

## Victor BK4: Ch19

Book 4: Chapter 19: A Matter of Density

“In here?” Victor asked, gesturing toward the stone archway opening onto a dim, downward-sloping tunnel.

“Yar. Fough’s place is down there. Not comfortable for me,” Tronk eyed Victor up and down and said, “Not comfortable for you, either, but better than me.”

“Okay,” Victor sighed, scratching at his stiff, short hair. “Where will I find you when I’m done?”

“Central gardens with Bell.”

“What about Valla? Are you going to get her? Escort her back here?”

“Nar, the lady, Tes, said she would get her back. Her aura was heavy—Tronk thinks she’s safe.”

“Yeah.” Victor slapped a hand on the stone lintel of the archway, bending slightly to look down the length of the tunnel; he’d have to stoop the whole way. “Makes sense. Well, I’ll see you in a while, then.” He started in, Tronk’s rumbled farewell echoing strangely down the long, sloping path. They were two levels beneath the ground floor of the citadel already, and the tunnel’s incline was taking him deeper still. It seemed Fough liked his seclusion.

As he meandered down the tunnel, walking past small, closed doors, he began to appreciate his evolved body and high vitality—despite his stooped posture, his neck and back felt fine. He knew he’d get sore eventually, but with his long-legged pace, Victor hoped he’d reach Fough’s lair before that happened.

“Let’s see,” he muttered as he came to a junction. “What did he say? Pass the doors, left, then left, and I’d come to some steps.” Victor turned left, and in another ten minutes, he’d found the cramped, stone stairwell and, growing impatient, he hopped down them, three at a time. A short walk up an even narrower tunnel brought him to a solid wooden door, beneath which steady yellow light leaked.

Victor’s eyes had grown accustomed to the murk, only having the occasional glow lamp to navigate by, and the bright light was a welcome sight. He strode up to the door and knocked on it three times with his knuckles.

“Come,” a raspy voice said immediately. Victor twisted the door handle and pushed it open. When he stepped through, he was pleased to find himself in a vaulted chamber. He straightened up and looked around. A man wearing black, silky robes, complete with a deeply cowled hood, was hunched over a table, carefully etching something into a sheet of shimmering silvery metal. Around him

were what looked like the cluttered contents of several warehouses worth of esoteric goods.

Books, boxes, wooden tubes, metal rods, crates, bolts of material, and tools of every sort Victor could imagine were piled on table tops, precariously stuffed onto shelves, and stacked into piles that teetered and leaned against each other and the high walls. Everything was illuminated by a high chandelier from which spilled brilliant yellow-white light, shed by numerous crystals that radiated more brightly than any glow lamps Victor had yet seen.

“The warlord sent you?” Fough asked, not looking up from his work.

“Not exactly.” Victor reached behind himself and pushed the door closed with a click. The walls of the chamber were crafted from the same square gray blocks of the tunnels he’d been traversing, but here, on the inside of Fough’s workshop, Victor could see they were coated with a thin layer of soot—he wondered if it was the residue of experiments gone awry.

“Well? Who are you, then?” Fough’s voice had a sibilance to it that seemed familiar, and Victor began to suspect the Artificer was a member of the Yazzian people, like Boaegh. He supposed it made sense, considering the slight similarity in their names.

“I’m a guest of the warlord. I have some questions and work for an artificer, and my escort, Tronk, said you were the right person to speak to.” Victor stepped toward the table on which Fough worked, noticing the rich pile of the carpet he stepped onto—despite the stone underneath it, he felt like he sank a good inch into the soft fabric.

“Hmm. Pose your questions while I finish this up.” Fough had yet to look up, and the only parts of him Victor could see were his slender, delicately scaled green fingers.

“All right,” Victor said, lifting Gorz’s chain over his head and setting the amulet on the table. “I’ll start with this. There’s a spirit in this amulet, well, a spirit shard. He used to be very talkative, but lately, he’s been quieter, and as of yesterday, I can’t get him to respond to me. He complained about losing time and feeling . . . shit, I don’t remember his exact words, but he said something about wondering if he was being pulled back to his ‘larger soul.’”

