

Victor BK3: Ch27

Book 3: Chapter 27: Visions

“I don’t know, Victor,” Valla replied, looking at the two treasures. “I’m sure the cake will help your body to heal—part of the process of improving your racial rank is the rebuilding and refining of your tissues. The biggest changes occur at new tiers, of course, but each rank will help. I think that cake is good for more than one, but the treasurer for ap’Torux wouldn’t guarantee it.” Valla paused and picked up the stoppered crystal bottle, staring into its weird, swirling gray contents.

“As for the bottle, the treasurer had a first-hand account that the smoke had been used by a royal family from . . . agh, I can’t remember the name of the world. In any case, they used the smoke to make themselves more resistant to heat and to cure burns they suffered while trying to tame their drakes. Apparently, they used them as mounts.”

“And the drakes are related to dragons?” Victor asked, reaching for the bottle. Valla nodded as she handed it to him. “Well, how do I take it? Just pop the cork and inhale?”

“The treasurer’s notes indicated the smoke would dissipate quickly. You need to inhale as much as you can and hold it for as long as possible. The accounts made it sound like it would be painful—not just because, you know, it’s smoke, but because it would burn your lungs before it worked its healing magic.”

“You fucking serious?” The idea of suffering more burns—on purpose—seemed madness to Victor as he lay there in bed, covered with scars.

“Yes,” Valla said, nodding curtly.

“I like that you don’t sugarcoat things, Valla. Well, I’m going to cheat then,” Victor said, and then he concentrated and cast Dauntless Radiance, bathing his bed in the red-gold glow of courage. He suddenly felt very much more capable, more sure, and he saw Valla’s shoulders pull back and her spine straighten. She looked at him with new confidence and nodded.

“This shouldn’t be a problem, Victor. You’ve done worse—had worse done to you.”

“That’s the spirit,” Victor said, then he blew out all his air, emptying his prodigious lungs. When his breath trailed off to a soft wheeze, he lifted the crystal bottle to his chin and twisted the cork, breaking the wax seal. As he pulled the cork away, the gray smoke started immediately to drift out, and Victor began inhaling, siphoning the gray, magical smoke out of the bottle. His lungs

were far more capacious than the bottle, and he soon drained the smoke away, pulling it deeper and packing air on top of it.

At first, Victor thought the treasurer had been mistaken because he didn't feel the urge to cough, and he didn't feel any discomfort. As he held his breath, though, he felt a warmth in his chest, then it rapidly ramped up to heat, then white-hot agony that spread through his lungs. He held his breath as long as possible, but when the pain was so blinding that he thought he was about to lose consciousness, he coughed it out.

Victor hacked and coughed, his eyes bulging and watering from the convulsions, but no smoke emerged from his lips. Worse, the burning hadn't subsided at all; in fact, it was spreading outward from his lungs, into his shoulders and stomach, and then into his limbs. Even his head felt like it was burning. When the coughing stopped, Victor inhaled a massive lungful of air and then began to scream, vibrating in his bed as his body burned from the inside out. It felt like someone had laced his bone marrow with thermite.

Vaguely, he was aware that Valla had run to the door, presumably to tell the guard to stand down—Victor couldn't concentrate on what was happening around him, but he imagined his screams were terrifying. He gripped his sheets, ripping them to shreds in his convulsions of agony. At some point, the pain became too much for his conscious mind, and Victor seemed to drift outside himself.

He watched his body writhe and thrash, and though he knew it was a trick of his mind, that he was probably seeing things through his own eyes, it seemed to him that he was floating above his body and that black smoke was erupting from his pores, making a cloud that obscured what he saw. After an eternity of agony, Victor felt the pain begin to fade where it first started, in his lungs.

He focused on that relief, sank his consciousness into that small, pain-free part of his body, and it slowly spread. By the time it was just his arms and legs still alight with agony, Victor was calmed and lay back on his wet, ripped sheets. Valla had come back to his bedside and looked at him with concern, but Victor could also see relief in her eyes.

"It's working," she said.

"The pain is fading," Victor croaked, his voice a hoarse whisper.

