

Victor BK4: Ch42

Book 4: Chapter 42: Lofty Goals

Victor walked with Tes and Valla through the evening streets of Coloss until they'd meandered down toward the western wall of the city, far from the warlord's citadel and his center of power. When Tes led them into a single-story, tan stone building, its doorway hung with colorful beads and the scent of roasting meat thick in the air, Victor's mouth began to water.

The restaurant wasn't sized for Degh, and Victor struggled with the low doorway and crowded dining room. Still, the proprietor, a cheerful, small man with a bald head and pink-red tentacles rather than arms, showed them to a quiet corner where an oversized chair sat snugly against a big wooden table. "I have a Degh friend who comes to drink with me once a week; this is his chair. You should find it roomy."

"Thank you, Gurt," Tes said. "Please bring us your best wine and a sample of your meats; I'm sure my friends are going to love your food."

"Right you are, Miss Tes. I'll get right on it." With that, the little man scurried away, and Victor shifted around the table to sit in the oversized leather chair. It was too large for him, but he'd rather that than one too small. Tes and Valla sat on either side of him, and once again, Victor heard the strange *pop* and knew Tes was making their conversation private.

"He can't pierce my veil this far from his chamber," Tes said.

"You have more news for us, Tes?" Valla asked, leaning forward, arms resting on the tabletop.

"Oh, I do. I do, indeed. First, I've convinced one of Boaegh's apprentices to open a portal to Fanwath. His name is Hark, Geomancer Hark, and he's not a bad fellow. He's been sort of running Boaegh's business in his absence, enchanting objects for a fee and training the more junior apprentices. When I explained Boaegh's fate, Hark was rather pleased, if I know how to read a man's face, and I do, Victor, I do." Tes chuckled and paused as Gurt returned with a carafe of dark wine and three glasses.

"Give me ten minutes or so for the food, please. Anything I can do for you while you wait?"

"No, thank you, Gurt." He shuffled off, and Tes continued, "As I was saying, Hark is pleased to be the new master at Boaegh's little coven. He knew exactly where Boaegh had been, the ritual used to open his original gateway was still in place, and he says he'll happily do me the favor of opening it again."

"That's wonderful, Tes!" Valla said.

"Hell yeah," Victor nodded, "Saves us six tokens!"

Tes chuckled and said, “That’s the least of the benefits. More importantly, you’re no longer under the warlord’s thumb; your transport away from this place is no longer in his control.” Tes lifted the carafe and poured generous servings of wine for each of them. She pushed their glasses toward them and said, “Now the question is, how long should you stay?”

“This Hark, can he create the portal at any time? Now?” Valla sipped at her wine after she asked the question.

“He can,” Tes nodded. “There’s the matter of your duel in two days’ time. I was sure Reis would back out, but she’s done something even more interesting. Blue wanted to pass this information to you, but I insisted that we already had plans for the evening; Reis would like to alter the duel to one of skill and with nonlethal consequences—weapon abilities only, three wounds that draw blood.”

Valla smiled, the wine staining her teeth a faint shade of purple, and Victor thought he could see the tension flowing out of her shoulders. “Truly?”

“Yes. When Blue approached me with the offer earlier today, I almost burst into laughter; you’re a far better swordswoman than she. She thinks to have an advantage because of her rapier—an epic weapon Blue won for her in a very deep dungeon. She doesn’t know about Midnight.” Tes gestured toward Valla’s sword, leaning against the side of her chair. “Nor does she know about your martial background.”

“So what’s in it for Valla to take the offer?” Victor asked, drinking a gulp of wine, frowning when he saw he’d nearly emptied the delicate glass.

“Excellent question. Reis has sweetened the deal by putting five of the warlord’s tokens on the line.”

“And what does she expect me to put into the pot?”

“She expects you to sign a binding contract—should you lose the duel, you will serve in Blue’s household for one year.”

“Nah, fuck that,” Victor snorted, reaching for the carafe to refill his glass. “Let’s just bail out right now.”

“Victor, I can beat her.”

“And then what? We’re in a nest of snakes here, Valla. If you win . . .”

“When I win, I’ll have some more tokens. We can buy something valuable and depart that same day.”

Victor frowned, not really agreeing with Valla’s assessment. Somehow he didn’t think Reis or Blue were stupid. No, in his opinion, they’d have some sort of trick or trap set up, some way to guarantee Valla lost. Rather than press the issue at that moment, though, he changed his angle of attack, “Well,

I'm not going to stick around for the tournament. It feels very shady to me. I'm confident the warlord is devising some scheme to cause me trouble or to get me somehow bound to him. You know what Tes said—he wants my bloodline, Valla. Blue's the warlord's right-hand man."

"So you think there will be foul play at my duel?" Valla frowned.

