

## Victor BK4: Ch24

### Book 4: Chapter 24: Night Camp

Victor strode forward to retrieve Lifedrinker from the dead wyrm, but before he could grab hold of her haft, he saw great motes of purple-gold Energy forming up around the gigantic corpse. He paused and stood back, bracing himself; it looked like a lot of Energy. Sure enough, the motes coalesced into a wide, shimmering pool, and then most of it surged toward him while a thin stream streaked toward Valla. Once again, Victor was lifted into the air, held helpless by the massive influx of Energy and the euphoric well-being that came with it.

It was such a surge that Victor felt he might gain another level, but it didn't happen; when he fell back to the ground, he had no System messages waiting for him. "I must be close, though," he said, voice thick with emotion and endorphins. "God, that's some feeling!"

"I can only imagine; I've never pulled a stream so robust," Valla said, though she looked quite pleased.

"Just wait," Tes said to Valla, resting her hand on her shoulder. "When you've improved that lightning strike and built up your well of Energy, you'll be able to smite large groups of enemies; throw a few dozen of those out into a battlefield, and when all's said and done, you'll collect quite the reward.

"A few dozen? I was nearly exhausted from just the one!"

"Naturally, we have a lot of work to do, but you're on the right road now. Victor, get your axe, and then I'll show you how to harvest a rock wyrm!"

"Right," Victor said, but before he grabbed Lifedrinker, he pulled up his status sheet and allocated his free points into his will attribute—he should have done it after fighting the arachnids, but at least he'd remembered now. "Three-seventy-seven will," he said, grinning at Tes and Valla.

"Oh, Ancestors!" Valla hissed, stepping forward to give him a punch in the shoulder.

"Hey!" Victor laughed, then reached up to grab Lifedrinker's haft and pull her free, with a squelching crunch, from the wyrm's skull.

"Settle down, dears," Tes said, chuckling. "Shall I start listing off my attributes?"

"Yes!" Victor and Valla both said, eager to hear just how strong the woman was, but Tes laughed and shook her head. She held out her right hand, and suddenly an ivory-hilted, bone-colored knife was resting in her palm; its eight-inch blade was long, tapered to a needle-point, and curved ever so slightly. It was the knife's blade that had Victor's eyes bugging out, though; it shimmered with red light, and wisps of smoke or steam drifted off it, curling away into the pale blue sky.

“I’ll train you to clean this corpse with my Hell Blade, but you’ll eventually have to get your own carving knife. Fair warning: this knife is going to spoil you.”

“Hell Blade?” Valla softly asked, leaning close to look at the wicked edge.

“Oh yes. It’s crafted from the fang of a greater pit fiend and charged with hell-attuned Energy. We’ll make short work of our job with this beauty.” As if to illustrate, Tes stepped closer to the wyrm’s head, and with two quick swipes of the knife, she removed one of its long, white teeth, leaving a smoking hole in the creature’s gums.

“There’s a ‘hell’ Energy?” Victor asked, still stuck on the implications.

“Yes, but don’t get too worked up about it; there are many planes, as you should know, being able to Spirit Walk, and some of them are categorized as ‘hells.’ It’s nothing to do with some of the other meanings and connotations the word might have for you.”

“All right,” Victor said, shrugging. “So, how much of this bad boy is worth saving?”

“A lot of it!” Tes laughed, then she said, “Now, watch more closely. I’ll cut out one more tooth, then you two can take over. We’ll go bit by bit, but we should hurry because once we start to spill the offal from our prize,” she patted a hand against the horns jutting from the wyrm’s chin, “some larger predators might be drawn to the smell.”

By the time they’d finished carving out valuable parts of the wyrm’s carcass, the sun was sinking toward the western horizon, and Victor and Valla were soaked in wyrm blood up to their shoulders. They’d learned to carve out horns, teeth, glands, organs, claws, and some plate-like, rocky scales. Tes taught them how to tell which scales were worth saving and which weren’t—the more mature plates had a coppery sheen if you rubbed them with oil, and she said they’d be valuable to crafters.

Victor and Valla shared the spoils, though it didn’t really matter—they’d probably pool their resources when they got back to town anyway. Still, Valla insisted Victor take the heart, and he nodded his agreement; he was curious what his Quinametzin alter-ego would think of it. Of the other parts, Tes said the wyrm’s venom sacks—Victor hadn’t even realized it was venomous—were the most valuable.

Valla took one, and he did as well, but he cast Honor the Spirits on it, and Tes watched with gleaming, eager eyes while his spell consumed the valuable prize. Valla’s look was more one of horror, as though she watched a child pour priceless liquor into the sink. While he watched the brilliant flames consume the big, greenish-yellow organ, Victor said, as if by instinct, “Take this offering, Ancestors! Grow stronger in your realm!”