"Your scars are largely gone, Victor."

Congratulations! You have gained a new feat: Flame Touched

Flame Touched: By inhaling the final breath of a Fire Drake, you've absorbed a part of its spirit. Your body is reborn in flame—while intense fire and heat can harm you, lesser flames will wash over your flesh with little effect, and you will heal more easily from such injuries.

"Oh, cool," Victor said, reading the message that appeared as the last burning pains faded away from his fingers and toes. He saw Valla's raised eyebrow and told her about his new boon.

"Even better than the ap'Torux treasurer thought," Valla said, leaning closer, peering at his shoulder. "What colors! Whoever created this tattoo was talented," she said.

“Oh shit, it’s back? I thought my scarring would wreck it.” Victor turned and saw his tattoo, the bladed claw surrounded by spears, and oddly, it looked bolder—more real than before. Maybe it was his relief at not seeing his arm covered with horrible scars playing tricks on him, but he thought the tattoo looked better than ever. After seeing his arm and shoulder, still crisscrossed with scars from blades and claws but with smooth, unblemished skin in between, he glanced down at the rest of himself.

“Did all the fire scars go away?” he asked, reaching up to feel at his head—it was still smooth and hairless, but he didn’t feel the lumpy, thick scarring he’d had before.

“It seems so, Victor! You’ve still got plenty of others, though,” Valla laughed, glancing over his body. Victor suddenly became very aware of his near-naked state—when he’d gotten into bed, he’d been in nothing but his underwear. He chuckled and folded his arms behind his head; Valla had already seen plenty, anyway.

“I owe you, Valla. That was a lucky find, and, well, you could have taken my money and bought something cheaper. I’m glad I can trust you.”

“Hah. If I didn’t trust your good intentions, I’d be offended. I’m a captain of the imperial legion. I’m a tier-5 Sword Dancer. You wouldn’t besmirch my honor, would you?”

“No, hell no, Valla! I meant that as a compliment—sorry, but I trust easily, and I get burned a lot. It just feels good to know I’ve got another person who won’t screw me over.” She nodded and gave him a half smile, and Victor continued, “I gotta say, though, that treasurer guy wasn’t right about everything—that was the worst fucking pain I’ve ever felt, and I’ve had some bad shit happen to me. Also, that wasn’t just ‘smoke from a drake’s lungs;’ it was the last breath of the drake and apparently held part of its spirit.”

“Well, now you have a record of it. You could probably sell that information to some of the more wealthy houses.”

“Same goes for you.”

“I’ll share it with Lady Rellia, but I won’t try to profit from the knowledge; it’s too hard to know what house might be aligned against ap’Yensha in the future.”

Victor gave her another appraising look; at some point, she’d changed clothes to her usual uniform, and her hair and skin were perfectly coiffed and clean. She stood like she was at attention, her hands clasped behind her back, and her pale green eyes looked lovely in the light from his Dauntless Radiance spell. Victor laughed inwardly. Was he falling for yet another pretty face? To bring himself back to reality, he said, “Rellia’s lucky to have you. Your loyalty is admirable.”

She nodded, smiling at the praise, then said, “How do you feel? Will you be able to eat the cake now?”

“Yeah, I think so. I feel all right, just a little wrung out. It’s crazy, but when I think about the pain I just went through, it doesn’t seem real—like my mind is already putting fog around it. I suppose I’ll wake up sweating with nightmares about it, but right now, I feel okay.”

“Good. Racial advancements often bring on sleep . . .”

“Yeah!” Victor interrupted, “I passed out for like ten days the last time.”

“Ten days? That’s a long one. I hope the cake won’t put you out for that long, but if you do sleep, I’ll purchase your armor and then put some pressure on Rellia’s questioner—I assume you’d like to know more about the mage that burned you when you wake up.”

“Yes! Hey, if I’m going to be out of it, I should ask: do you know anything about the guard Hine put in the hallway? Can we trust him?”

“Yes.” Valla nodded firmly. “He’s one of Hine’s men from the legion. He’ll not betray you.”

