

Victor BK4: Ch23

Book 4: Chapter 23: Reaping the Rewards

Victor followed Tes's gaze to the giant arachnid corpse near the center of the gully and started kicking his way through the corpses toward it. Sure enough, as he walked around the lifeless body, its legs hanging in the air, curled inward, he saw a long, dark haft sticking out of the creature's head. He recognized it as Lifedrinker's living wood handle. Still, it was different—longer, broader, and the tiny twinkling motes of light that usually lay deep within the grain, only visible in the right light, were decidedly more pronounced.

"Que bonita!" he whispered through teeth clenched in nervous anticipation. He shoved the bloody, broken legs aside and reached out to grasp her haft, and a jolt of Energy hit him when his fingers wrapped around the wood. It felt familiar and different at the same time, and his grin widened as the axe seemed to sink into his grip eagerly, humming and vibrating ever-so-slightly.

"I can hear them growing close; come with me to stand near Victor, Valla. I'll need to calm Cayle's anger." Victor heard Tes speaking, but he couldn't concentrate on her; he had eyes only for Lifedrinker as he pulled her thick, long handle sideways, cracking the spider's carapace and freeing her head. He lifted her clear of the fuzzy, monstrous arachnid and held her up in the bright sunlight.

"Holy shit," he said, and he heard Valla's intake of breath, echoing the sentiment. Lifedrinker's Heart Silver core had spread through the black metal, nearly obscuring it to the point where only thin streaks of black lingered in the brilliant, much larger, silvery axe head. Her blade had grown significantly, and the heavy, thick spike at the back looked ready to punch through four inches of solid steel without a problem, so wickedly did it glint in the light.

If he gripped her past the halfway point on her handle, he could still swing the axe one-handed, but she was definitely bigger and meant to be used with both hands now—at least while he wasn't the size of a Quinametzin. "I'm going to need a better way to carry her . . ." he started to say, but then a crystal-clear, feminine voice, high, sharp, and fierce, entered his mind.

Victor, my love, do I please you?

"Fuck yes, you do, Lifedrinker!"

All I ever wanted, all I ever want, is to help you crush your foes. Didn't we have such fun with these many-legged weaklings? Victor, when will you make yourself large again? When can we lay waste to more of your enemies?

"Hah!" Victor couldn't help the laugh and the huge smile that had spread on his face. "Soon, beautiful, soon. We're on a hunt now; there should be more for us to fight."

"She speaks to you?" Tes asked, walking closer, Valla close beside her.

“Yes, more than ever. She’s hungry for more battle.”

Talk to your flesh-mates. I’ll be close when you need me.

“Thank you, Lifedrinker,” Victor said, resting her haft on his shoulder, the massive, silvery axe gleaming in the sunlight next to his head. He turned to speak to Tes and Valla, but then a commotion between the hills caught his attention, and he turned to see several enormous beasts—mounts—carrying their riders into the gully and the scene of spider carnage.

In the lead was Cayle on her thirty-foot, black and yellow serpent mount. This close to the creature, Victor could see its wings, folded back and rather anemic; he figured they must grow as the creature aged. Cayle didn’t look happy as she pulled her snake to a stop and leaped down, crunching her boot through the exoskeleton of a dead spider’s leg.

Several others also dismounted, but only one came forward with Cayle—a hulking, black-furred Vesh with four arms. He held a coppery spear that had to be twelve feet long from its tasseled haft to its needle-sharp tip, and his thick-nosed, heavy-browed face was twisted with rage. Before Calye could speak, he growled, “I should crack your legs, runt!” With his words, a wave of anger and strength poured out, and Victor had to take a step back—this was no low-level Colossian.

“Quiet, Forx,” Cayle said, holding up a hand, but she didn’t look happy either. She’d kept her wings folded behind her, but her brow was furrowed under her thick, white horn, and her chocolate eyes held storm clouds within their murky depths. “When you sign on with my company, you don’t race off to kill hordes on your own. I’d planned to pass this way purposefully—we often find trophies in this gully.”