“Mmhmm,” Fough said, carefully etching another rune into his metallic sheet. “Has the amulet been subject to powerful Energies?”

“Uh,” Victor thought about the question. He thought about his own spells, how he transformed with huge surges of rage-attuned Energy to become a berserking giant. He thought about his powerful justice and fear-based transformations, then he thought about the spells that had been used against

him, particularly the fire cast by Boaeagh. “Yeah, it has. I guess there’s also the portal we went through to come here. Does that matter?”

“A world portal? Was it stable?”

“I don’t know . . .”

“All right, just a moment, just a moment; I take it back, don’t tell me any more—I need to concentrate.” Fough continued etching, and Victor stood as patiently as he could, straightening his back and flexing his neck, watching the tiny, delicate etchings the Artificer was making; they were complicated and beautiful, and they reminded him of the patterns he’d created in his pathways to build his Energy weaves. A minute turned into five, turned into fifteen, and then Fough sighed and set his slightly humming, green-metal etching tool onto the tabletop. It buzzed against the wood until he released it, and then it lay still.

“Done?” Victor asked, looking into the man’s bright yellow serpent eyes as he straightened, giving Victor his attention.

“For now, yes.” To Victor’s surprise, the Yazzian affected a very human-like smile, and it softened his weird, alien appearance a great deal. “This amulet, hmm?” He picked up Gorz’s amulet in his nimble fingers and turned it over, giving it a good look. Victor felt a surge of Energy, and Fough’s eyes pulsed with golden light for a brief second or two.

“See anything?”

“Oh yes. Quite an old artifact, isn’t it? I can see the Energy lines, the entrapment runes, and the persona regulating ciphers—those I’m not familiar with and would need a key to understand fully. I don’t need the key to see that many of the binding materials, woven through the metal of the amulet, have weakened. There are gaps in the rings, and some runes are completely worn away. I’d say your entrapped spirit has fled this plane of existence, friend.” He set the amulet on the table and shrugged.

“Seriously? He wasn’t trying to flee, though . . . he seemed confused by what was happening to him.”

“A simple fragment, regulated by this amulet to behave a certain way. No, it’s likely there was truth to its assumptions—the greater whole of the spirit, from which the fragment was taken, was exerting a pull. It might not have been a conscious effort; as fragments of rock might gather around a planet, forming into a ring and then into a moon, pieces of a spirit gravitate toward each other. With holes in the bindings, this one slipped free and no longer lingers on this plane with us.”

“Damn. I was starting to wonder if I’d done something to cause his problems, like, I’ve been a bit neglectful . . .” Victor trailed off, not really wanting to bare his soul to this stranger.

“Well, your amulet needed some maintenance, but not being an Artificer, I’m not surprised you didn’t realize it. I could repair it, help you to trap a new spirit within. It won’t be the same, but the amulet has the enchantments to force a similar behavior—it will perform the same functions it used to.”

“Wait . . . so Gorz wasn’t obsessed with memorizing things and mapping? The amulet made him do that shit?”

“Gorz was the spirit’s name? Yes, it’s likely the amulet enforced those traits.”

“I’ll fucking melt it down, then. I wouldn’t enslave a spirit.” Victor struggled with the emotions fighting for dominance within him—guilt, anger, regret, and even disgust. While his outburst vented some of his anger, a real sense of loss suddenly hit him so hard that he had to take a step back.

Gorz was gone. Gorz, the friendly voice that had guided him out of despair in the mines, helped him to master his inspiration attunement. Gorz, who had given him advice and shown him the path to take in the darkest depths of the world. He was gone, and Victor hadn’t even properly said goodbye.

“Are you all right?” Fough asked. It wasn’t easy to see the emotion on his hairless, scaly face, but his eyes seemed slightly widened, and Victor wondered what his own face looked like to illicit such a question.

“Not really, no. I figured Gorz’s issue was solvable. I didn’t think the last time I spoke to him was . . . the last time I would speak to him. Goddammit.” Victor stepped forward to pick up the amulet, but as he reached for it, Fough spoke.

“I’d buy it from you just to study the cipher—I’ve not seen that quality of work in some time. I’ll swear to properly destroy it when I’m done.”