“All right, let’s do this,” Victor said, looking for the box that held the cake.

Valla held it out to him and said, “I picked it up when you began to thrash.”

“Thanks,” Victor said, taking it. For such a small box, it was quite heavy. He saw that the top lid was sealed with gold foil, so he summoned a sharp knife from his ring and dug the tip into the gold, running it along the seam between the lid and the bottom half. When he was done, he put the knife away and gently lifted the lid. The scent of cinnamon and sugar hit his nostrils and his mouth filled with saliva. “Dios! That smells good!”

He saw Valla move out of the corner of his eye, and Victor glanced at her. She’d taken a step back and gripped her hands in tight fists. “You all right?”

“Hurry and eat it, Victor! It smells too good!”

“Right,” Victor said. He knew what she meant—every bone in his body was screaming at him to eat that cake. He picked it up, dense like an overmoist poundcake, and took a bite. The flavors that overwhelmed his tastebuds were too many to comprehend. His nose told him there was cinnamon, honey, and some other cloying scent for which he didn’t know the name. The cake, while dense, dissolved in his mouth and seemed to flood his blood vessels with a warmth that spread from his mouth into his entire body.

“Ungh,” he managed, stuffing the rest of the cake into his mouth. Then, as the potent alchemical and magical mixture flooded his pathways and the heat rose

into his brain, he felt himself falling back into his bed. Instead of hitting the pillow, though, he fell through it and sank to the center of the world. He felt like he was descending at a million miles per hour, and the world's depths shot by in a blur—caverns, magma, strange creatures in their multitudes, different layers of rocks and soil, then he was sinking through space, Fanwath rapidly shrinking and disappearing as he fell.

Planets and stars shot by in a haze, and as Victor began to lose his grip on reality and a long ululating scream rose from his throat, he closed his eyes. An instant later, he felt his feet standing on solid ground, and he opened them to see he was standing on damp grass in a clearing surrounded by a dense, hot jungle. A rocky slope rose before him, and a path littered with white, humanoid bones led up the hill to a dark cavemouth.

Victor, no, Tenecoalt, gripped his macuahuitl in a sweaty grip. He looked down at himself and saw his bone breastplate carved from the thousand-toothed lizard, his wyrm-hide pants, and his feathered boots. He was ready! He was Tenecoalt! He was Quinametzin, and anything that threatened his lands must be crushed! He lifted his throat to the sun and howled again, his ululation echoing off the rocks and trees, sending birds in the hundreds squawking and flapping into the orange-tinted sky.

He lifted his macuahuitl and leaped up the slope to the cave. When he stepped into the stinking, evil darkness, Tenecoalt urged his ancestor's spirits to brighten the shadows. Suddenly shapes took form in his yellow-limned magical sight—boulders, bones, skins, horns, and there, in the back, hunched over its latest meal, a small man from the southern jungle, was the feathered bear. It grunted and crunched a bone, dark marrow dripping over the mutilated corpse.

The feathered bear was big, heavier than a Quinametzin, but Tenecoalt didn't care—his ancestors would strengthen him. He roared his challenge, and when the monster turned to regard him, baleful red eyes glaring down its long, tooth-lined snout, it barked a coughing growl in response, and then the fight was on.

The monster charged out of the cave, long spear-like claws ripping over the stones in a clatter, horrible teeth gnashing in a fury, and feathered mane and tails streaming behind it. It smashed into Tenecoalt, and the two rolled in a furious melee down the rocky slope leaving a trail of blood and feathers to glisten in the fading orange sunlight. Tenecoalt gripped the bear's mane, holding onto it while he employed his jagged macuahuitl to horrible effect, smashing the heavy stone-wood weapon into the monster's snout, limbs, and neck.

They rolled in a frenzy, and when the feathered bear crunched its enormous fangs into Tenecoalt's shoulder, breaking flesh and bone and piercing organs, it only further agitated the giant warrior. His eyes turned red, and the fury of his ancestors entered him, filling him with their strength and pride. Tenecoalt drove a thick, hard-nailed thumb into the bear's eye, and with the power of a true titan, he pulled its enormous skull away from his shoulder, its teeth popping free with wet, bloody suction.