“It’s my fault, Cayle,” Tes said, stepping in front of Victor and Valla. “I led them off, thought this would be a good initiation for them. Of course, they’ll share the prizes, but you have to admit, they need the experience.”

“So do plenty others!” Forx roared, veins standing out on his ruddy forehead and saliva feathering out with his breath.

“Calm yourself,” Tes said, and suddenly Forx blanched and stepped back. Victor had a good idea why; Tes probably gave him a taste of her aura.

Cayle seemed not to have noticed anything, though, and said, “Tes, I appreciate you’re used to doing things your way around the city; I know you have the war captains’ ears, that they and the warlord respect you. I won’t hold a grudge, but I’d appreciate it if you let me run my hunt without such interference—it makes me look bad and makes it hard to keep everyone in line. Are we agreed?”

“Yes, Cayle. I’ll speak to you before I do anything so impulsive again.” Tes held out a hand, and Cayle took it; the two women stared at each other for a moment, and then Cayle nodded.

“Well, we’ve got some harvesting to do!” She turned and started hollering to the others who’d arrived at the gully but had hung back to watch how things played out. “Right! No venom glands from sand spiders, but I want hearts, fangs, claws, spinnerets, silk glands, and any piece of carapace bigger than a square foot!”

Some people started moving toward the battle scene, but others hung back, and Cayle shouted, “I’m a fair hunt master, people! If you help harvest, you will be rewarded. If you laze about, your share will be docked!”

“You’ll want the book lungs and ovaries from the females, too, Cayle,” Tes said quietly, a hand before her lips.

“That’s right. Thank you,” Cayle nodded and then shouted the orders.

“Come, Victor, Valla,” Tes said. “I’ll teach you how to harvest a sand spider.”

It took the hunting party the better part of two hours to comb through the bloody corpses, carving off carapaces, slicing out organs, and piling them all on large tarps that Cayle watched over, making some sort of tally on her magical clipboard. Tes kept her promise, showing Valla and Victor how to slice away the salvageable large pieces of carapace and how to make sense of the mess within the spiders’ abdomens. Victor enjoyed the removal of the fangs the most, as it didn’t require as much carving and wasn’t nearly as odiferous a pursuit.

In the end, when Cayle awarded the treasures, he and Valla each received a sizeable pile of parts—several large hunks of carapace, a dozen fangs each, and six of each organ, including the hearts. Victor stared at his blue-spattered prizes for a long while, and then he started putting them into his ring, saving out the longest pair of fangs and the biggest heart.

“What are you doing?” Valla asked, watching how Victor stared at the long, weirdly tubular spider heart.

“Are you going to eat it?” Tes asked, grinning over Valla’s head.

“Not this one. I might eat some of the others, but I’ll wait ‘til I’m Berserk. No, this one is for my ancestors, along with these fangs.”

“They’re valuable, Victor!” Valla said. “I heard some of the others talking—we already have enough monster parts to trade for a prize token if we’re crafty with our dealing.

“I need to start earning my ancestors’ favor, Valla. I know it’s hard to understand, but it’ll be worth it.”

“I believe him,” Tes said. After watching Victor stare at the trophies for another minute, she prompted, “Well? The hunting party is getting ready to move again soon . . .”

“What Energy attunement should I use? Does it matter?”

“Oh? You haven’t done this before?”

“No.”

“I don’t know the right answer, but if I were you, I’d cast the spell with my inspiration-attuned Energy; it seems fitting for a man seeking his ancestors’ help and guidance.”

“Yeah. I was thinking the same—I was afraid they might take offense at rage or fear-tainted offerings.” Victor nodded and concentrated on the bloody heart and the two fangs he’d rested atop it, and then he cast Honor the Spirits for the first time. He clamped down on his rage and fear Energy pools and allowed his inspiration to feed the spell.

