

## Victor BK4: Ch16

Book 4: Chapter 16: A Sleeping Giant

“Ah! Victor! The champion of the lower tier tourney, everyone!” The warlord’s words held a tint of amusement that bordered on scorn, at least in Victor’s mind, and he had a hard time finding a friendly expression as he strode toward the dais. Only the people mingling nearby bothered to turn at the warlord’s words, halting their conversations long enough to observe the minor spectacle.

“He’s a big one for a Deshi,” one of the scantily-clad Vesh women hanging about near the warlord’s thronelike chair said, her lips curling into a seductive smile, exposing fangs that complimented her lupine eyes and long, black claws.

“Not a Deshi, Tawnla, not a Deshi,” the warlord said, holding up a hand as though to push the words back into the woman’s mouth. “No, Victor is a man from another world, entirely, and his bloodline is quite potent, as you’d know if you’d managed to look away from your cup of wine during his match!”

Victor stood before the dais, dozens of eyes on him, but hundreds of others seemed utterly unaware or uncaring of his arrival, which was fine by him. Valla and Tronk stood back near one of the refreshment tables, watching, he was sure, to see how this would play out. “Warlord,” he said, sketching a half-bow that would have been sloppy if his body were capable of ungraceful movements.

It seemed the more he advanced his racial traits, the more palpable were the effects of his superhuman attributes. He’d noticed it before as he progressed, feeling stronger, healthier, his fingers more nimble, but this latest advancement was the most tangible. He wondered if there were certain “hard caps” on attributes governed by a person’s racial advancement.

Though Victor’s strength and agility were the same after his ordeal in the cultivation chamber, he felt significantly more potent and agile. More than that, he felt sharper—nuances of expression and the repercussions of his words were more obvious. He still felt like himself, but it was more like his average, his baseline, was what his most inspired moments used to be.

“I welcome you, Victor . . . tell me, from whence do you hail? Have you a surname or a title you’d like me to use?”

“I . . . I have a few, Warlord, but I’d be happy to simply be known as Victor of Tucson, the place of my birth.” Victor wasn’t sure why he said those words, but he imagined it had something to do with nostalgia; he knew he’d likely never go back to Tucson, but it felt good to remind himself and the universe that it existed and that he had roots none of them would or could ever understand.

“You heard it! Victor of Tucson! What a show you put on for us today! I must say, you appear different to me. Have you already partaken of your grand prize?”

Victor breathed deeply, contemplating his words as he looked around the crowded hall. Musicians played loudly from a stage off to his left, and people mingled and danced in every direction—the

warlord's dais stood at the center of the room, though it was hardly the center of attention. To his right, where Valla and Tronk stood, were rows and rows of tables laden with meats, fruits, steaming platters, magically heated pots and trays, and piles of pastries. His stomach rumbled as he cleared his throat to reply.

"I did, thank you. I used your cultivation chamber at Tronk's insistence." He smiled, baring his perfect, straight, white teeth, devoid of cavities or fillings and strong enough to bite through a plank of oak.

"Oho? Tronk's been known to take liberties with my chamber, but this is a new level! Hah! Well, Victor, how would you like to have access to that chamber for another month? I'd let you use it whenever you found it convenient."

"For a month, Warlord?" Victor asked, stepping a bit closer. He noticed the warlord didn't have any guards, didn't seem to mind people crowding around his chair, and didn't shy away but rather leaned forward as Victor approached.

"That's right. You won the tournament, so you've gained a wild card entry into the Gazra's Day Tournament next month. Naturally, you'd be competing under my flag, and I can't have you wanting for training opportunities."

"I'm not familiar with the tournaments or, well, any of the customs in this world, sir," Victor said, rubbing his chin. "Is it different from today's tournament?"

"Yes! It's grander, Victor, and champions from the twelve great cities will compete. You'll represent Coloss alongside Yabbo, our current champion. Because we're hosting, Coloss gets two spots on the ladder."