“Do they linger there?” Valla asked when it was over. “Your ancestors, I mean? I always thought most ancestors move on to . . . other things. My elders taught

me to honor my ancestors, but it's more an homage; we believe that most spirits move on and that only those that want to meddle tend to stick around.”

“I think Quinametzin are different. I don't know how, exactly, but when I had my bloodline vision, my ancestor believed that when he sent his offering into the spirit realm, it found its way to his ancestors and made them stronger. In turn, they'd sometimes grant him some of their strength.”

“Quinametzin? The name for your titan bloodline?” Valla asked, clarifying.

“Yeah.”

“Your ancestor, the one walking through your blood, was wise. The Spirit Plane is a gateway to many realms. A powerful being could easily send messages or Energy through it from one realm or plane to another. I wonder where your ancestors live and fight!” Tes looked into the sky for a moment, eyes narrowed in contemplation, then said, “Likely many different worlds and realms and planes—your spell and your spirit must have a way of finding them.”

“Pretty cool,” Victor said, nodding. He tried to imagine it—dying and then finding his way, as a spirit, to a new place, some kind of new existence, and he wondered what sorts of challenges he'd face; surely the ideas of heaven and hell had to come from somewhere. He wondered if spirits went wherever they wanted or if something from their past might pull them in a particular direction. He wondered if they always forgot their old lives when they left the spirit plane or if some of them remembered something somehow.

Victor was pleased to know that this existence, though it might end, wouldn't necessarily mean the end of him. As he contemplated an afterlife, and they walked, their prizes safely stored in their dimensional containers, another thought occurred to him, and he asked, “Tes, you told me that many strong bloodlines existed in my home world, that lots of Elder races mingled with humans. Does that mean I might have more than one bloodline?”

“I would think so, given how many generations have passed since the Elder peoples walked your Earth. If you dream of waking more of them, though, I have some bad news. Your Quinametzin bloodline must have been the strongest, closest to the surface when you went digging around in your blood. As you've pulled it further out of the past, into your pumping blood and cells, it surely has pushed any other bloodlines further down. I've never seen a person wake more than one bloodline from an Elder heritage.”

“Ah.” Victor nodded, slightly crestfallen; he'd had some unvoiced dreams of gaining wings or something cool like that one day.

“Don't be glum, titan-blood. Few bloodlines can compare to that of a titan—I don't mean giant, mind you. You know the difference, yes?”

“I don’t . . .” Valla said from Tes’s other side.

“Ah,” Tes turned to smile at Valla and said, “It’s a matter of Energy density and potential. A titan, while a giant, is not the same as a giant who is not a titan. Titans,” she paused as if considering her words, “are known for destruction and dominance. They’re clever and powerful and sometimes rise to such levels of power that other peoples view them as gods. Giants are different; they might resemble a titan, but their potential isn’t on the same scale—their Energy affinity and innate abilities are simply on different levels. It’s like comparing a newborn member of your race, Valla, an Ardeni, with one who’s advanced their race into legendary status.”

“Are they related, though? Khul Bach,” Victor touched his bracer, “thinks I’m somehow related to him.”

“Related, indeed, but the Degh are not simple giants; they’re fallen titans. Surely he’s explained that to you?”

“Their Ancestor Stone . . .”

“Exactly. They made a pact, a blood rite, and fueled it with spirit Energy. Their Ancestor Stone granted them great potency, but its destruction ruined them. I’ve been studying the histories of this world a bit while I’ve been in Coloss.”

“Khul wants me to help the Degh here. When I’m stronger.”

“Much stronger, I’d hope,” Tes laughed. “You have powerful abilities, a potent combination of affinities, and, obviously, your bloodline, but you’re no match for Warlord Thoargh, and sadly, I cannot help you with him or those loyal to him; I’ve made a pact.”

“Yeah, no, I don’t plan to try to rebuild the Ancestor Stone anytime soon. Maybe someday, though.” Victor felt a little guilty saying “maybe,” considering the agreement he’d made with Khul Bach, but he knew he was just playing things down; he really did intend to help the giant and his people someday.

“It’ll be dark soon,” Valla said. “Should we hurry?”

“We’ll come upon the hunter’s train in a dozen miles; already, they move to make camp.”

“How do you know that stuff, Tes? Like, how did you know where to find the spiders and the wyrm?” Victor looked from Tes to Valla, who shrugged.