Victor picked up the amulet, ignoring the man’s words. He concentrated, closed his eyes, and reached out, “speaking” to Gorz in his head, as he used to, “Are you there, buddy? Are you really gone?” No reply was forthcoming, though he stood there for several seconds repeating the question, his eyes closed. To his credit, Fough didn’t speak or attempt to interrupt him. When Victor finally opened his eyes, the Artificer shrugged his narrow shoulders.

“I wouldn’t lie about a thing like this; there is no presence in that amulet.”

Victor sighed heavily and hung the amulet over his head again, tucking it down beneath his shimmering scale armor. “Sorry, but I’m going to hang onto it for a while—sentimental reasons.”

“I understand. Let me know if you change your mind about letting me study it.”

“Yeah.” Victor didn’t think he would—why would he want to help this guy learn to enslave spirits better? He supposed there might be legitimate reasons for

knowing how to do whatever the maker of Gorz's amulet had done. Maybe some spirits went willingly into objects, but he didn't like the idea that they could be forced to behave a certain way. His mind raced down various lines of thought—what if the spirit was evil? What if a person willingly separated a shard of their soul for such a purpose?

There might be cases where the creation of such an object wasn't inherently wrong, but Victor wasn't interested in exploring them at the moment. He just hoped Gorz had found a better existence than he'd been forced into for the last several thousand years.

“Is there aught else I can help you with?” Fough asked, gesturing to his table, indicating the work he'd been doing.

“Yeah. A few things, I'd bet, but first, a question that's been tickling the back of my mind: Are there limits to the magical resizing effects on items? Take my armor, for instance—I sometimes grow in size, like, as big as a Degh . . . bigger. So far, it's held up.” Victor grabbed the material of his shimmersteel armor at the sleeve, tugging on it as if to illustrate its sturdiness. “What if I grew even more? How is it possible? I mean, magical materials are expensive. Couldn't someone just make a small piece of armor, enchant it to grow to the size of the wearer, and then have a giant put it on? Then they could melt it down, making more and more of their material.”

Fough held up a hand, interrupting Victor's monologue. “No, no, no. That's not how the magic works. Do you know about the tiny building blocks of the universe? The atomic level?”

“Yeah . . .”

“When an Artificer creates an object that can shift its size, he or she puts a spell on the material, charging it with ambient Energy used to shrink or expand the space between those atoms. It works up to a certain limit, but eventually, the object's material will degrade. High-quality materials with high Energy density can withstand this more than others, using their deep stores of Energy to bridge the gaps, especially if the resizing is temporary.” Fough paused for a minute and really looked at Victor, his eyes running up and down his figure from his boots to his bare head glowing faintly yellow as he channeled some sort of spell.

“Your boots are in dire straights. Your pants don't seem bad; are they new?”

“Yeah, I have quite a few pairs.”

“Your armor is made from very high-quality material. Whatever resizing you're forcing it to go through is taking a bit of a toll, but I think it could withstand the punishment for quite some time before it started to bleed its Energy and begin to unravel.”

“Fuck, seriously?”

“Oh yes. I’ll let you in on a little secret—if you want your gear to last longer, many, many times longer, you should have it crafted for your largest size and then bond with it while you’re small. It’s much easier on materials to shrink than to stretch.”

“Ah, no shit? So I should get some Degh-sized gear while I’m here, hmm?”

“Here? As in Coloss?”

“Right. Not here.” Victor gestured around the cluttered room.

“Well, I do have quite a stock of objects I’ve worked on over the years. Anything you’re particularly interested in?” As though mimicking Victor, Fough gestured around his workspace, his eyes lingering on some steel-strapped trunks tucked against one wall.

“Maybe. Just a sec, can you check something else out?” Victor reached into his storage ring and pulled out Polo’s gift, the enormously heavy Kethian Juggernaut helmet. His muscles straining, he carefully set it on the table so that he didn’t shatter any of the boards.

