

Victor BK4: Ch37

Book 4: Chapter 37: Sentience

Victor watched as the ghostly white flames consumed his offering to his ancestors. He'd unloaded all his monster trophies from the hunt, piling them on two big tarps in the garden for Tes and the broker to comb through. While they worked on that, and Valla watched, he'd taken one of the hearts and two fangs down a side path, stopping in front of a pleasant little fountain in the shape of three splashing fish, and then he'd cast Honor the Spirits.

The broker had been dismayed to see him walk off with the fangs; apparently, they were precious. Tes had quickly diverted the hairy Vesh's attention back to the trophies Victor had left behind. Valla, for her part, had simply smiled and waved as Victor walked away. He supposed it was good that they understood his need to give tribute to his ancestors. He barely understood it himself, but he had that feeling in his gut every time he looked at his loot and remembered Citlalicue's words about him repaying her tenfold—he owed her. If he didn't send offerings, he could forget ever getting his ancestors to intervene directly again.

After the last wisp of spirit smoke faded away, he returned to the larger trail where he'd left the others. Tes and the broker stood off to one side, conferring over a white, slightly luminous slate. Valla, who'd been listening to them, walked over to Victor.

"She's driving a hard bargain, but he seems pretty desperate for some of these parts. He got very agitated when he saw the night brute prince's bones."

"Really?" Victor looked at the large pile of dark, still-bloody bones that he and Tes had carved from the enormous corpse. "Did Tes keep back some scales to make our armor?"

"Yes, she made sure I was watching when she collected them into her storage . . . ring? I've never seen her storage device."

"Yeah. If she has jewelry on, I think she hides it with magic."

"She didn't take any of my scales. Are you sure it's all right that she makes armor for both of us from the scales you earned?"

"Yeah. I got a hell of a lot more than you." Victor sat on a bench and motioned for Valla to sit beside him. She complied, and they sat quietly for a few moments, watching Tes go back and forth with the Vesh, pointing at something on the glowing slate, then shaking her head. "I kinda feel sorry for the guy."

"You know, she annihilated that night brute prince. I'll wager the armor she's offering to craft us would sell for a fortune. I wonder—what's she getting out of helping us?" Valla's voice was soft, and she leaned forward, resting an elbow on her knee, holding her chin in one hand, staring at the subject of her speculation.

"I had similar thoughts earlier. I've decided it doesn't matter to me—she's powerful enough to take what she wants, but she's not doing that. She's helping

us and seems to be having a damn good time doing it. How am I supposed to speculate on the motives of someone so powerful? Listen, on my homeworld, we had these things called video games. Imagine a dungeon, but contained in a magical box that you could explore with tiny avatars—bodies that weren't you but represented you. Do you follow?"

"Like a box that you could see into? And watch your 'avatars' fight monsters and solve puzzles?"

"Exactly!" Victor cleared his throat and tried to remember where he'd been going with the explanation. "Oh, right. So, imagine some people could get really good at the game. So good that the challenge of it became boring. Sometimes people like that would torment new players, making their lives difficult as a way to pass the time. Other people like that, though, would help the new players. They'd give their avatars equipment or help them kill monsters they couldn't handle on their own. I think Tes is like that."

"You think she's just bored and enjoying the 'game' through us?"

"Well, I'm probably oversimplifying things, but yeah, I guess that's what I'm saying."

"I think you're on the right track, but I wonder if it's more complicated, as you implied. Maybe she has challenging things to do, but she's stalling or taking a break. Maybe we're something of a diversion for . . ."

"Well," Tes said. Victor and Valla had been so intent on their whispered speculations that Tes had walked up completely unnoticed. Victor had no doubt that Tes could surprise them even if they'd had their eyes trained on her, though, so he just grinned at her and attempted to look sheepish. Valla slapped a hand over her mouth, eyes wide with shock. Tes, though, was smiling happily as she continued speaking, "if you're done trying to solve the mysteries of Tes, I have good news!"

"I'm sorry . . ." Valla said as Victor chuckled.

"You made us a good deal?" Victor looked around her to see the hirsute Vesh walking among the trophies, making them disappear into containers one after another.

"Indeed! Valla, for your share of the spider, night brute, and wyrm trophies, I've managed to collect a fee of four tokens!"

"Truly?" Valla stood and actually pranced in place with excitement. Victor didn't see what the big deal was—the item she wanted to buy was five tokens unless she wanted the better one, which was ten. She'd still need to earn more to teleport home . . .