As the pattern completed and the Energy rushed out of him, brilliant white flames engulfed the spider trophies, but not a bit of smoke rose from them; they flared like a chemical reaction and then faded away, nothing left of the fangs or heart, not even ash or charred soil where they’d been resting.

“An expensive offering,” Tes said, nodding. “I hope your ancestors appreciate it.”

“Yeah.” Victor shrugged, then looked at the column of hunters; their mounts, wagons, and retainers starting to wend their way out of the gully through a different gap in the hills. “So, we gotta stay with the rest of ‘em from now on?”

“No,” Tes chuckled. “I already spoke to Cayle about another potential target on the way—I’ve caught the scent of a juvenile rock wurm a league or so to the north; she doesn’t want to pursue it but has given us permission to have a look.”

“Why doesn’t she . . .” Valla started, but Tes had anticipated the question.

“It could take hours to track it down, and she doesn’t want to move the whole hunt that far off course for a single juvenile—she’s hoping to take on an adult blood wurm at Vagrant’s Oasis, quite a different sort of challenge.”

“You’re cool with us hunting wyrms?” Victor asked, then clamped his mouth shut; he’d forgotten Valla didn’t know Tes’s true nature.

“Why wouldn’t I be ‘cool’ with it?” Tes laughed and started hiking up the side of a hill to the north, moving directly perpendicular to the rest of the hunting party.

“Come on,” Valla said, hurrying after her. Victor shrugged and started jogging to catch up. When he was halfway up the hill, well away from the other mounts and people in the hunting party, he cast Berserk and fought with himself for a while until he’d gotten under control. By then, Tes was a distant yellow figure near the top of the hill, and he grinned as he laid eyes on his quarry.

With a barbaric roar, he began to leap in long bounds up the slope, quickly catching Valla. She was startled by his outburst but cast her movement spell, keeping pace with him. In his haze of diminished cognition and feeling the urge to fight, Victor was moderately pleased to find he didn’t

have to struggle with any hostility aimed at Valla; it seemed his Berserk Quinametzin self had grown used to her presence and didn't consider her a threat.

He chased the woman in yellow for a long while, up and down hills, and, as before, she managed to keep herself just out of his reach no matter how he thought to surprise her with a well-timed leap down a steep slope or a sudden sprint as he drew near. The frustration made it easy to maintain his rage. However, when she finally stopped and he drew near, Victor asserted his will and calmed himself, reminding his furious alter-ego that she was his ally and helping him train.

“Hold your rage, Victor; keep it simmering. Look to your Core. Have you much left to draw upon?” Tes asked as he and Valla came up beside her, Victor looming to her right, and Valla crouched low, a small figure to her left.

Victor did as she asked, finding it harder than usual to turn his gaze inward, well aware that it was his fury that made it difficult—he wanted to scan the horizon for a foe, wanted to lash out and strike something. Still, he forced himself, and there, quickly pulsating with hot fervor next to his other pools of Energy, stood his rage, more than half depleted. “Half,” he grumbled.

“Perhaps a snack is in order. Do you not have more hearts within your storage?”

“Those are valuable . . .” Valla started to say but gave up, shaking her head as Victor produced one of the long, strangely shaped spider hearts.

His mouth began to salivate the moment he saw it, the moment he smelled it. He didn't wait for an invitation or for second thoughts; he tore into the thick, rubbery meat with his powerful incisors, ripping off a gory hunk, blue blood spattering down his chin. Valla looked away, but Tes watched him with eager eyes.

Victor swallowed his first bite and chomped into the heart for a second as he felt the lump of meat sink into his gut—it was satisfying on a level he could hardly describe, but rather than be calmed by the pleasure, his rage surged, and his fury and bloodlust rose to new peaks. He hungrily gobbled the heart, one huge, ripping bite after another. All the while, he felt something occurring within him—the meat was flooding his channels with Energy, so much that it surged into his Core, pushing it past full until, with a satisfying pulse, it expanded.