“Ah! Wondrous,” Fough said, nodding. His eyes flared with the familiar golden glow, and then he smiled. “You’ve no worries about this item; that’s some of the densest metal I’ve ever seen, and its natural size is a great deal larger than this. Yes . . . some sort of deep metal,” he reached out to touch the helmet, gently scraping one of his pointy black nails against its surface. “Very dense Energy. Look! The noseguard is slowly sinking into the wood.”

“Yeah, sorry ‘bout that,” Victor said, reaching out to touch the helmet and sending it back into his storage ring. Sure enough, several indentations remained on the wooden top of Fough’s work table.

“Not to worry; you can see the scrapes and stains I’ve left behind—it’s meant for working on, not admiring.” Fough rubbed his hand over the wood, pausing to smear a black stain into the grain with his thumb. “I was dying some fabric earlier.”

“Well, do you have any armor similarly dense? Preferably something made for a big Degh.”

“I’m the warlord’s artificer; what do you think?” Again, the Yazzian smiled, and though it didn’t show any teeth, it was a pleasant expression. “I have a wyrm scale vest that would suit you well. I can also help with your footwear.”

“Wyrmscale?”

“Oh yes. Fabulous material, the scales of an adult wyrm. Difficult to work with, difficult to enchant, but in the right hands . . .” Fough held up his long, slender, green fingers, allowing Victor’s imagination to finish the statement.

“Are wyrms related to dragons?”

“Yes! Wyrms are dragons’ brutish, flightless cousins. Well, according to the texts I’ve studied. They’re not nearly as intelligent, but still quite dangerous and powerful.”

“Have you ever seen a dragon?” Victor wondered how Tes felt about the people of Coloss hunting her “brutish cousins.”

“No, not in the flesh. There’s a skull in Maposh—they built their great cathedral around it.”

“Maposh? That another city around here?”

“Well, not exactly ‘around here.’ Maposh is beyond the Serpent Sea and then some thousand leagues inland.” Fough turned and walked over to the banded trunks Victor had spotted earlier and began to clear a space on the rug in front of them. “Come, let me make some room here, and then I’ll show you the vest. You won’t be disappointed.”

Victor nodded and stepped around a pile of leather sacks and a rack of long wooden staves so that he could watch while Fough dragged boxes, books, and various other items to other parts of his cluttered space, clearing a large section of rug in front of the center-most trunk. “You could use some help organizing this place, I’d say.”

“Oh, it’s not a matter of help . . . well, yes, it is. I do need the help; whenever I get started doing it on my own, I get interrupted. The warlord keeps me busy. It’s just that I need an assistant I can trust, and I haven’t found one yet. Not for a long while.”

“Really?”

“Yes. I had an apprentice, but he went into business on his own. I’m sorely tempted to create a construct that will serve my needs, but it’s terribly costly and difficult to make one that can learn, and such functionality would be essential to the job.” He grunted as he shifted the last object—a foot-long cylinder that rattled like it was filled with marbles.

“There’s no one in this whole city you can trust?”

“Ah, I didn’t say that; I said I couldn’t find an assistant I could trust. The people I trust in this city do not want to work for me, categorically!” He chuckled as he

flipped open the trunk, revealing what looked like a deep, black void to Victor.  
“Bear with me—thousands of objects in here.”

“Oh, right. A dimensional container.”

“Just so, just so,” Fough said in his raspy voice, and then he snapped his fingers and said, “Aha!” He gestured with his left hand and suddenly, with a heavy rattling \*clunk\*, a hauberk, easily twice the size of Victor’s current armored shirt, flopped down on the thick carpet. It gleamed in the bright light, hundreds—thousands—of pearlescent black scales glinting as Victor moved closer, sucking a breath through his teeth.

“Chingado,” he said, leaning close, admiring the craftsmanship.

“I was going to sell it to Black, but the bastard contracted his own armorsmith and refused to even look at it.”

“The scales are amazing, but what about that leather they’re stitched into?” Victor couldn’t take his eyes off the vest. The scales were brilliant, and he could feel the Energy within them, but the black, supple material they were stitched to looked like something special as well; it gleamed like it was freshly oiled; he wanted to put it on, to feel that rich texture for himself.

“That’s not leather; it’s Hell Queen silk.”

“Excuse me?” Victor straightened up and jerked his eyes away from the armor.  
“What’s a Hell Queen?”