Tenecoalt stood, holding the great bear at arm's length while it thrashed in agony, and then he finished the battle with a series of terrible, hacking blows of his macuahuitl. The first few strikes pulverized the feathered fur and flesh of the bear's chest. The next shattered bones, and the final strike, resounded into the bear's heart, bursting it with the terrible concussion.

Tenecoalt threw the bear to the stony ground and punched his mighty fist into its shattered chest, pulling forth part of its torn, steaming heart. He bit into the bloody meat, and as he felt the bear's strength flooding into him, he lifted his head and roared with new vigor and potency. He gave thanks to his ancestors, and he gave thanks to his enemies because each of them had made him stronger with their deaths.

When Victor woke, it was dark in his room, and though he was snug under a heavy blanket, he could feel the chill in the air. He glanced around the shadowy periphery, saw moonlight coming through the window, and found that he was alone. He felt tired, though good, and the vision he'd had of his ancestor, if that's what Tenecoalt was, loomed vividly in his mind. Like his other bloodline vision, he knew it was different from a dream or a fantasy—it felt like a memory that had been hidden but was now unlocked.

When Victor thought back to the way Tenecoalt had torn the heart from the bear and eaten, he didn't feel any revulsion—it was like he understood Tenecoalt's motivations, and that understanding extended to his beliefs and the undeniable effects of the practice on his strength. Tenecoalt had grown powerful, eating the hearts of his strongest enemies. "Fucking weird," Victor said, his voice rumbling into the dark room.

He held up his hand in the dim light, flexing his powerful fingers and noting how the muscles on his forearm bunched with the gesture. He looked down at his feet, saw that he still fit on the bed, and sighed a breath of relief—he hadn't turned into a giant. He saw something glimmering from the corner of his eye and glanced at his shoulder. There, glinting in the darkness, was the tattoo Chandri had given him. The sun was gleaming with faint yellow light, and the spears seemed to reflect the light on their silvery tips. "Even fucking weirder . . ."

With a grunt, he stood up and stepped onto the cold wooden floorboards. He felt terrific if he were being honest. All his aches and pains were gone, and the sore, stiff spots where thick scars had formed over deep wounds were dim memories. He padded into the bathroom, and when he turned on the Energy lamp, he had to squint against the glare until his eyes adjusted. As he blinked away the spots in his vision, he looked into the mirror and was happy to see that not a whole lot had changed.

The first thing that brought a smile to his face was the quarter inch of dense, black hair that covered his scalp. He saw he still had four thin white scars that crossed half his face where the bear had clawed him, though they were much subtler than before. His other scars were similarly faded, even the thick ones where he'd been impaled or nearly eviscerated. Victor reached down to the sink to splash some water on his face, and that's when he realized he'd grown again. The sink was definitely more of a reach than before, though only slightly.

Victor saw Gorz on the counter where he'd thrown off most of his ruined clothes, and he picked the amulet up, slipping it around his neck. "Gorz?"

"Victor? I was growing worried about you."

"I got hurt pretty badly, but I'm good now. You doing okay?"

"I am, thank you."

"Hey, can you measure me? Based on the dimension of this room? You can do that, right?"

“You are two point one-six meters tall, Victor.”

“That’s . . .” Victor concentrated and did the math far more quickly than he would have done back on Earth. “Around seven-one? Chingado!” He patted the amulet and said, “Thanks, buddy. By the way, we’re in a city again. I’ll buy some books before I leave again, all right?”

“Yes! Some maps, too, please! Could you not find an artificer and ask for a slate—something I could interface with? I’m sure it can be crafted because Reevus had one.”

