

## Victor BK4: Ch17

### Book 4: Chapter 17: A Bargain for Answers

Tronk had shown him and Valla to their suite and then grumbled about being hungry as he walked off down the hallway. He hadn't said whether he'd come back or when, and Victor decided not to worry about it. Their rooms were simple but elegant, with high ceilings, large furniture, and plenty of space.

A central sitting area separated two bedrooms, each with a built-in bathing chamber. The floors and walls were appointed with polished marble, oil paintings, and thick carpets woven from fine materials. The balcony let in the light of the nearly full moon, exposing a view of an entire quarter of the city. The view alone ensured that no inn in the city could compete with the warlord's guest accommodations. Victor opened the balcony doors and stepped outside.

He breathed deeply of the fresh, crisp air, then went back inside to sit on one of the long couches in the central room, staring at the box he'd set on the table when they'd first arrived—the box Black had given him. While not large enough for a Degh, the furniture was comfortable for Victor, and he wondered at that; was it too large for a person Valla's size or for a Vesh? He couldn't ask her because she'd gone into her room and closed the door when they'd arrived, saying something about practicing a cultivation technique Tes had shown her.

He thought about what he was doing; should he get some sleep before he tackled the mystery of Black's gift? Victor laughed, thinking about himself hitting the pillow and how his mind would wander to the idea of an ancient giant ancestor waiting to speak to him through a magical soul shard. There was no way he'd be able to sleep. The next day wasn't going to be taxing, anyway; he and Valla were planning to go shopping and to speak with an alchemist and an artificer—maybe some training if there was time.

Shrugging to himself, Victor pulled the box containing the spirit shard closer. There wasn't a lock on the box, but the sides of the lid had two brass circles, slightly indented on the edge, and when Victor pressed them both with his forefingers, it clicked and popped open. A wash of Energy, warm and vibrant, rolled out of the box, and Victor inhaled deeply, enjoying its feel as images of warm kitchens and family gatherings rushed through his mind.

As the feeling faded and the Energy pulse subsided, he studied the long, jagged crystal resting on the box's padded, black velvet interior. It was about eight inches long, thick as his wrist at the base, tapering to a jagged point on the other end. The center of the crystal pulsed with dim pink light, and the left edge of the shard looked sharp enough to cut flesh. Victor tentatively reached into the box and grasped the shard with his left hand, careful to grip it around the smooth, rounded side and not to squeeze against that sharp edge.

The crystal wasn't warm, as Victor had expected. It felt cool in his palm and slightly rough where he'd thought it would be smooth. He held it closer to his eye, examining the faintly pink surface, and saw it was filled with tiny pores. He gently rubbed his thumb against it, feeling the bumps of the nearly microscopic holes and wondering what the whole crystal had looked like before it had been fractured. Was what he held a significant piece or just a tiny sliver of a massive stone?

“Well . . .” he said, wondering how to proceed but knowing in his gut that he needed to connect to it, to touch the crystal's Energy with his own. “Do I pull

your Energy to me, or do I send my Energy into you? Does it matter?"

Tentatively, Victor reached out with his will, trying to tug at the pink, pulsing heart of the crystal. The Energy was there, dense and powerful, and it slipped from his grasp like sand through a person's fingers. "All right, then. You want to see who you're dealing with first, hmm?"

Victor reached into his Core and pulled out a thread of inspiration-attuned Energy, ready to send it into the crystal, but then he had a second thought. Should he only use a part of his Core, or should he give this ancestor dwelling in the shard a fuller picture of himself? Victor tugged threads of rage and fear-attuned Energy into his pathway, winding them around his inspiration thread. Then, with the woven ribbon firmly held together with his will, he pushed it out through his pathways into the crystal.

Suddenly he felt a tug on his Energy, felt his Core abruptly surge, pushing more and more of it into his pathways as the threads became ribbons, became ropes, became flowing rivers of Energy. The crystal was no longer cool in his hand; it had grown warm and then uncomfortably hot as the pink Energy softly pulsing at the center grew brilliant, the radiant aura expanding like a halo, at first, but then like an enormous bloom, filling Victor's vision and obscuring everything else.

