually laden with some sort of burden like heavy-looking baskets or laundry.

Tronk just shrugged and didn’t offer any sort of reply; instead, he reached toward a smooth spot on the right-side door, resting his palm on the metal. With a shimmer and a click, the Energy barrier faded away, and the door popped ajar by a fraction of an inch. A wash of powerful Energy seemed to flow through that tiny crack in the doorway, and Victor’s mouth filled with saliva as his body began to gravitate toward the door.

Valla made a small sound, like a gasp and a cry, and she rushed past him, reaching for the edge of the door, clearly intending to pull it wide, but Tronk reached down and grabbed hold of her wrist.

“Nar, little blue one. Let the big man in first, and if there’s time, I’ll let ya cultivate for a while in there.” His voice was calm and rumbled out of his big chest pleasantly, but Victor noticed that Valla had stopped short at his touch, and she nodded quickly, visibly battling with herself as she backed away from the door.

“In ya go, titan-blood,” Tronk said, nodding to Victor.

“Titan-blood?” Victor had gained control of himself pretty easily while he watched Valla struggle, and now he stood before the door, basking in the rich Energy but wanting to know what Tronk knew of his bloodline.

“Yar, Warlord was excited to see ya in the arena when yer blood woke up. Reminded him o’ the old Degh the way we was ‘afore our ancestor stone was busted an’ Horc killed the Wyrms at the center o’ the Degh mountains.” As he spoke, the big man’s words were thick with emotion, and Victor felt a sadness—a loss—emanating from him that nearly made his eyes well up. Tronk’s heavy lips curled down toward his prodigious chin, and Victor could see he was reliving some memory or another and that it was painful to him.

“Your people aren’t what they once were?” Valla asked; apparently, she’d acclimated to the rich Energy in the air enough to speak—that, or Tronk’s words had affected her, too.

“That’s puttin’ it light. Nar, we used to rule this world, we Degh. Long ‘afore my time, though. ‘Tis fine, though. I’m good and tough. Good enough.” He shrugged and nodded as though he’d just talked himself into something.

“But the warlord remembers how things were back then?” Victor glanced at Valla skeptically. “How old is he?”

“Dunno. Thousands o’ years, though. Don’t think any in Coloss are older.” Tronk rapped his huge knuckles against the metal of the door and pulled it open a couple of feet. “In ya go now, titan-blood. Make us proud.”

Victor nodded and gave Valla a quick glance.

“Go on,” she urged. And Victor stepped into the thick Energy. As he looked about, taking in the chamber, he heard the massive door click shut behind him and felt the buzz of the Energy field coming back to life, sealing it tight. The room was shaped like the inside of a stone ball. The only part that wasn’t curved was where the tall metal doors met the concave walls and ceiling. Steps rose from the base of the door up to a stone pedestal that sat in the middle of the spherical chamber.

As he slowly climbed the—human-sized—steps, Victor studied the walls, noting that thousands of little rune-inscribed bronze discs were mounted into the stone. To him, it looked like they were caps, as though they covered something. “Like maybe whatever all this Energy is coming from,”

Victor said, nodding to himself as he reached the pedestal. Standing there, inside the round room, he could feel the waves of Energy washing over him, coming from every direction.

The top of the spherical chamber was probably ten feet over his head, and the walls were just as far away; the pedestal put him dead in the middle of the space. "Huh. Maybe I'll sit down," Victor muttered, dropping down and putting himself into a lotus position on the stone platform. He took the jar containing the spine fiend heart out of his storage ring and set it on the floor before him, then he rested his hands on his knees and took several deep breaths, savoring the rich flow of Energy in the air.

"I wonder how fast I could level my Core if I sat in a place like this all the time? I wonder how hard it would be to make a space like this. I bet all those bronze discs have natural treasures under them." Suddenly Victor wondered if Tronk was wrong about the warlord being okay with him using the cultivation chamber. What if he found out and flew there to yank Victor out and smash him like a bug? "Better get this going while I still can," Victor chuckled, and then he built his pattern for Berserk, took a deep breath, and allowed his rage-attuned Energy to populate his pathways.