"Undoubtedly," Tes agreed, drinking her wine. They all sat in silence for a few moments, and then their conversation was further put on hold when Gurt approached their table with a huge wooden platter. Moist, smoked, roasted, and grilled meats were sliced and piled high on one side, and two large wooden bowls, one filled with a mixture of beans and herbs and the other with sticky, seasoned rice, occupied the rest of the space. Gurt placed them on their table, and one of his servers brought over wide, shallow bowls and silverware for the three of them.

"Enjoy!" Gurt said, grinning and nodding as though he knew they would. If so, he would have been right. Victor dug into the meat, and it reminded him a great deal of something he might find at a barbeque restaurant back on Earth. The beans were tangy with a bit of spiciness, and when he added them to the rice, mixed in some of the cut meats, and began to wolf everything down, Valla and Tes weren't far behind.

"This is good stuff, Tes," Victor said around a bite, leaning forward over the too-small table from the too-large chair. He didn't care about his comfort, though; the pleasure in his mouth and the warm glow in his stomach more than made up for it.

"It is good, but wouldn't a cold ale go with it better than this wine?" Valla asked.

"Hush," Tes chuckled. "I like wine." Victor watched her chew a bite of meat, licking the salty grease from her lips and then chasing it with a drink from her wine glass. She caught him watching and narrowed her eyes, offering him a half smile as she cleared her throat and said, "Valla, I've gathered some texts for you to take home to your family. They're a collection of some of the types of books and tomes I suggested you and Victor should gather. I know you've both been busy training these last weeks, and I wanted to offer them to you as a gift."

"Tes, you've already given me so much . . ."

"True! But this is nothing; just a little time spent exploring old shops and family libraries, which I rather enjoy anyway. By the way, if Black asks about some missing books, you don't know anything about it," she laughed, winking at Valla. "I only ask one thing in return."

"Oh?" Valla asked, wiping her mouth with a napkin.

“Yes. I’d like you to go through with the duel, even though it’s not the smartest move.” She glanced at Victor, ducking her head apologetically.

“Why, Tes?” he asked.

“Because I’ve spied some of the preparations Blue is making for, in his opinion, the inevitability of you joining his household. I’ve seen some strange deliveries make their way to his estate, and I’m curious about what else he intends to do. This is rather valuable for my research, you see; if they intend to try to steal some part of your heritage, I might learn a great deal from watching their actions.”

“C’mon, Tes,” Victor said. “We’re not going to have you using Valla as bait.”

“No. Allow me to observe them for another day or two, and I promise you, I will thwart whatever they intend to do to ensure Valla’s loss. She’ll never have to go to his estate.”

“If you want me to do this, then I will,” Valla said, setting her mouth into a firm line and nodding her head.

“I don’t like it,” Victor growled.

“Do you trust me?” Tes asked, and it was clear the question was for both of them.

“I do,” Valla said.

Victor frowned, glancing down at the beautiful scale armor he wore, made from Tes’s own blood and hard work. He thought of how she’d guided him out on the monster hunt and helped him to understand so much of his potential. Rather than answer her immediately, though, he asked, “Tes, I know you don’t want much from us—not right now. What about in the long term? I feel like you’re planning something . . .”

“Is that your answer? When I ask a simple question of trust, you frown and glower and then ask me what my plans are for you. I thought I’d earned more respect than that.” Tes didn’t look angry, she didn’t yell, she didn’t even raise her voice, but she stood from the table and said, “I need some air.” Then she turned and walked through the restaurant, out the rear door where, presumably, Gurt offered outside dining.

“Sheesh,” Victor sighed, blowing out a breath.

“You don’t trust her? After everything she’s done? She’s spent months of her life with us, and it’s cost her far more than she’s gained. You heard what she said about breaking her oath! She’ll likely be in some trouble when she heads home . . .”

“Easy, Valla. Chill.” Victor held up a hand. “I didn’t think my question was going to piss her off, and yeah, if she’d given me a chance, I would have come around to the point that I do trust her. I guess I’m just used to her being a lot more easygoing than that!” He jerked his thumb toward the balcony.

“I should go and talk to her,” Valla started to slide her chair back, but Victor stood up first.

“Wait! This is my fault. Let me speak to her.” Victor tried to look reassuringly into Valla’s troubled eyes, but she continued to scowl toward the patio where Tes had gone. He sighed and carefully wended his way through the tables and ducked out through the balcony doors, straightening in the cool evening air, thick with the scent of cloying night blooms. A few people were having dinner on the cobbled patio, and a path led away from it, down through a flowering garden, so he walked that way.

Energy lamps here and there shed diffuse light on the garden path, and the moon, strange and green-tinted, hung nearly full in the sky, so he could see quite well as he followed the little pathway toward the sound of a tinkling fountain. When he came around the corner and saw Tes standing in the moonlight, looking into a little pond where he could hear fish playing in the clear water, he froze for a second, not for the first time struck dumb by her beauty. She had an effortless grace, and there in the moonlight, she seemed otherworldly to him.

He shook his head, remembering she was the very definition of otherworldly. “Hey,” he said, clearly trying to impress with his vernacular.

Tes looked at him and frowned, “I could hear you coming. I almost departed.”

