

## Victor BK4: Ch20

Book 4: Chapter 20: A Kind Voice in a Dark Place

“That’s right,” Victor growled, growing irritated by the black-plated guard’s questioning. “War Captain Black wanted me to check in, to tell him about my experience with the Ancestor Shard.”

“Yar,” Tronk said, from behind him, looming over his left shoulder. The giant hadn’t been exactly excited to lead Victor to the war captain’s estate, but he’d shrugged and said something about there still being hours of light left and then said goodbye to Bell. She’d been a little more difficult to shake than that, though, following them for several minutes through the upper districts of the city until Tronk had finally promised to meet her at their favorite spot after Victor and Valla left on their monster hunt.

“Yes, and I’ve told you the war captain isn’t seeing visitors this evening . . .”

“Move,” Tronk said, striding forward, shoving the Vesh-sized guard out of the way and dragging the long, sliding gate open several feet. “Fist comin’ through. Official business,” he rumbled as several other guards rushed out of the gatehouse. None of them spoke, though, nor lifted a hand toward Tronk. The giant nodded at them, then motioned for Victor to follow, trundling up the long, cobbled drive toward the gloomy, black-marble villa.

“They didn’t want to mess with you, did they?” Victor asked, quickening his steps so he came up beside Tronk.

“Nar, they know better. Only one in this place tha’ might give me a workout is Black hisself.”

“He’s the strongest?” Victor asked, a little surprised.

“‘Course. Aren’t the leaders the strongest in yer world?”

“Earth? Definitely not—most wealthy, most influential, I suppose. Fanwath? I don’t think so; there seems to be a degree of contrast between political power and raw power. It’s certainly a little different than here.”

Tronk shrugged and stomped up the steps, ignoring the black-clad footmen and approaching the enormous doors at the front of the big, imposing edifice. The left door opened before he crashed into it, and a liveried servant stood panting, holding it open to the side. “Lord Fist, will you need to see the war captain on this visit?”

“Yar.”

“Please go to the Midnight Parlor, and I’ll fetch him the news of your arrival.”

“Uh-huh,” Tronk strode off, and Victor followed, amused at how the giant had made himself at home. Most of the guards and servants at Black’s villa were Vesh, though he thought he counted a higher percentage of Degh than he’d seen elsewhere; it made sense to him—Black was Degh, and his home was built to accommodate him and his family. Surely there were friends and relations from wherever the Degh hailed that he’d wanted to hire.

In Victor’s opinion, the villa was a depressing place—the lights were dim, the wall panels stained dark grays and blacks, and black marble was ubiquitous, used for floors, pillars, and trim. Gloomy artwork abounded—black marble busts and statues, paintings of nighttime scenes, and rugs and carpeting that were all predominantly—no surprise, here—black.

Tronk led him, purposefully and without pause, to a small parlor with a servant’s station in the corner and comfortable, darkly upholstered couches and chairs arrayed on dark carpeting. Victor figured out, rather quickly, why it was called the Midnight Parlor; the Energy lamp that supplied the light in the room was a faded yellow-green and hung near the apex of the high, domed ceiling, almost like a replica of the moon that was just now rising outside.

While the place was gloomy, it was interesting, and Victor and Tronk had no trouble getting comfortable in oversized, overstuffed chairs. While they waited for Black, a servant wearing a black, velvety uniform brought refreshments—some sort of chilled wine and a bowl of cut, nearly-frozen fruit. Victor availed himself of the snacks, pleased by the mixture of tart and sweet samples and enjoying the pale, cold wine—the first time he could remember having wine that wasn’t dark red.

“Victor, and my old friend, Tronk. Thank you for visiting; can I assume you have some news of the shard?” Black strode into the room, still enormous, still intimidating, but no longer wearing heavy plate armor. He wore comfortable-looking black pants that were baggy at the top and tapered at the ankles. A loose, button-front shirt, also black, hung from his shoulders, only partially fastened by the bottom few buttons.

Black was a handsome, if borderline elderly, man with dark, peppered gray and black hair and a full, well-maintained beard. His eyes, buried in the folds of decades—or centuries—of crow’s feet, were bright, pale brown, and full of depth. Victor could tell the man was holding back his aura, much the way Tronk and the Warlord did, and he wondered just how many people were of such power that they needed to restrain themselves on a constant basis. Valla had said Victor’s aura was heavy, but he didn’t feel he did anything to contain it.

“Hullo, Black,” Tronk rumbled, reaching for a scoop of chilled fruit, heedless of the sticky mess he was making of his hand.

“Hello,” Victor said, standing up and holding out his hand, “I do have some news and some questions. Can we talk here?”

