

## Victor BK4: Ch21

### Book 4: Chapter 21: Guidance

Sometime around midnight, Valla went to bed, and Victor sat by himself on the balcony, endlessly entertained by the sea of lights that stretched away from the citadel. Beyond the city wall was a sea of darkness, not a single light to be seen as far as the horizon. “Coloss is like a . . .” Victor paused and thought, trying to come up with something clever, poetic, even, “Coloss is like a pile of glittering jewels, poured out by a colossus in the middle of the desert.”

Victor laughed and patted Lifedrinker’s living-wood haft, where she rested across his knees. “That was fucking terrible. Remind me not to try to make a living as a poet.” He was a little drunk, mostly just buzzed and relaxed, but behind the easy laughter lurked darker emotions—loss, anger, self-loathing, and embarrassment.

“Why’d I have to go and tell Valla all that shit?” he growled, standing up abruptly. He carried Lifedrinker through the sitting room of their suite and then into his bedroom. He placed the axe on the dresser top where the box containing the Ancestor’s shard sat waiting for him. He wished he could put it in a storage container but knew better than that; the spirit within would suffer in such an environment.

Victor was tired but not sleepy, and he decided to spend some time with the Ancestor; with the hunt starting in the morning, he wasn’t sure when he’d get another good chance. He took the faintly pink crystal from the box, cradled it in his hands, and sat down on the rug at the foot of his bed. The last time he’d spoken with the ancient spirit within, scant seconds had passed in the world, so he wasn’t worried about the safety of his person while he communed with the Ancestor.

Clearing his mind, Victor gathered his Energies and pushed them out into the shard, and as before, he felt his Core surge, flooding the fragment with his three affinities, until the world faded away and in a bloom of brilliant light, he once again sat before Khul Bach in the strange white and gray, sharp-angled plane.

“You return,” the giant said, his stern gaze softening slightly, perhaps pleased that Victor had kept his promise.

“Yes,” Victor said, clearing his throat. “I had a chance to speak with Black, um, the Degh who gave me this shard—I think his real name is Ardek.” Victor shrugged.

“And? You have information for me? Answers about the fate of my people?”

“Yeah . . .” Victor gathered his thoughts, then tried to share what he’d learned as succinctly as possible, “The warlord who rules Coloss rules a lot of the world, I guess; other city-states and their leaders pay him fealty. He’s the one who destroyed your people, well, with a Vesh army and the help of the Yazzians. According to Black, they caused the seas to rise up and flood your homeland, and in the process, they managed to shatter your Ancestor Stone.”

“Impossible!” Khul Bach said, slamming a fist into his palm, but Victor felt like it was more surprise than disbelief that caused the outburst.

“I have more,” Victor said, waiting to see if the giant would continue fuming, but the giant didn’t object further, so he continued, “Black knows about seventeen different shards from the Ancestor Stone. He says most of the clans have at least one and that the warlord has several. He said some were left too long, and dungeons grew around them, whatever that means. Um, I’m supposed to tell you he’s begging you for help—he says the Degh have grown weaker and fewer in number with every generation.”

“Why will they not speak to me themselves?”

“Didn’t I explain that last time? Black said that when the Ancestor Stone was destroyed, Degh with spirit Cores died, and none have been born since.”

“I . . .” Khul Bach opened his mouth to speak, but then his eyes narrowed, and he shook his head. His face fell, and he said, “It’s our fault. Our hubris, our ambition, did this.”

“What?” Victor had been expecting Khul Bach to rage about the warlord, insisting that Victor kill him or something.

“We created the Ancestor Stone as a way to take control of our destiny; our bloodlines, our knowledge, our . . . ancestors, all there, tangible, ready to augment and enhance the younger generations. I can see how the Spirit Casters of my people would have been shattered with the stone; their connections were deep and permanent. With them gone, with the stone destroyed, our people languish, the great magics we created to bind us to the stone serving to harm rather than aid.”

“Is there anything that can be done?”

“Aye, a powerful Spirit Caster must mend the stone.” Khul Bach frowned and glowered at Victor rubbing at his chin. “You won’t do. Not yet. What level did you say you’d attained? Forty?”

“Thirty-six.”

“Ancestors!” Khul Bach growled, squeezing his fists so tightly that Victor could hear the strain of the flesh on his knuckles. “One runt. One child to face the man who conquered a race of titans. This won’t do.”

“Uh, yeah. I’ve felt the warlord’s aura, and I think he could whip my ass pretty easily.”

“Yes. You’ll need to be much stronger. I’ll need to make you stronger.”