Fough chuckled and said, “A type of spider. Sounds worse than it is . . . well, no, it doesn’t. They’re called that because their venom has been described as synonymous with a visit to hell. Metaphorically, of course, I’ve never visited one of the abyssal planes, but I can’t imagine just being there would be torturous. There are those who would argue the point, however. Oh, and they’re called queens because males of the species don’t live long—the females consume them after mating.”

“So, uh, It looks awesome, but I imagine it’s expensive, huh?”

“I’d part with it for five prize tokens. I’m happy to entertain other offers.”

“I’m not really looking to trade any prize tokens. How about beads?”

“Well, the scales and silk were quite expensive, then you have my enchantment and crafting fees. I couldn’t let it go for less than two hundred thousand.”

“Fuck me.”

Fough grinned at Victor’s outburst and said, “Too rich for your blood? I’ll take other trades; have you been on any monster hunts lately? Have any interesting trophies?”



“No, but I’m going on one tomorrow. I’ll come to see you if I get anything I don’t want. What’s the benefit of the armor besides being dense in Energy and able to resize a lot?”

“Oh, you’ll never need to fear these materials unraveling; they’ll hold up, especially considering I made it so large to begin with. More than that, it will provide excellent protection—I’d invite you to strike it with your axe, but it looks like a hungry weapon. I can see the Heart Silver veins; it’s ready to evolve soon, if I’m not mistaken, and I’m afraid it would feast upon the hauberk’s Energy.

“Really?”

“Oh yes. I was quite taken with it as I examined your equipment. You wouldn’t be looking to trade it, would you?”

Victor frowned and put his hand atop Lifedrinker’s metallic head. “Her. And not for a million beads, pendejo.”

“I didn’t mean any offense,” Fough held up his hands, smiling again, his yellow eyes slightly squinting as though apologetic or embarrassed—Victor couldn’t quite read the emotion. “I’ll hold the hauberk for you, hmm? If you’re going on a hunt, I bet you’ll come away with some real prizes you might trade. As a show of good faith, how about I give you a pair of boots? Hmm? I have quite a few gathering dust in here.”

“I can’t argue with free boots.” Victor shrugged and smiled, removing his hand from Lifedrinker.

Twenty minutes later, Victor was striding up a long, wide corridor on his way back to the ground floor of the citadel. His new boots were black—it had been that or a pair of pale yellow ones, and Victor wasn’t ready to make that kind of fashion statement in Coloss. They had thick, grippy soles made from a material much like rubber but entirely synthesized by Fough from various rare ingredients. He claimed they’d never burn or melt and that he’d really have to try to lose his footing.

The uppers were polished to a near mirror sheen, and when Victor had frowned at the flashiness of them, Fough had reassured him, saying that the shine wasn’t permanent; he’d have to buff them now and then to keep them looking so sharp. Victor had no intention of doing so. Still, they were comfortable and had been sized for a Degh before he bonded with them. They were dense with Energy and would last him a very long time if Fough were to be believed.

Victor was annoyed at how long he’d been in there and how expensive everything seemed in Coloss. On the other hand, he had to remind himself that he’d only been there a few days and was already significantly richer than when he’d arrived. He was beginning to look forward to the monster hunt and hoped he’d have a chance to score some big points with the hunt master; it sounded like there were great rewards to be had.

More than anything, he had a vague hollow feeling in the pit of his stomach, and he knew it was from what he’d learned about Gorz. He felt like a friend had died. He wanted to go sit in a tavern

and get drunk. He wanted to tell people about Gorz, but he didn't think anyone would get it, not even Valla, which only added to the hollowness. Was he really that alone? He felt a slight vibration at his hip, and he looked down to see Lifedrinker, and a smile turned the corners of his lips upward. Had she felt his thoughts, or maybe, at least, his emotions?

“Well, beautiful,” he said, holding his hand against Lifedrinker's cool metal, “at least that guy confirmed what I thought; you're pretty damn special. What do you say we go find out what Black knows about the Ancestor Stone? Maybe I can get the old giant in the crystal to give me a few more secrets before we leave on the hunt tomorrow.”