Victor gripped the crystal with one hand and shielded his eyes with the other, trying to focus inwardly on his Core. He saw his Energy drawing low and readied his will, prepared to cut off the flow before he was drained dry. As if anticipating his intentions, though, the surge suddenly stopped, and the flood became a trickle, and he was left with nearly a quarter of his Energy intact. He was just about to look away from his Core when a deep voice rumbled nearby.

"Is it true? A scion at long last? You have a different feel about you, titan-blood. Your Energy is thick and rich with so many flavors—has so much changed?"

Victor opened his eyes to see that he sat in a strange featureless plane. Angles of light and shadow were the only hints of any structure, but sitting cross-legged in front of him, was a being that didn't lack for substance; a giant, with a demeanor and hulking presence that put Black to shame, glowered down at him. He had dark skin covered with runic tattoos etched with bright turquoise, ochre, and emerald inks. His face was stern, with a prominent brow, an aquiline nose, and cheek and jawbones like etched granite.

The giant's eyes blazed with power, a bright pink that matched the Energy Victor had seen in the crystal. Again, the titan cleared his throat and rumbled, "Well? Will you speak, or are you dumb-struck?"

"Well, yeah, I guess I am a little bit—dumb-struck, I mean." Victor cleared his throat and then said, "I'm Victor."

"Victor. Not a name one in my clan would take. You're from one of the others, then, not a Stone Heart? The Black Sun? The Lake Lords?"

"Uh, none of the above. I'm not from your world. Are you aware of how long you've been without a visitor?"

“Time is different here, and I can feel . . . a separation.” The giant scowled, his heavy black brows drawing together. “Where are my kin? My ancestors and brothers? My father and uncles? It’s strange. Tell me, then, stranger, how come you to the Ancestor Stone? Why have my sons not removed your head?”

“Well, I guess you know less than Black thought you would. I have some . . . hard news for you.”

“Go on, speak plainly.” The giant leaned forward, his muscles rippling along his bare chest and midriff. It dawned on Victor that the giant was nearly naked, wearing a simple leather loincloth.

“Well, first of all, I’m new to this world. I’m from Fanwath and Earth before that. One of your descendants awarded me a shard with a powerful spirit. You see, a long time ago, thousands of years, your Ancestor Stone was shattered . . .”

“LIES!” the giant erupted, leaping to his feet, fury on his face. Victor scrambled up also, backing away and holding his hands out.

“I’m not lying! Can’t you tell? Can’t you feel that I’m not being deceptive? What good would it do me to lie about this?”

The giant paced back and forth, scowling, and Victor swore he could see tendrils of steam rising off his tattooed shoulders. “Continue your tale.”

“Well, the Degh who gave me the shard said it was part of the Ancestor Stone, said that he and his people had lost the ability to connect to you through it, that since the shattering, none of them had been born with a spirit Core.”

The giant looked up from where he’d been pacing, brooding, his eyes on the strange, shapeless ground. When those pink, luminescent orbs focused on Victor’s eyes, Victor gazed back, unblinking, unflinching. He had nothing but true words for the giant and wanted him to see that. “No spirit Cores? For thousands of years?”

“A hundred generations, I think, is how he put it.”

“Gods be good,” the giant rumbled softly. “Could it be? Have I languished so long? How did the stone fracture? I remember . . . I remember Bavarak . . . yes, it was Bavarak I last spoke to. Something about a war with the upstarts, the mutants from Ghol. Vesh, I believe they called themselves. Is that how it happened? Did the Vesh crack our Ancestor Stone?”

“I don’t know.” Victor held his hands out, palms up, as though to display his lack of an answer. “I can try to learn more—try to find answers for you.”

“And what of you, Victor? Why come to me? Your blood feels strong; I sense a kinship. You’re no giant, but you’re no weakling, either. Do you seek knowledge?” The brooding giant sat again, a fluid motion where he seemed to

almost collapse as he sat on the floor, his long, powerful legs folding beneath him. Victor followed suit, sitting in front of him.