“Hold on a minute, Khul Bach.” Victor held up his hands, and when the giant glowered at him, he continued, “I have a lot on my plate. I need to go back to my world, at least for a while; there’s an entire army and huge households depending on me. We’re supposed to conquer some new lands, and I think that will probably take a while . . .”

“Conquering is good, Victor. You’ll gain strength, which you need.”

“So, you’re cool with me not challenging the warlord right away?”

“Hah! I’m not a fool; you’ll gain strength, you’ll become a powerful force with my instruction, you’ll gather my people and what shards you can under your banner, and then, only then, will you challenge the warlord.” Khul Bach’s voice grew louder as he spoke, and his fists gradually lifted until they were over his head, and his final words came out as a shout.

“Hold up! Fucking hell, man! I’m not looking for another war! Besides, why would your people win now, when they’re weaker and fewer than when the Warlord last beat them? What if I could get my hands on the warlord’s shards without fighting him? Maybe he doesn’t care about them all that much . . .”

“Don’t be naive; the man holds them for a reason!” Khul Bach growled, leaning closer to Victor, fury in his eyes. Victor knew the anger wasn’t really directed toward him, but he felt like he needed to take a step back to settle the giant down, so he held up his hands and cleared his throat.

“Hold on! We need to get some things straight.” Khul Bach glowered but held his tongue, and Victor continued, “Of course, I want your guidance! I know you have a lot to teach me, and I’ve wanted a real mentor for a long time. That doesn’t mean I’m going to throw away my life and my freedom for it. I can find what I need elsewhere; it might be hard and take me decades or even centuries, but I’ll be doing what I want, of my own free will. Do you get me?”

“So you would leave my people to languish? You’d have them whither away to nothing?”

“I’m not saying that. I’m not saying I won’t help them, but I need you to know that I’ll do it when I think I’m ready and when I don’t have other people already depending on me.” Victor held the giant’s gaze, difficult as it was. He felt like he was lifting weights with his eyeballs, struggling to hold up under the mountain-sized aura bleeding out of the giant’s oddly pink-hued eyes.

“A bargain well struck,” the giant said, at last, his posture softening and his deep frown relaxing. “When you’re ready, then. I, too, think you need work. Much of it.”

“Right . . .”

“Your Core is pathetic. Do you never cultivate?”

“I cultivate . . .” Victor’s voice lost its stern conviction, raising an octave on the word, and he frowned, annoyed with himself.

“Not enough. Your Core should be in the advanced stages. What’s your highest-ranked spell?”

“Um, Berserk and Sovereign Will are both advanced.”

“Passable,” the giant sniffed, then added, “But barely. You should use them at every opportunity; Berserk frees your titan blood, no? And Sovereign Will; your ability to force your body to rise to greatness? What attributes are you currently enhancing?”

“Well, none; I’m not fighting or anything . . .”

“Bash’s Blood, boy! You should be using it always! Because you aren’t planning a fight doesn’t mean your enemies feel the same!”

“It takes concentration . . .”

“How much? How hard is it?”

“It’s like . . . it’s like trying to hold your eyes open without blinking; I can do it, and I can do it for a long time, but it starts to wear on me.”

“Then you must keep using it, practice it until it feels more like breathing. Eventually, you’ll feel worse without it than with it. Do you understand?”

“Yes,” Victor nodded.

“Good! We want that spell to grow into the epic range as soon as possible. I believe you’ll experience a great breakthrough when that happens. Now, tell me about your Core. I know you have three affinities. I know you’re in the improved ranks, but why? Do you hate to cultivate?”

“I’m just . . . I’m just always busy, and yeah, cultivating is a pain in the ass, especially my rage and fear affinities; I have to live through those emotions. I have to grind through them like a fucking miner trying to get a nugget of gold out of a mountain of stone.”

“Show me,” the giant said, and Victor knew what he meant; he expected him to do some cultivating at that moment.

“In here?”

“You’ll struggle to gain any strength cultivating here because of the nature of this place; it’s outside the flow of time, but you can still show me your method.”

“All right,” Victor sighed, and then he closed his eyes and turned his gaze inward, pulling up one of the constructs he’d built from his memories, a construct of rage. He studied it, wrapped his mind around it, felt the raw heat of his fury, his animosity—it was a construct built from a memory concerning his cousins, one of the many times they’d bullied him, speaking Spanish about him, teasing him about his “gringa” mother.