“Why’d my question piss you off so much?” Victor asked, getting right to the point, still not really sure why she’d been so short-tempered.

“Half the reason I came out here is that I was surprised at my own vehemence. I’m not sure why, but it hurt when I saw I hadn’t earned your immediate trust. I’ve sacrificed much, you know, choosing to help you avoid the warlord’s clutches. My . . . organization is going to put me under review, at the very least. I’ll likely have to return to journeyman status and follow a master to the next world I study.” She sighed, frowned, and rubbed her brow as though trying to soothe a headache.

“I’m . . .”

“I know that doesn’t sound like such a big problem, especially when your very lives are on the line, and that’s why I chose to help. I can sacrifice a few decades of freedom to see you and Valla live . . .”

“Decades?” Victor blurted.

She waved a hand as though dismissing the idea, “If I choose to stay with them. It’s a prestigious guild, but there are others. My uncle, Yek’nakkara’ma’shohon, thinks I waste my time with them. Perhaps he’s correct.” When she said her uncle’s name, the word rolled out of her throat like a growl, and Victor had to give her a double-take, making sure she hadn’t assumed her dragon form.

“Your uncle?”

“Yes, Victor. Dragons have families too.” She sighed and then pointed at the pond, “I like that one, the white one with the orange and blue spots.”

Victor stepped closer to her so he could look more closely into the water, and then he saw the fish she’d described. He watched it flitting among the colorful, decorative rocks and crystals at the bottom of the clear pool, and when it passed close to another fish, one with black and yellow scales, he said, “That’s a pretty one.”

“Aye,” she sighed. “They all are, aren’t they? In their own way.” Tes looked up from her study of the pond and stared at Victor, and he found it a little unnerving that her expression didn’t change when she went from admiring the fish to looking at his face. “I can see the look on your face, Victor, and, no, you aren’t just another pretty fish for me to watch. I see so much in you. I wish . . .” She sighed and shook her head, looking away.

“You wish?” Victor pressed.

“I wish I weren’t ten times your age and so far beyond your . . . potency. It’s not right to have the feelings I have.” She looked away, and the words were so softly spoken that he doubted he’d have heard them if not for his exceptional hearing and the quiet of the little garden.

“Really, Tes?” Victor said, his turn to speak softly. “I mean, I have a massive crush on you, but I thought that was a hopeless cause.” His lips turned up as he spoke, and he allowed a little humor into his voice.

“Is my heart something you’d mock?” Tes asked, jerking her head back toward him.

“I’m not mocking you,” Victor chuckled, “I’m trying to make you feel better. I’m sorry, but I’m a clown that way—I try to relieve tension by teasing others or making fun of myself. Tes, I’m hopeless when it comes to you. You’re so damn beautiful and smart and capable. I wish I could be a match for you, but you don’t want someone you have to babysit following you around like that. Wouldn’t you get bored and start to resent me after you had to hold my hand for the ten thousandth time?”

She turned to face him more directly and reached out one of her hands to rest her palm on his chest. It was warm, and it made his skin tingle and awoke a desire that he’d held down for the very reasons he’d just listed—Victor didn’t want to be babysat by the woman he was attracted to. Still,

the electricity in her touch was undeniable, and it stung a little when she said, “You’re right, Victor.”

She gently moved her hand sideways until it rested over his heart, and she stood there for a moment as though memorizing the feel of its beat. “You’re right, but let’s remember this feeling because if I’m in control of my fate at all, we will meet again, and I have great confidence that you’ll continue to surprise everyone with your accomplishments.”

“Anyway,” Victor said, his voice husky and thick with emotion, “the answer is yes.”

“Yes?” Tes looked confused.

“Yes, I trust you.”

That got a smile out of her, and she nodded, her blond curls bouncing with the movement. “Good! You should!” she laughed, then, giving his chest one more pat with her hand, she turned and said, “Let’s go join Valla. I care about her a lot, you know. I wouldn’t ask her to duel that woman if I weren’t going to be there to watch over her.”

“I get it, Tes.” He followed her back through the garden, breathing in the rich, sweet air and wondering about his feelings for the strange, incredible woman. He’d badly wanted to kiss her back by the fish pond but knew he wasn’t ready for that; she was brilliant and quick-witted, clever and funny. She was kind and always ready to help others. He felt a certain way when he was with her; it was like some of her confidence and good intentions brushed off on him, making him better. He knew he’d forever be comparing other women to her and coming up short.

Those thoughts and feelings in his mind while they walked, he thought about how he’d find his way back to Tes someday. He wondered how much he’d need to change for her to take him seriously. Would it be enough to conquer the Untamed Marches? Would he need to explore other worlds? Conquer other lands? How many dungeons would he have to delve into and plunder? When he’d returned to Zaafor and crushed the warlord, would that be enough? He grinned, shaking his head at himself, amused that nothing sounded too daunting. As far as he was concerned, it was good to have goals, and getting a kiss or more from Tes was definitely a worthy goal.