“Yes. I was pulled from my home, forced to fight, forced to learn what I could from enemies and friends, though few have had any clue about my talents—my bloodline. I need help. More and more, I’m faced with enemies whose power eclipses my own, whose intentions are less than kind. I need guidance if I’m going to survive the challenges before me.” Victor sat back, staring at the giant, his mind torn between pride at his eloquent speech and shock . . . at his eloquent speech. Had he truly changed so much?

“Hmm,” the giant rumbled, lifting a hand to his chin. “Do you speak true? You will help me to learn of my people’s fate?”

“Yes.” Victor nodded, once, with conviction.

“If there is aught you can do to help, will you? I must know what happened to my people, why they’re so cursed, and if they can be helped—if the damage can be repaired.”

“I . . . I want to help you, but my time in this world is limited. I have people depending on me back on Fanwath.” Victor faced the giant as he spoke, worried there might be another outburst, but the giant’s only reaction was a deepening of his already prodigious frown.

“And me? You planned to take me with you from my homeworld?” His voice didn’t betray any anger, but Victor could feel a hidden edge, like violence on the verge of erupting.

“I hadn’t thought about that. I didn’t know what to expect when I won the crystal. Now that I’ve met you, I wouldn’t take you from your world if you don’t want me to.”

“Am I the last?” the giant asked, though the question didn’t seem directed at Victor. He glanced up into the weird, shapeless space around them, and it looked like his eyes were focused on something. Victor tried to follow his gaze but saw only the weird void.

“Victor, did you hear of any other shards? Are there others of us lingering in fragments of the Ancestor Stone?”

“I don’t know. I can ask . . .”

“Very well, Victor. As a show of good faith, I’ll answer any two questions you have about your growth, your nature, or your Core. If you return with more answers to my questions, I’ll help you further. Agreed?”

“Agreed!” Victor’s mouth blurted before his mind could think about it.

“Good. Speak your questions, then.”

Victor didn’t have to think about his first question—he’d been wondering it for a while now. “My bloodline leads back to my distant ancestors, a race of giants—titans—called Quinametzin. As I further my racial advancement, I seem to grow larger, but not truly giant like the Degh or the Quinametzin . . .” the giant opened his mouth to say something, but Victor hurriedly kept speaking.

“One aspect of my Core is rage. When I cast Berserk, using my rage-attuned Energy, I take on the aspect of my ancestors—I’m a true titan for a while. Is there any way for me to assume that aspect without my rage? Perhaps with a different Energy attunement, or none at all? Will I keep growing as I improve my racial bloodline?”

The giant stared at him for a moment after he’d stopped speaking, and finally, he rumbled, “Finished?”

“Yes.”

“You tried to sneak more than one question into that one. I’ll indulge you, but only because you seem an honest soul. There are spells that might ignite your bloodline, spells other than your ‘Berserk.’ I might know one. As to your second question, the one you tried to sneak in, I’ll indulge it because I don’t have a good answer—I don’t know. I’ve not heard of the Quinametzin, but I know titan blood is strong, and I feel it pulsing in your veins. You may eventually take the full form of your ancestors if you continue to evolve your race. You may not.”

“Any chance you could . . .”

“Careful! One more I’ll allow, Victor. When you return to me with answers, we can arrange a new bargain.”

“Right. Um, before I ask my next question, I feel like I need to describe myself to you, what I’ve been doing with my levels and attributes, my spells and skills, and my Core. Would that be all right?”

“Go on,” the giant rumbled, seeming to settle further into the ground, affecting a more comfortable, contemplative pose.

“Well, I’ve had a few different Classes. I’m level thirty-six, by the way. You see, it all started when I formed my Core out of rage-attuned Energy . . .” Victor spent the better part of an hour, well, what seemed like an hour, in that timeless place, describing his Classes, his Core, his spells and skills, and how he’d spent most of his attribute points on will. The giant grunted every so often, listening and frowning, occasionally asking for clarification, especially when Victor described the effects of his spells.