He remembered them laughing at how he only understood a few of their words and mimicking the way his mom walked and spoke; he’d only been a little boy then, and his mom had been everything to him—his dad, Hernan Sandoval, did shift work for the military in Nevada—flew out of Phoenix and was sometimes gone for weeks. Victor remembered feeling like an outcast, an outsider in his own family, only happy when his mom took him home. He and his mom had been a team, and she’d done everything for him. Then she’d died.

Victor felt the fury building in his pathways and worked it, pushing, driving, gathering, and pulling it into his Core. He wallowed in his construct, soaking it in, becoming the rage that simmered there in his past. He didn’t know how long he sat like that, running through his drill, but he knew it was a good long while before the giant cleared his throat and gave him a nudge.

“Enough, Victor.” When Victor looked up at him, he saw the giant’s face was troubled and that much of his earlier hostility had faded. “Rage is a difficult affinity, lad. I see the pain on your face while you struggle with it. Who taught you that drill?”

“Well, I mostly learned it myself through experimentation. When I first had to cultivate, I wasn’t much more than a slave, and I didn’t have any real help.”

“Then you should be proud. Your drill is potent, and if the Energy were richer around you, I believe you’d be pulling great swaths of it into your pathways, converting it to rage, strengthening your Core with each repetition. Still, there’s room for improvement. The method you use to gather the Energy, condense it, and siphon it into your Core needs work.

“Did you know that Energy calls to Energy? The more you leave in your pathways, the faster you’ll pull more in, and the faster it will convert to rage or whatever affinity you’re cultivating. You must learn to fill your pathways to bursting, then to siphon off only half of that Energy, leaving the rest to build up another rotation more quickly.”

“I get it,” Victor nodded, “I can do that, Khul Bach.”

“Good. When you return, I’ll expect your Core to be stronger. So, tell me about your spirit totems. You mentioned the spell last time we spoke.”

“They’re fragments of my own soul, as far as I understand . . .” Victor spent what felt like hours going over his spells with Khul Bach—how he learned them, what they did, what rank they’d gotten to, and what his plans were as far as improving each one. The answer to that last question always tended to be some variation of, “Well, I hadn’t really thought about it; I just planned to keep using them and hope they’d improve.”

Khul told Victor that the best way for him to improve his abilities was to pick one or two and focus on them, then go on to the next. Sure, it helped to use them all whenever he needed them, but he wanted Victor to get some skills and spells into the epic level as quickly as possible. That said, he insisted that Victor go Berserk at every possibility and keep himself boosted by Sovereign Will at all times.

“Really? You want me berserking when I’m not even in a fight?” Victor said when Khul delivered that last instruction.

“Yes. You have the will to manage it. If you push that spell beyond epic into legendary, it’s likely to morph; I have high hopes for it. Should you fully master yourself under its influence, it won’t exactly be a “berserking” spell, will it?”

“Spells can change . . .” Victor stopped himself before he finished the question. Of course, spells could change; he’d seen it himself as he’d used different Energy to cast them, or when they’d increased in level from basic to improved or beyond—they gained new effects or became more potent.

“I see the light blooming behind your dim eyes, apprentice. You may yet learn. So, here are my orders: Never go a waking moment without Sovereign Will active. If you must rest your mind from time to time, that’s permitted, but only so long as you absolutely have to. Secondly, you must use your Berserk ability whenever possible, and you must practice casting other spells while under its influence.”

“Fuck, man. My traveling companions aren’t really going to love this . . .”

“Good! People should fear and respect you. You’re the descendent of titans, and by the Ancestors, all the Gods, and their children, I’m going to make you into a worthy scion. Now, tell me about your axe.”

“Lifedrinker? How do you know about her?”

Khul pointed to Victor’s waist and said, “Its echo is here with you.”

“What . . .” Victor looked down, but he didn’t see what Khul was pointing at. He’d left Lifedrinker on his dresser. “I don’t see her.”

“Because your mind knows where it is. The echo of its spirit is heavy though and closely tied to your own.”

“Her,” Victor said, frowning. “She’s alive and not an ‘it.’”

“Ah, yes. Of course. So, she speaks to you?”

“Yeah,” Victor said, then he spent another long while telling Khul all about Lifedrinker.

“A worthy weapon for my scion! And you think she’s coming close to an evolution?”

“Yeah, I’m sure of it!” Victor said, grinning proudly, as though Lifedrinker were his child and he was telling another parent about her accomplishments at school.

“Let’s hope she grows. A strong spirit is good, but you’ll need a mighty weapon to take on the Vesh.”

“I’m not taking on the Vesh . . .”