"Yabbo? I didn't see him today."

"You must not have watched the mid-tier tournament, hmm? Oh, I didn't mention that the Gazra's Day tournament is mid-tier only. You'll need to work on your level a bit, but I think you'll do well, Victor." The warlord spoke offhandedly as though it wasn't a big deal at all, but Victor's throat caught mid-swallow.

"Ahem," Victor glanced at the people watching the conversation—a dozen or so Vesh of varying sizes and animalistic natures. He saw how their eyes gleamed hungrily though their lips smiled pleasantly. "I'm yet to reach tier-four, Warlord."

"True, but you're so strong for your level, Victor! Think of the glory you'll achieve for Coloss should you win a match or two! I'm sure you can make your way to tier-five before the tournament, don't you think? I'll give you access to my chamber, and you can train with Yabbo. Why, I heard you're signed up for a monster hunt leaving in two days! Surely you'll gain a level or two fighting desert wyrms!"

“I . . .” Victor shrugged—it wouldn’t hurt to act like he was willing to go along with things for now; if he found a way off this world before the tournament and wanted to bail, at least he’d have some time to use the warlord’s facilities. “I’ll give it a try. If I don’t make it to tier-five, I’ll be disqualified?”

“No, no, no,” the warlord chuckled, “I’ll sign an exception. Trust me, Victor, you’re going to bring glory to Coloss, even if you’re a bit under-level. That reminds me! Doesn’t Black owe you a prize?” He spoke to the gathered nobility, his voice suddenly cutting through the noise of the hall. “Black!” the word, spoken like a summons, echoed through the great room, and Victor suddenly felt an inkling of the aura the warlord was holding in check—a power so dense, so concentrated, he felt like he was standing next to a bomb primed to explode.

The warlord looked like a handsome human, though a strange one with white feathers for hair, even his eyebrows. His wings were folded and hung behind him, giving the illusion of a chair back, but as the warlord shifted, Victor saw that his “throne” was a fancy stool. His white, feathery eyebrows narrowed as his summons went unanswered for a few seconds, but then the smile returned to his lips as he heard something Victor could not. “He comes.” The warlord nodded and motioned for Victor to step to the side.

Victor turned toward the wide-open double doors, past the throng of servants lingering about with trays of refreshments to offer guests as they arrived. A few heartbeats passed, and then heavy clanking steps echoed over the hubbub of the crowd, and a familiar figure loomed into view, stomping through the open doors—the giant Degh, still clad in black plate armor, though his head was now uncovered.

Black was a big Degh, though not any larger than his son, and he didn’t seem so intimidating to Victor—not after he’d cowered behind his great shield in the face of Victor’s rage in the arena. A part of Victor’s mind, the more rational, intelligent part, knew the war captain likely hadn’t wanted to fight him, not because he was afraid, but because he didn’t want to anger the warlord any further. Still, Victor stood tall and watched him approach impassively.

“Warlord,” Black rumbled, coming to a stop in front of the dais next to Victor and bowing his head.

“War Captain. Thank you for being so prompt. My new charge, Victor of Tucson, is weary and would like to retire soon. Have you some words for him?” The warlord wore a sardonic smile and shifted on his chair to lean sideways, crossing one long, silk-clad leg over the other.

“Aye,” Black said, pivoting to face Victor, looking down from atop his boulder-like armored chest. “Congratulations on your victory today. I’m sorry I intervened, but I have only one son and am willing to pay the consequences for keeping him alive.”

“Thank you,” Victor said, then he glanced around, noting that the hall had grown far quieter than when he’d been speaking to the warlord alone. He raised his

voice, speaking so that more people could easily hear, and said, "I can't blame you. I'd do just about anything for the people I love, too."

"Well said!" the warlord crowed, clapping his hands together. Victor was startled as the sound that emerged from their contact was more a \*boom\* than a clap, and the spell of silence that seemed to have hung over the hall was dispersed—people again began to talk and laugh, and the music took on new life, increasing in intensity. "And Victor's prize?" the warlord asked, more quietly, his words directed at Black.