“Aye,” Black nodded, stomping forward and grasping Victor firmly by the wrist. Victor squeezed the giant’s wrist in return and was pleased that his grip felt firm on the thick, powerful appendage. “This is a good place; we won’t be bothered.”

He released Victor's arm, sat in a chair across from him and Tronk, and Victor sat back down.

"I made contact with your ancestor," Victor said, not interested in beating around the bush.

"Truly?" Black's eyes opened widely, and he leaned forward, his mouth partially open, as though he wanted to speak but clearly held himself back, waiting for Victor to expound.

"Yes, no lie." Victor nodded. "He's well, with all of his faculties, but he's lost time and has no idea what's happened outside the stone since its shattering. The last person he remembers speaking to is someone named Bavarak. Does that ring a bell?"

"Ring a bell? Ah, I get your meaning, Victor. Yes, I know who Bavarak is . . . was. He died during the Breaking. Aye, Tronk?"

"Yar."

"The Breaking?" Victor pressed.

"The war between the Degh and the Vesh. Well, and the Yazzians—they aided the Vesh. When the snakes besieged our cities to the south, distracting us, the Vesh did the unthinkable; raided our homelands, calling up the seas to drown Ulhavat—the island from which our ancestors hailed."

"And broke your Ancestor Stone?"

"Aye. The warlord himself led the attack long before my time. What's this to do with the Ancestor, though, Victor? Am I just serving to assuage his curiosity, or is there a larger purpose for your visit? I'd hoped you'd be giving me answers—a way to restore my people's lost glory."

"I want to give you answers. I want to help you, but the Ancestor wasn't ready to tell me everything he knows; I'm not one of your people if you hadn't noticed." Victor leaned closer to Tronk as if to demonstrate his differences and snorted at himself, pleased with his attempt at levity.

"So he sent you for more information before he would help us?" Black didn't seem amused.

"He doesn't know enough to help you yet. He wanted to know another thing: is he the last one? Are there other shards of the Ancestor Stone?"

“Aye, there are others. Most of the clans have one, and the Warlord has three. Some were left where they lay too long, and dungeons grew around them. I know of seventeen shards altogether.”

“Did you . . .” Victor paused, trying to think of how he should phrase the question without sounding insulting. “Did your people not try to put them together? The ones the clans hold, I mean?”

“Of course. Those of us who could agree, at least.” Black frowned and rubbed at his chin. “This was back when the fracture was new, and my people were freshly conquered. The accounts I’ve read seemed to indicate that great Energies repulsed the shards, pushing them away from each other. It didn’t help that none of my people with a spirit Core escaped the fracturing alive.”

“I think that information will be interesting to your Ancestor. He seemed . . .”

Again, Victor broke off his speech, trying to choose his words delicately, “dismayed. Yeah, he seemed dismayed that your people were in Coloss, that you were working and living with the Vesh. He called them ‘upstart mutants.’ He knew the warlord, by the way, said he was the one who stirred the Vesh up to wage war.”

“Aye, Warlord Thoargh is ancient and powerful.” Black frowned, and Victor thought he could hear the giant’s molars grinding. “We don’t serve him, not exactly, but we don’t have the numbers or the strength to be our own people again; Some of us,” he gestured to Tronk, “think it wiser to work with the Vesh, grateful that we still exist as a people, though our numbers dwindle year to year.”

“He broke us,” Tronk said, stretching back. “Broke us, then let us live, part o’ his empire.”

“Empire? I thought Coloss was a city-state.”

“A city-state with ten million square miles of countryside under its direct control. A city-state with a dozen other city-states subservient to it. An empire in everything but name,” Black said.

“Enough,” Tronk rumbled, sitting up and making a vague gesture at the air around them. “This topic ain’t somethin’ the warlord wants to ‘ear about.”

“Aye, brother,” Black said, scooting forward and looking directly into Victor’s eyes. “Victor, please tell the Ancestor about our situation. Tell him about the loss of Ulhavat. Tell him our people diminish each year, each generation weaker and fewer than the one before. Keep his counsel to yourself and only speak of it among Degh you can trust—Tronk and I should be the extent of this circle, for now.”

“Yar,” Tronk grunted, scooting forward to stand up. “Time we ‘eaded back, Victor.”

“Alright,” Victor said, standing. He felt he had enough information to please the Ancestor and wanted to get back to the citadel to check on Valla, anyway. Black walked them to the door, and as he and Tronk stepped through, he offered some parting words.

“Victor, no one from my household will cause you trouble, and it’s known the warlord is sponsoring you, at least until Gazra’s Day. You shouldn’t run into any trouble from the citizens of Coloss, but watch yourself should you leave the city—I’d hate to lose your connection to my ancestor before aught could be gained from it.”

“I’ll be careful, War Captain. Thanks for the head’s up.”