Congratulations! You have improved your Core to rank: Improved 2

Victor wiped the message away, too eager to fight to bother reading it. “Full,” he grunted, noting how Tes anxiously watched him.

“Brilliant,” she laughed, then pointed down the hillside to a long expanse of rocky, sandy land. “See how the ground tremors ever-so-slightly?”

“Ugh,” Victor grunted, nodding.

“Valla, now's your chance to try the spell Elementalist Troft showed you. Target that spot of ground with your Lightning Strike.”

“From here?”

“Yes—we have the height, and you can clearly see your target. I think it will work.” She didn't wait for Valla to acknowledge her instructions; she turned to

Victor and, reaching a hand between his shoulder blades, gave him a shove, shouting, "Titan! Charge that spot! There's a beast there that dares to challenge you!"

Victor didn't need further urging—his tall, beautiful friend said a beast wanted to fight. How could he not charge into battle? As he ran down the hill, he released his hold on his rage, letting it flow heavy and rich into his pathways—all of them. His vision turned blood red, and Victor screamed a horrible challenge, holding Lifedrinker's gleaming blade high over his head as he bounded down the rocky slope.

Just as he reached the base of the hill, a yellow-white fork of lightning flashed out of the blue sky, cracking into the sandy ground, nearly blinding him with its brilliance. When it faded, he had a dark spot in his vision—the after-image of the bolt. He didn't slow, though; instead, he roared into the sky, hectoring the source of the lightning, his enraged mind already having forgotten that Valla was the caster. It didn't matter, though; something was there to answer his challenge.

A horn the size of Victor's thick, muscular arm burst out of the sand, followed by a stone-plated head from which two baleful red eyes glared. The monster saw Victor leaping over the sand, axe high, and continued to surge forth, a six-foot section of neck coming clear of the ground before two brown and gray scaled forelimbs pulled free of the rocky soil, stomping down and clawing as it scabbled to deliver itself from the grasping dirt.

The wyrm was half emerged, some twenty feet of rock-scaled monstrosity, when Victor made the final leap that brought him sailing toward its horn-plated head. The monster roared at him, lifting its spike-bearded chin and opening its maw, revealing dozens of foot-long teeth, well-designed for the ripping of flesh and bone.

However, Victor was no docile plate of meat, ready to be consumed. He was a leaping, screaming titan. His muscles bunched like enormous steel cables, and Lifedrinker screamed along with him, tearing through the air like a falling comet. Though he wasn't as massive as the young wyrm, Victor probably weighed close to a thousand pounds with the added mass of his Kethian Juggernaut helm, and his strength was prodigious. When he crashed into the wyrm's head, he gripped its snout horn with his left hand and delivered Lifedrinker's edge into the side of its skull just behind its left eye with the other.

Lifedrinker screamed in excitement and frenzied battle lust, and the sound her edge made as it smashed and cut through scales, flesh, and bone was like a small automobile colliding with a telephone pole. The wyrm, still half in the ground, didn't stand a chance; that blow alone nearly killed it, and Lifedrinker was so deeply set in the side of its skull that, when Victor released her handle, the beast had no hope of dislodging her—Lifedrinker pulled herself further in, and thick rivulets of Energy began to stream into the axe.

Victor lifted his hands and blood-spattered face to the sun and screamed his triumph, watching the wyrm thrash and flop in its death throes. Standing there, arms upraised, face hot with the brilliance of the solar light, he felt a joy in his soul that he'd rarely felt before—this was what he was made for. He was a fighter, a gladiator, a titan, and a killer of beasts, monsters, and men. Nothing felt so good as fulfilling his purpose. Once more, as the rage began to fade and his enemy's thrashing ceased, he lifted his head to the sky and screamed his titanic bloodlust.

“Well done, Victor,” Tes said, walking up behind him, Valla trailing a bit further behind, her wide eyes tracing the length of the mighty wyrm. “Let your rage cool now, Titan. It’s time to rest and reap your rewards.”