When Victor finally finished, and the echoes of his words had faded away, the giant lifted his head and said, “An intriguing tale, Victor. You’ve done well for a man with little guidance. I would have been proud to have you in my clan. Tell me, then, what is a question I can answer for you?”

“Well,” Victor sighed and shook his head, smiling ruefully, “this feels like a stupid question, but I’m banking on finding you some answers, hopefully, so we can speak and cooperate more fluidly.”

“Go on!” the giant barked, clearly growing tired of the build-up.

“All right, all right. I want to know, what the hell should I do with my attribute points? The ones I get that I can allocate. I’ve been dumping them in will as several other people have advised—is that wise?”

“Truly? Do you ask such a simple question? Victor, you’ve learned the art of dominating your physical nature with the power of your will. Do you desire strength? You have it. Do you demand speed from your body? You have it! Such power was so very rare in my time; very few Spirit Casters had such control of their physical nature. Already, you’ve explained that your ability has doubled in potency—you are able to improve not one but two aspects of your physical nature with an effort of your will. Why would you not continue to refine that ability?”

“Yes, Victor, should your class continue to grant you unallocated attribute points, you should put them into your will. Build it up so it towers like a monument of stubbornness, a fulcrum on which you can bend the nature of reality. Flesh and bone will rend and break before the might of your insubordinate desire.”

“Thank you . . . can I know your name, Ancestor?” Victor asked, deciding it was appropriate to honor the ancient spirit with the title.

“I am Khul Bach, founder of the Stone Heart Clan.”

“Khul Bach? I’ve noticed the Degh I’ve met in Coloss don’t use surnames . . .”

“COLOSS?” Khul roared, erupting to his feet again. “That den of Vesh villainy?”

“Yeah, um, it’s the only city I’ve visited so far.” Victor stood up, taking a step back from the enraged giant.

“There are Degh in Coloss? Did we conquer them, then?”

“No. There’s a Vesh in charge of Coloss, though he seems at peace with the Degh. His name is . . .” Victor struggled to remember the warlord’s name. Everyone referred to him as ‘Warlord,’ but he knew he’d heard his name a time or three. “Let’s see, it’s . . . Thor? Thorg? Thoa . . .”

“Thoargh!” Khul roared, spitting the word like a curse. “So the bastard has broken the clans? The upstart about whom Bavarak sought our counsel, our

guidance to destroy . . .” Suddenly, Khul’s face fell, and he seemed to slump. “Did we fail so miserably? Was it we who wrote our own doom?”

“I don’t know, Khul, um, Mr. Bach . . .” Victor trailed off, his earlier brilliance with words dashed by his awkward tongue.

“Khul Bach, Victor. Use my whole name for respect—are your people so different?”

“No, not so different, just a little mix-up with the System’s Language Integration. Listen, I’ll get you more answers. I’ll come back as soon as I can, all right?”

“Good. Yes. I must think on what you’ve told me. Pull your Energy back to yourself, Victor. You’ll find very little time has passed on the Material Plane.”

“Oh? All right, let me see here,” Victor concentrated and reached out into the thick Energy hanging in the air and began to pull, tugging it toward himself, toward his pathways, and then, like water down a drain, it rushed into him, and when he opened his eyes, he was sitting alone. He’d sunk back into the couch cushions but didn’t feel cramped; he almost felt rested.

The night was quiet, save a single dark-blue bird that sat on the balcony railing, trilling a haunting song, something like, “Ta-twee-ta-twee-ta-ta-ta-twee.” When Victor stood up and walked toward the open doors, the bird spread its azure wings and whistled shrilly as it glided down toward the city, spiraling away from him on an invisible updraft. Victor watched it go, wondering what it was called.

He thought back to Khul Bach and their conversation. He thought about all the different threads that were starting to pull him in different directions in this new world, and he wondered what he would do. How could he possibly deal with so many things in a month or two?