"Yes." Black produced a polished wooden box engraved with silvery runes. It was about the size of a shoebox, and he held it out on one giant palm toward Victor. War Captain Black was not a young man; he had gray and black hair, grizzled stubble, and wrinkled, extra skin sagging around his pale brown eyes, but he managed a smile that looked genuine as Victor reached toward his offered prize. "I learned, during the tournament, that you have a spirit Core. This is a prize that sat in my family's vaults for generations, waiting for a scion who could make use of it."

As Victor took the box, heavier than it looked, into his hands, the warlord said, "Tell us more, Black. What's this ancient treasure, and what's it got to do with a spirit Core? Surely not some dusty heirloom you found convenient to foist off on this newcomer?"

"Nay, Warlord, not a foisting, but an exceptional prize. Can ya nay feel the Energy coming from that shielded box?" As the war captain spoke, Victor knew his words were true; he felt a tingling sensation in the palms of his hands where they touched the wood. They itched with it, and he felt a deep urge to rip the box open, exposing the contents. He knew that if his will weren't so strong, he'd struggle to resist the temptation. As it was, though, Victor held the box close and looked to the warlord, listening to his conversation with Black.

"I feel it, aye. Okay, enough mysteries. Tell us!"

"'Tis a fragment of one of my ancestors. A piece of a mighty ancestor's soul—a shard of the ancestor stone itself. Silent these many generations, waiting for one of our kind to be able to commune with it. We've not had a spirit Core among us since the fracture, and the Degh wise ones fear we never will. Now, here comes a man with titan blood in his veins, with a mighty connection to the spirit realm, and here I am, beholden to him. Some in my clan are angry, but the wise ones are in agreement; it's not chance that Victor came here; our ancestor awaits him."

The hall had grown quiet again, and Victor got the impression that Black rarely spoke at such length. He felt emotions warring within him at the giant's words—honor, pride, sympathy, sorrow,

even shame. Why shame, he wondered, but he knew the answer; was he really deserving? “I . . . thank you, War Captain,” he said as the eyes in the hall fell on him.

“Well said! A prize well given and well received! Let us rejoice! Victor,” the warlord said, his words breaking the spell in the hall once again, signaling a return to revelry, “I trust you’ll allow me to provide accommodations to you and your companion? Stay as long as you like, but when you’re ready to retire, Tronk will show you to your quarters. Think long and hard about my offer; I’d love to help you improve over the next few weeks and do Coloss proud on Gazra’s Day.”

“Thank you, Warlord,” Victor said, bending at the waist ever-so-slightly, still clutching the rune-covered box to his chest. The warlord smiled and then turned to speak to one of the women standing nearby, and though he was only a few feet away, Victor couldn’t make out his words—he’d been dismissed.

“Victor, might I have another word?” Black asked, turning toward him.

“Of course . . .”

“Follow me to the refreshments? My throat is parched.”

“Sure.” Victor followed the war captain through the crowd to one of the tables where pitchers of icy juice and bottles of strangely labeled alcohol were gathered. He saw Valla and Tronk move toward them, but they hung back, perhaps intuiting that he and War Captain Black had more words to exchange.

“Do you understand what I’ve given you?” Black asked as he picked up a large crystal goblet and poured the shimmering green contents of a bottle into it.

“Sort of—I’ve had some experience with spirit shards in the past.”

“This is likely different,” the giant rumbled. “This shard is taken from a massive crystal where, once, our people’s great ancestors continued their existence after living in this world. The shard in that box isn’t a tiny fragment of my ancestor’s soul, but rather most of it—a nearly complete being that lies dormant, waiting for the touch of a Spirit Caster, but not just any Spirit Caster, one with the right bloodline. I believe he’ll speak to you.”