“I’ll hope to hear from you again soon,” Black called after them as Victor and Tronk made their way down the steps and up the lane. Victor raised his hand up and waved in answer. Then he turned to regard Tronk.

“So, you’re friends with Black?”

“Friends. Cousins.” Tronk shrugged. He didn’t offer any other explanation, and Victor decided to let the matter rest for now. He had a lot to mull over while they walked. The more Victor learned about the Degh and their situation, the more tragic it seemed. He had a hard time reconciling his experiences with the warlord with the image he had of a conqueror who drove an entire race of people into submission, destroying their home—an entire island—and diminishing their potency in so many ways.

Something about their Ancestor Stone seemed to make the Degh different from the other peoples Victor had encountered in this world and on Fanwath. Why were they weaker individually because of this stone’s breaking? Why would there be fewer of them each generation? Why would they keep growing weaker? He hoped the Ancestor in the shard would be able to shed some light on the matter, but if not, he hoped he’d be happy with the information enough to give Victor some more guidance as a mentor.

When they returned to the citadel and Tronk led Victor to his suite, he found Valla within, sitting on the rich, thick rug at the center of their seating area, deep in meditation. He could feel the Energy swirling in the air around her and wondered why she was cultivating there instead of in the warlord’s cultivation chamber. Despite his attempt to be quiet, she heard him moving around and opened her eyes. “You’re back.”

“Hey, Valla.” Victor sat in one of the chairs positioned so he could speak to her while looking out the windows toward the city. Valla shifted to face him directly. “Your time with Tes go well?”

“Very well! She . . . I still have a hard time saying this; it seems unbelievable to me, but she thinks I can improve my Energy affinity by perfecting my cultivation method; she thinks I’ll be able to gradually increase it to a level half-again as high as it is. Victor, no one on Fanwath knows how to do that! Well, no one who’s ever spoken of it.”

“Seriously? Can I ask . . .”

“Right now, I have equal affinities for iron and air—both are four point one.”

“And she thinks she can help you get those into the . . . sixes?”

“Yes!”

“That’s fucking great, Valla!” Victor clapped his hands together enthusiastically. “I told you she knew a lot!”

“It helps that she has elemental affinities, herself, I think.”

“No doubt.” Victor, of course, couldn’t stop his mind from running away with the obvious question: if Valla could improve her affinities, could he? Did it work differently for spirit affinities? Regardless of anything else, he was excited to see that there were rules about Energy and Cores that the people on Fanwath didn’t yet know; there might be a lot more to discover on Zaafor than he’d first considered. “Anything else? She teach you any cool spells or anything?”

“No, but she hinted at being excited to speak to you during the hunt. She went on and on during the tournament about your potential. It was . . . tedious.”

“Oh? You didn’t mention that yesterday!”

“Well, it was your big day, and I didn’t want to sound sour. I’m in a much better mood after the progress I made today. Tes thinks I’m going to master this cultivation drill in no time. She’s such a good teacher! Victor, I think she’s a lot more powerful than she seems . . .” Valla spoke the last in a hushed voice, as though she worried about eavesdroppers.

“Yeah. You’ve noticed she looks human, like me, right? I think the people here assume she’s a Vesh with no obvious . . . mutations—is that the right word?”

“I’ve noticed. I asked Tes about it, and she said she and you might share some ancestry but that she’s not human.”

“Mmhhh,” Victor said, rubbing at his chin. He supposed Tes would have told Valla she was a dragon if she wanted her to know. “Sounds about right. I knew she wasn’t from Zaafor, anyway.”

“I asked her if she could help us open a gateway to Fanwath, and she wouldn’t answer me directly, but she said, ‘I don’t think you’ll need to worry about that.’”

“Really? Well, for what it’s worth, I think she’s right. Speaking of which, did you find out where we’re supposed to meet our hunting company? I completely forgot to ask Tronk about it.”

“Yes, Tes told me we should meet her at the gate to the wastes at dawn.” Valla’s eyes suddenly widened as though she’d just remembered something, and she said, “Oh, Victor! How did things go with the Artificer? Did you get help with your amulet?”

Victor’s face fell, and he sighed, falling back in his chair, tilting his eyes so he looked up at the white plastered ceiling. “Not exactly help, no. The Artificer thinks the enchantments on the amulet got weakened from time and exposure to Energy. He thinks Gorz slipped away, well his fragment did, and he thinks it’s gone to join the greater part of his spirit.”

“Oh?” Valla asked, lithely springing to her feet and coming closer to Victor. There wasn’t a chair nearby, but she put a hand on his wrist and leaned toward him, concern in her eyes. “Are you upset about it?”