“Not yet!” Khul said, holding up a hand to forestall argument. “When next you slay an enemy, be sure to let your axe feast! More than that, don’t forget to honor your ancestors. Have I given you enough to work on? You should bring my shard with you, of course; we can speak while you’re on your hunt.”

“About that,” Victor said, frowning, “Your shard is pretty large, and it’s in a box. It’s not exactly convenient to carry around.”

“Do not put me in a dimensional container!” Khul roared.

“I know, I know! Is there anything else I can do?”

“Yes, a simple solution exists; have the shard built into an amulet or some such, and have the artificer reduce the size of it. Just be sure that when the shard is removed from the jewelry, it will retain its original form. Easily done, and the size of the shard will not affect me at all. Just don’t damage it!”

“Oh? All right, that doesn’t sound bad, then. Okay, Khul Bach, I think I should get going—you’ve given me plenty to work on.”

“Yes. Speak to me as soon as you’re able. I’ll want a thorough update on your progress.”

Victor nodded, and then he gathered up his Energy. When he opened his eyes, he was sitting in his room, and the moon still hung high in the sky outside his window. Victor hopped to his feet, one fist tight around the Ancestor shard, and then he walked over and scooped up Lifedrinker, slipping her into his belt. He strode, with purpose, through the suite, out the door, and then broke into a jog.

He’d made it to the first stairwell when he frowned and concentrated, casting Sovereign Will to boost his Vitality and Strength; then, as he hurried down the steps, Victor cast Berserk. Red-tinged fury filled his vision, and a growl slipped past his lips, but he kept moving, realizing he was now

striding easily down the Degh side of the steps. Occasional growls escaped him, and his fists were clenched and ready to strike out, one holding tightly to the ancestor stone.

He was glad it was the dead of night, and nobody was out and about in the hallways; Victor kept looking for something to fight and kept catching himself doing so, but he growled, and, with an effort of will, he pushed the rage out of his mind, let it fester in his pathways, let it simmer in his heart, ready to explode, but kept his mind cool. It was a struggle to do so without ending the Berserk spell altogether, and he found the exercise both taxing and rewarding; he could do this.

When he'd descended several levels and came to the cramped, narrow tunnels that led deeper still, he finally allowed the spell to fade and breathed a deep sigh of relief; he felt like he'd just done several circuits around a weight room, using every machine along the way. Still, he felt good and knew his advanced body wouldn't let him down, so he crouched low and hurried through the tunnels, making his way to Fough's workshop.

The door was slightly ajar, and when Victor peered through, he saw Fough sitting at the same table where he'd last seen him, only this time, he was poring over a densely inscribed stone tablet. "Come in," the Artificer said without looking up.

"Hey," Victor said, stepping into the room and straightening his back with a sigh.

"Thought of something you need at the last minute?" Fough asked, a wry smile on his face as he looked up from his tablet.

"Yeah, actually." Victor stepped forward with the Ancestor shard and then said, "I need a convenient way to carry this, and maybe some more like it, but I can't put it in a dimensional container because . . ."

"Because a powerful spirit lies within," Fough said, standing up from his stool and stepping back from the shard.

"Yeah, exactly."

"Well, I can help you—the spirit, it's not hostile, is it?"

"No. Shouldn't be anyway." Victor kept his grip on the shard, pleased by its gentle pink glow.

"How many others do you anticipate needing to accommodate?"

"Well, at least eighteen." Victor didn't know why he said that, why he was trying to prepare for all the other shards when he knew damn well it would be a long time—maybe many years—before he'd need to worry about them, but something about it felt right.

Fough's eyes narrowed, and he held his chin between his thumb and forefinger, the scales glittering ever so slightly in the glow of the lamps. "What about a bracer? I could make a bracer and enchant it to hold the shard and others like it; When you touch the shard to the socket, it will decrease in size and sink into it."



“Would I be able to remove it, and would the shard return to its normal size and shape?”

“Naturally.” Fough moved off to rummage in one of his trunks as if he’d finished with Victor.

“Can you do it now? I mean, I can pay extra for the short timing, but I gotta leave town at dawn . . .”

“Yes, yes. I’m intrigued. I have a bracer I can modify if I can just find it.” Fough continued to rummage in the trunk, nothing but a black void visible to Victor within its four sides.

A thought occurred to Victor as he looked around himself. He was in one of the only open areas in the room, standing on a large rug before Fough’s primary workbench. “Well, I don’t want to alarm you, but I’m supposed to be practicing a spell; I’m going to increase in size a bit while you’re working . . .”