“What happened to your, um, ancestor stone?”

“It’s a long story and not one I’ll enjoy reliving in this crowded hall. Come to me in my estate, sit with me and drink, tell me about what my ancestor says to you, and I’ll share what I know. To be honest, Victor, if you are able to speak to my ancestor in that shard, then you’ll probably know more about the fracture than I do.”

“Are Spirit Casters really so rare here?”

“Among the Degh, aye—unheard of for a hundred generations. There are some among the Vesh, but our ancestors won’t speak to them, won’t even stir.”

“If I come to you,” Victor said, reaching for a goblet and a pitcher of something that looked like fruit punch, “to share what I’ve learned, can you please ask your more . . . enthusiastic supporters to not attack me?”

“Aye. I’ll put the word out. You’ll have my protection going forward. I wish I could tell you more about the shard. I’m not sure how you’re supposed to reach my ancestor, but I hope it will be clear to you as a Spirit Caster. I hope my ancestor will have much to teach you.” The giant lifted his goblet, drained the contents, set it on the table, and reached out to clap Victor on the shoulder. “I’m off—not in the mood to celebrate tonight, but perhaps I will be down the road. Perhaps with my ancestor’s aid, you’ll have something good to share with me.”

He didn’t wait for Victor to respond; War Captain Black stomped out of the hall, walking directly through groups of Vesh and Degh, interrupting conversations and ignoring greetings and curses alike. Victor felt a presence at his elbow and looked down to see Valla. “Hey,” he said, smiling.

“That went well. What an interesting encounter!”

“Yeah, did you hear about the tournament? About the warlord’s invitation to stay here?”

“Yes. Tronk said the invitation extends to us both, me being your ‘companion’ and all.” Valla wore a smirk, and Victor smiled along with her.

“At least you won’t need to worry about Blue messing with you if you’re staying in the warlord’s citadel.”

“What makes you think I don’t want him ‘messing’ with me?” Valla asked with a wink, and Victor’s mouth fell open.

“I . . .”

“When d’ya want Tronk to show yer rooms to ya?” a voice rumbled behind him, and Victor whirled to see the giant, armor-clad man taking a bite from a huge slab of meat, still attached to a bone.

“Can we go now?” Valla asked, and Victor couldn’t blame her; it had been a long day, and he was dog-tired.

“Yeah. That good with you, Tronk?”

“Yar.” Tronk turned and started ambling toward the big doorway, and Victor and Valla followed in his wake. They traversed hallways that were a good deal more narrow than the ones they’d used to get to the cultivation chamber but still plenty

large for Tronk's easy passage. The hall where the celebration was being held was near the ground floor, so their journey included several flights of stone stairs.

These more narrow hallways were often carpeted down the center, and Victor caught himself trying to estimate the size of the carpet rolls needed to furnish a place like the warlord's citadel. "They've got to be enchanted," he said, imagining the need to replace them every few years and the enormous undertaking it would be.

"What?" Valla asked.

"The carpets—I mean, they've got to be enchanted to self-repair, don't you think? Can you imagine replacing miles and miles of carpeting?"

"Yar, they are," Tronk rumbled from up ahead. Valla chuckled, shaking her head.

"You think of strange things, Victor. Are you going to tell me about that box you're clutching to your chest? I heard Black's words when he presented it, but you act like you know more."

"I don't know more, but I feel more," Victor said with a shrug. "It's definitely something powerful, and I know I don't want to put it in a storage container; let's put it that way."

"What will you do with it?"

"Um, well, when we get to our rooms, I'm going to take it out of this box, for starters." He paused, thinking about it, gauging his excitement and measuring it against his exhaustion, and then said, "Yeah. I'm going to take it out of its box and go from there. I have a feeling I'll know what to do." Victor smiled and tucked the box under one arm so he could lower his other hand to give Valla's shoulder a nudge, "You don't expect me to wait around when I've got something this cool to check out, do you?"