“Yeah, I’ll look into it, Gorz. I know you told me that before, and I dropped the ball. I’m going to make it a priority.” Victor dug around in his ring and found his watch. “Four in the morning. Not bad.” Just then, he remembered to look at his status sheet to see what exactly the cake had done:

Name: Victor Sandoval Race: Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Improved 4 Class: Spirit Carver - Epic Level: 33

“Not bad! Three ranks from that cake.” More than that, though, he felt like he understood his bloodline more, and as the minutes ticked by, putting him further and further from his vision, he began to worry about the implications. “Do I really want to try eating my enemies’ hearts?” Truthfully, he figured it wouldn’t be much of a stretch from his usual behavior if he were berserk.

Victor didn’t know how long he’d slept, but he could smell himself standing there, so he took a shower before getting dressed. When he went into the main room again, the light from the bathroom spilling out behind him, he saw a package on the chair where Valla had been sitting before. He walked over and realized it was a neatly folded, faintly glimmering chainmail shirt.

When he picked it up and turned toward the bathroom light, he saw that the chain links shimmered between green and brass. He walked back into the bathroom and pulled it over his head, but got stuck there, the opening too narrow to go over his shoulders. Holding a finger to the shirt, he trickled forth some Energy, and a message appeared in his vision as the shirt expanded to the point where he could pull it on.

Shimmersteel Chainmail Shirt - Smelted and crafted by the great mage-artisan Zefin-dak—a fine armored shirt benefiting from the peerless self-repairing properties of Shimmersteel. This shirt will resist sharp attacks, repair itself rapidly, and stretch or shrink to fit a wide range of people.

“Zefin-dak, huh?” Victor smoothed the chainmail out, noticing that it only covered the tops of his arms like his old ringmail armor. He didn’t mind much—he sort of liked having his arms free, especially when he wore his armor almost all the time. He picked up his belt, happy to see that it had repaired itself from the scorching it had suffered, and put it on over the chainmail, then he looked in the mirror. “Damn, that’s pretty.”

The shimmersteel one moment looked yellow-green, but if he moved, it shimmered toward a more brassy color. “I guess that’s why it’s called shimmersteel.” He liked the cut of it, and the comfort was undeniable—he resolved to compliment Valla on her choice when he next saw her.

Victor returned to the bedroom and turned on the Energy lamp, scanning the room. He knew he’d had Lifedrinker with him when he lay in the bed, but he didn’t see her right away. A slight twinge of worry ignited in his chest, but then he saw her handle sticking up next to the nightstand.

“Valla must have moved you when I was going bonkers, huh?” he said as he picked the axe up. He took a few minutes to cut some strips of leather from a piece of hide in his ring, then he twisted them into a braided loop that he attached to his belt. He slipped Lifedrinker into the loop and nodded in satisfaction. He figured that would work until he replaced the metal ring he’d lost in the barn fire.

When he checked his watch, he saw it was almost five-thirty, so he stepped out into the hallway. He saw a different guard sitting on his stool by the stairway and waved. The guard, peering through the same strange goggles, waved back. Victor shrugged and tapped gently on Valla’s door. Rapid footsteps signaled her approach, and then Valla opened the door, her sword held back and to her side, blade down. “Victor?”

“Yeah,” he said, smiling.

“You’re looking a lot better!” She pulled the door wide, and Victor saw that she’d been awake—her fireplace was lit, her lamps were on, and stacks of paper covered the little table in her room.

“How long was I out?”

“Only three days.”

“Well, I feel pretty damn great. Thanks for the armor, by the way!” He held his arms up as if to display the scaled shirt he wore.

“You’re welcome. I have some beads for you—the shirt was only five hundred.” She motioned for him to come through the doorway, which he did, though he had to duck, then she shut the door. “You didn’t change much, though your scars are further faded, and you seem more . . . robust.”

“Robust?”

“Yes. Your aura is stronger. People will feel you enter a room. Well, that already happened, but it’s . . . more profound now. Did anything else happen? The cake was supposed to uncover bloodline traits . . .”

“Yeah, I had another vision. Did I ever tell you about my bloodline vision? It’s kinda crazy shit. I’ll, um, I’ll go over it with you, but first, have you learned anything from the wizard we captured?”

“Yes, Victor. As you would say, there’s a lot of shit for us to go over.” Valla smiled wryly and gestured to the table, indicating that he should take a seat.