Tes interrupted his thoughts, “Truly! Which means, Victor, your share of the trophies garnered a rather stunning thirty-seven tokens.”

“Holy shit!” Victor said, suddenly understanding Valla’s enthusiasm. Of course, she’d figured out that if she’d earned four with her smaller share, he’d have a huge haul, and, of course, she knew he’d share.

“Yes! Your pathway home is open, with plenty left over to purchase treasures. Or, if you want to take the time to bargain for other prizes, you might find some things more valuable than those on the warlord’s list.” She paused as Victor’s face grew contemplative and added, “I do hope you won’t depart this very minute. If you have time, there’s still much to learn here in Coloss. I’ll also need a week or two to craft your armor.”

“Tes, about what I was saying earlier,” Valla said, but Tes waved her words away.

“Nonsense. You both have questions about me, and I’d love to answer them all, but I’m bound by promises to keep many aspects of myself to . . . myself. I’m the one who should apologize.”

“Are you kidding, Tes?” Victor chuckled. “You’ve helped us so much; don’t even think about apologizing.”

“I agree wholeheartedly!” Valla said, reaching out to grasp Tes’s hand with both of hers.

“All right, all right. Here you are.” She produced two black, velvety pouches, one noticeably more full than the other, and handed them to Valla and Victor. Victor produced his other four tokens and slipped them into the pouch with those Tes had bartered for him. He hefted the little bag, grinning at the weight of forty-one tokens, then placed it into his storage ring.

Valla also tucked hers away, then sat on the bench and motioned for Tes and Victor to sit with her. “Will you give us your advice, Tes? How should we spend these tokens?”

“Oh?” Tes sat on the bench next to Valla, and Victor sat next to her, though there wasn’t enough room for him. Half his butt ended up hanging off the edge, and Tes laughed, “I’ll give you the rest of my spell pattern so you can learn it while you’re here, Victor.”

As Victor grunted his thanks, she took a deep breath, and a small pulse of Energy surged out of her. Victor’s ears popped, and then she said, “I can certainly advise the two of you with regard to those tokens. If you hadn’t noticed, there are two markets in this town—the day-to-day market brokered in beads, and the secondary, less talked about market brokered in prize tokens.”

“Yes,” Valla nodded. “I paid a hundred thousand beads for my tincture, but I could have paid a couple of tokens instead.”

“Thank you, Valla! This helps me to illustrate my next point: The warlord’s prize list is a good bargain for some things but a rather poor one for others. The alchemical ingredients are not a good value—your tincture contained two different ‘epic’ alchemical ingredients. Did you know that? To buy those ingredients from the warlord’s prize list would cost you, at a minimum, ten tokens. I say at a minimum because there’s little chance you’d get the ingredients you wanted with the first selection.”

“Ah,” Valla nodded.

“Some items are exceedingly rare; thus, the warlord’s prices are better than you’ll find in town. The epic racial boosts, for example. Generally, you won’t find those for sale because they’re so coveted.”

“What about the stones of sentience and consciousness?”

“Rare, indeed, though I’d never pay for a stone of consciousness. If your weapon takes well to the stone of sentience, it will grow a conscious mind before too long.”

“Oh?” Valla raised her eyebrows, excited at the idea.

“Yes, I think that would be a wonderful prize for your blade, Valla. That sword is powerful; granting it a spirit would be a wise investment.”

“What about the legendary treasure?” Victor asked. “What kinds of things does the warlord have for twenty tokens?”

“A good question, Victor. I’ve been on Zaafor, off and on, for nearly a decade and have yet to meet anyone who has purchased such a prize. The warlord has a System-purchased vault tied to the Stone and its store. Even I cannot see within it.”

“Would the racial boosts other than ‘epic’ be a waste of tokens?”

“For you, Victor, yes. The advanced boost would work nicely for Valla.”

“Tes, what would you do with the tokens if you were in our shoes?” Valla asked.

Tes smiled and looked from Victor to Valla, then reached up to twist a strand of her golden hair around her forefinger as she contemplated. After a moment, she said, “I’d buy a few items from the warlord’s store, but then I’d purchase other things to bring home. Things that would make me a hero to my people—cultivation manuals, spell tomes, class advancement tabulations, alchemical recipes, enchantment glyphs, and dictionaries to understand them.

“Don’t you see? Coloss is thousands of years beyond your world in experimentation with Energy and the System. It’s clear to me that your world has yet to manage a connection to a significantly more advanced world, or if there’s

such a connection, the people in power on Fanwath are keeping it to themselves.”