“I . . .” Victor wanted to vent; he wanted to talk about how he really felt, but something choked the words in his throat, and he said, “I guess it’s good that he’s not trapped anymore. Who knows what his spirit will get up to now that it’s free.”

“That’s true,” Valla said, giving his wrist another squeeze, but her eyes narrowed as she stared at him, as he avoided making eye contact. “Something’s bothering you, though.”

Victor sat up, looked at her, saw the sincerity on her face, and sighed, “I’m upset, yeah. I’m upset with myself. This shit has happened to me before, and it fucking guts me that I let it happen again. I didn’t even know it was happening.”

Valla’s eyes narrowed in confusion, and she said, “I’m not following . . .”

“I’ve done this with friends before. When I was fifteen, I had a friend. His name was Chris, and we were pretty good friends—hung out a lot around the neighborhood, you know?” Valla nodded, and he continued, “Well, one summer, he stopped coming around and started hanging around with these other dudes. I just shrugged it off. ‘Guess he’s too cool for me,’ I said—never even fucking texted him about it or anything.” He could see Valla was confused by his words, but he kept pushing through the memory.

“Well, the months went by, and I knew less and less about what he was up to, and then one day, I got to school, and they called me to the counselor’s office. They were calling all the people they thought were close to Chris. He was dead.

The rumor I heard was that he was running from the cops on his dirtbike, wiped out on some gravel, and slid his head into the curb. My fucking friend was dead! He'd gotten wrapped up with some dudes that had him running product from some asshole on the south side up to our neighborhood."

"Product?"

"Drugs. It doesn't matter. The point is, I fucking just let him go, never bothered him, never tried to get him to tell me what was up, never told him to get away from those assholes. And then he was dead."

"And you feel like Gorz is the same?"

"Well, I sure as hell neglected the shit out of him. I could have taken him to an artificer sooner. Maybe if I'd spent more time chatting with him in Persi Gables, I'd have seen he had a problem. Now he's gone."

"It's not the same, though, Victor. Gorz was a trapped spirit; you could say he's better off, and it wouldn't be a euphemism."

"I know, logically, that it's different, but it doesn't feel different, you know?" Victor put his hand on his stomach, right beneath his heart. "It feels like I've got a hole here, as though I fucked up somehow and lost something—someone—important." He shook his head and rubbed at his eyes, embarrassed that he was getting so emotional over the amulet, over the spirit shard. "It's just—in the back of my mind, I always knew Gorz was there, but like in my past, I was too wrapped up with my own shit to give him the attention he needed. Meanwhile, I could talk to him anytime I needed to. He . . . he helped me get through some pretty grim shit, Valla."

Valla stared at him for a few seconds, but rather than speak right away, she gave him a smile and took his hand, tugging him to his feet. "Come on, Victor. Let's go out on the balcony. I have some very special whiskey I've been saving for a special occasion. Let's send your friend off with a toast."

"Valla, you don't have . . ."

"No. Don't protest; come on. I've been wanting an excuse to drink this, and it sounds like Gorz deserves our well wishes to send him off. He's got a great journey ahead of him!"

"Yeah," Victor nodded, walking with her to the door, comforted to know she was here with him, and before he could say it, she spoke.

"I'm glad you're here with me, Victor. How alone and scared I'd be in this strange world without you! I won't diminish your feelings, but I'll tell you that, from what I've seen, you're an excellent friend. You're dependable, you care about how



people feel, and I know you didn't mean to neglect Gorz. You missed a chance to say goodbye, but here's another. Tell your friend how you feel."

Valla had been placing objects on the balcony railing while she spoke—a black crystal bottle with a red, waxed cork top and two square, short crystal glasses. She broke the seal on the cork, twisted it out of the bottle, and poured the glasses full of a rich, vaporous, amber liquid. She handed one glass to Victor, picked up the other one, and then looked at him expectantly.

"All right," Victor said, licking his lips. The heady scent of the liquor's vapors filled the air, wafting into his nose, and the smoky odor was making his mouth water. "Gorz," Victor cleared his throat, shaking his head ruefully, then tried again, "Gorz, you were a dependable, kind voice in a dark, terrible place. You saved me from despair on more than one occasion, and just knowing you were there was a comfort that got me through a lot of bad shit. You were a great friend, and you deserved better from me. I'll honor your memory, and I hope there's some way we might meet again—maybe in your next life."

Valla lifted her glass, and Victor clinked his against it, then they both drank. The liquor burned his throat, but it warmed his body instantly, and a tingle of numbness touched his nose and cheeks. "Whew," he said, blowing out a vaporous breath and waving a hand in front of his face. "Strong stuff!"

"Yes! Another?" Valla asked, already pouring her glass full. Victor nodded, and that night they stood out under the stars, looking down at the immense sea of lights that was Coloss, and Gorz received many toasts in his honor.