Victor sat back, blowing out a pent-up breath, and Valla said, “Ancestors!” as she processed Tes’s words. “I hadn’t thought of that! Are such things available for sale?”

“Oh, for the right price and from the right people, surely. I can help you find what you need.”

“Rellia would like that,” Victor said, directing his words to Valla.

“She’s a ruler of Fanwath?”

“Oh, she’s my adoptive mother and a noblewoman. She’s gathering an army now so that Victor can lead them on a conquest of unclaimed lands.”

“Ah, unclaimed lands. It’s been a thousand years since any such existed on Zaafor. A hundred thousand on my homeworld. What a tumultuous time when the System finally grew strong enough to assert itself on Aradnue!”

“Aradnue’s your homeworld, right?” Victor had heard Tes mention it before.

“Yes. Many of my people died fighting the System’s . . . invasion.” She sighed heavily, looked at Victor and then at Valla’s wide eyes, and said, “It was long before my time. I’m not that old!”

“Whew,” Victor laughed. He looked past Tes to Valla, the way she smiled and nodded along with Tes’s words. He reached into his ring, took out his pouch of tokens, and said, “Hey, Valla, there’s no reason to sit on these right now. I want you to get that sentience stone for your sword, and I want to make sure you’ve got three tokens for teleporting home in case something happens to me.” She opened her mouth to say something, but he held up a hand to forestall objections.

Victor knew she wanted that stone badly, and he knew she was too proud to ask for the tokens. He counted out four from his pouch and handed them to her. “That gives you eight, right? Five for the stone and three to hold in reserve to get home. Maybe we’ll earn some more while we’re here, but if not, I’ll make sure we talk to each other about what I spend the rest of them on.”

Valla took the tokens and clasped both her hands around Victor’s, awkwardly holding it in front of Tes, who still sat between them. “You’re a good friend, Victor. I won’t make an empty promise to repay you because I know you can earn these far more easily than I can. That said, when we get back to Fanwath, don’t you dare ever try to split the bill at a restaurant or inn with me!” She squeezed Victor’s hand one more time, then let go.

Victor glanced at Tes, saw the amusement in her eyes, then shrugged and said, “Well? Let’s go get that stone.”

“Yes!” Tes said, leaping to her feet. She turned to Victor and added, “You should buy at least one of the epic racial boosts if any are available.”

“Right,” Victor nodded, standing up. “Before the hunt, there were two.”

“Much can change in a week.”

“C’mon!” Valla said, hurrying down the path toward the center of the garden. Victor followed after her, walking beside Tes, happy to see his friend, once so reticent and taciturn, genuinely excited about something. Coloss had been good for her, he reflected. “All except that pendeja who wants to kill her for being blue.”

“You worry about your friend?” Tes asked.

“Yeah.”

“Don’t. Reis felt her smaller aura, heard her speak of her level, and thought she was picking an easy fight. She’ll come to regret that decision; I won’t be surprised if she tries to back out of the duel in the next week or so. She’ll likely make an excuse, saying she’s learned about Valla’s character and wants to allow her to live, which will put the onus on our friend. I’m sure Valla will let her back out, though it would be interesting if she didn’t.”

“You really think she’ll do that? Reis, I mean?” Victor turned left, saw Valla hurrying up to the porcelain lady at the end of the path, and slowed his pace so Tes would have time to answer him.

“I do. Reis is no great duelist, and when she hears rumors about Valla’s gains, her nerve will falter.” She frowned and then shrugged, “That’s my guess, in any case.”

“Huh. I hope you’re right, but I’m not so sure Valla will let her back down. She’s different these days, but I’ve seen her be pretty hard on people—she was a captain in the Legion and, if I recall, one of the youngest to ever reach that rank.”

“The Legion? This is the military from her homeland?”

“Oh, yeah.” Victor nodded.

“Perhaps she’ll press the duel or amend the stakes—third strike or first blood, maybe. That would be amusing to watch.” Tes cleared her throat as they approached the gate, guarded by the two motionless knights and attended by the strange, fragile-looking woman on her stool. Valla stood waiting, a prize token in her hand, and Tes motioned for Victor to go ahead. “I’ll wait here, you two.”

Victor fished out one of his tokens, held it up to the porcelain lady, and said, “May I proceed?”

“Oh yes. Thank you for your politeness, young man,” she replied, her strange lips curving into a smile, accompanied by a soft sound that made Victor imagine a damp stone sliding against another, bigger stone. “You may call me Gallia.”

Tes caught her breath, and Victor glanced at her. She seemed almost shocked by the pale, diminutive woman’s words. He hoped he’d remember to ask her why later, but there, in front of the porcelain woman, he didn’t think it would be wise. Instead, he said, “Why thank you, Gallia. If you don’t recall, I’m Victor. It’s a pleasure.”

“Thank you, Victor. Please proceed.”

He nodded and followed Valla to the System’s City Stone, and she was quick to place her hand on it. He figured he might as well check on available prizes, so he touched the stone and navigated to the Treasure Exchange menu, and then read through it:

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 (1 Available)

Stone of Sentience - 5 Prize Tokens (1 Available)

Alchemical Ingredient - Legendary - 10 Prize Tokens

Stone of Consciousness - 10 Prize Tokens (2 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

“There are fewer available than last time,” Valla said from beside him just as Victor drew the same conclusion.

“Only one epic racial boost,” he said, then selected it, suddenly fearful that somehow someone else would beat him to it.

Tokens Received. Your prize will appear at your feet.

The sudden System message reminded him that this City Stone and the exchange within it were managed by the ubiquitous arbiter of Energy and Classes and so much more. As he watched his purchase apparate out of a cloud of bright yellow Energy, he wondered about Tes's earlier words. Her people had existed long before the System. They'd kept it out of their world for millennia, but when it grew bigger and stronger, it still forced itself on them. He wanted to ask her more about it and resolved to do so.

"If I can get her to talk," he grunted, leaning down and picking up the glimmering, heavy, silver flask. It felt like he was picking up an ingot of gold, so dense was the container or whatever was inside it. He slipped it into his storage ring, figuring he'd ask Khul Bach or Tes when it would be wise to advance his race again. He saw Valla straightening up beside him and that she cradled, in her hands, a shimmering, silver and white egg-shaped object that emitted a soft, swirling mist of Energy.

"How do I use it?" she asked, her words a bare whisper as though she feared she might disturb the object in her grasp.

"Let's go ask Tes," Victor said, putting a hand on her shoulder and walking with her back through the gate. She moved slowly and carefully, and he almost laughed; she really did treat it like an egg.

"It looks like a magical chicken egg," Victor said as they approached Tes.

She stood from the wrought iron bench where she'd been waiting and looked at the beautiful object in Valla's hands. "It does, doesn't it? It's the most beautiful Stone of Sentience I've seen."

"They're not all the same?"

"No! That's the seed of a spirit, there, Victor. They can be as different as one person is from another." Victor's eyes opened wide at the idea, and he leaned closer as Tes said, "Valla, hold it in one hand and summon your blade."

"Just one moment," Valla said, carefully tilting her right hand so the stone rolled into her left, then she cupped it there and held out her free hand. A moment later, she held Blue Razor, the deep, dark-blue blade aloft. The black, leather-wrapped hilt, long enough for her to wield two-handed, jutted out below her fist. Victor took a good look at the sword, noting how lovely the silvery crossguard and pommel were, etched with vines and flowers. He knew it was heavy, having felt its weight in many sparring sessions, and he admired how effortlessly Valla held it.

"Now, Valla, this is important!" Tes said, moving to stand before the smaller woman so she could look her in the eyes. "Fill your mind with your intentions! Picture something that embodies a virtue you think is worthy, a virtue you'd like to see reflected in the spirit of your blade."

“A virtue,” Valla said softly, then she closed her eyes, and when she reopened them, her gaze was far away and her face serene.

“Good, now, move your hand with the stone next to the blade; press it against it—not the pommel or hilt, only the blade.”

Valla didn't speak, but she nodded in understanding, and she carefully moved her left hand over to the blade of her sword and pressed the Stone of Sentience against the deep, blue metal. Victor watched as the stone seemed to melt and spread into it, and then the entire sword flared with blinding, silvery light. When the bloom faded from his vision, and he saw the sword, now held aloft in both of Valla's hands, he gasped in awe at its beauty.

The sword's dark blue, almost black blade glittered with thousands of tiny motes of light that reminded Victor very much of the ones that lurked in Lifedrinker's haft. The blade's edges radiated faint, wispy-white Energy tendrils that faded to nothing almost immediately. Valla laughed and whipped the sword around in a few intricate practice forms, and when she stopped, she was practically glowing with excitement.

“I can feel it! Her! This sword is no longer Blue Razor! Her name is Midnight Hope, and she's wonderful!”