“My senses are . . . robust.” Tes laughed and reached over to tousle Victor’s hair. “Come, shall we hurry as Valla suggests?” She started running, and Victor sighed, then looked at Valla.

“She’ll only tell us what she wants us to know. Have you figured that out?”

“Yes . . .” Valla looked ready to say more, but Tes interrupted her.

“I can hear you two! Come!” She laughed, pulling away from them, dust rising in her wake. Valla cast her movement spell, a cloud of swirling, electrically charged wind surrounding her feet as she bolted after Tes’s yellow, streaming skirts.

“Oh hell,” Victor sighed, shifting Lifedrinker where she rested against his shoulder and breaking into a jog. “Guess I might as well keep practicing,” he grunted as he cast Berserk, and then, red fury clouding his vision, he dashed and leaped after the two women, a maniac’s grin on his face.

When they came within sight of the hunter’s camp, Tes stopped and let Victor “catch” her, encouraging him to let his rage fade away. When he’d cooled down and they walked past the perimeter guards, Victor was tired and hoped there wouldn’t be anything more to do before he got some sleep; he’d gotten precisely none the night before. Unfortunately, the hunters’ camp wasn’t a place to quickly find sleep.

The strange beasts the people of Coloss used for mounts were staked around the tents, bedrolls, and campfires of the hunters, but they made quite a racket as the moons rose—howls, grunts, yawls, and hisses. The noises were exceptional not because of their variety but because of their volume; many of the mounts were sized for Degh, and their voices had a way of rolling through the night and echoing over the desert landscape that Victor found jarring. Valla was no different, and when she voiced a complaint, a nearby hunter walked over.

He was an old, grizzled fellow with two chipped bull horns and a prodigious underbite from which four long tusks sprouted. “Don’t ye worry ‘bout it, lass. Them beasties will get quiet after a bit—they’re just letting each other know who they are. You’ll get used to ‘em soon, anyhow. Why, I couldn’t sleep without them lovely sounds—means there ain’t any adult wyrms or drakes attacking.”

“Well put, oldtimer,” Tes said, looking up from where she was laying out a bedroll.

“Oldtimer? Why, I ought . . . nah, I’m jus’ joking. I’m old, all right.” He laughed and then moved back to his campfire.

“Funny fellow,” Tes said, and Victor noticed she’d made herself an average human’s size again while he hadn’t been looking.

“Tes, I have a tent if you want to share,” Valla said, pulling out her fancy camping equipment and beginning to set it up in the spot Tes had commandeered for them.

“What the hell?” Victor laughed. “I never got an invite like that . . .”

“I imagine you’re too large and smelly,” Tes laughed.

“I see how this trip is going to be,” Victor sighed, then dug around in his ring for his own bedroll and small, one-man tent, glancing over his shoulder every so often to watch the two women put together Valla’s sizable tent and populated it with all the furniture she kept in her storage containers—armchairs, tables, carpets, a canopied bed, and several glow lamps. “I swear to God, when we get back to town, I’m buying a shit load of camping gear, and by camping gear, I mean a huge tent and a bunch of furniture.”

“You can put your bedroll on the rug here,” Valla said.

“Well, thanks,” Victor laughed, getting up and moving it over. “I don’t remember your tent being quite this big before . . .”

“It’s got a few different appearances. Rellia bought it for me when I left for the legion.”

“Tes,” a new voice called from just outside. Victor recognized Cayle and straightened up from where he’d been laying out his bedroll.

“Yes, Cayle?” Tes asked, lithely springing up from one of Valla’s armchairs.

“How was your wyrm hunt?”

“One juvenile . . . do you want the spoils?”

“No, no. You offered, and I declined to bring the hunt, so you should keep them. I have another request.”

“You want me to bring your brother the next time we break off?” Tes asked, and Cayle laughed.

“I’m that transparent?”

“No, but it’s logical; he’s low-tier, and you want him to learn, just as Victor and Valla are learning. Of course, we’ll let him come along if we break off again.”

“Thank you, Tes! I appreciate it; he hates when I’m hanging over him, feels like I’m trying to fill in for our mother.”

“Not to worry. What time do you think you’ll break camp in the morning? There’s a cave on the way, well, a couple of leagues south of Boil’s Crossing—that’s your next stop, yes? I can take these two and your brother to check it out; I’ve heard rumors of night brutes. If you don’t mind, we’ll get going at dawn.”

“Night brutes, huh? Are you sure that’s wise? Barn’s only level thirty-two.”

“I’ll watch over him, and Victor and Valla are more capable than you think. We should be able to reach the crossing by late afternoon—sooner if the rumors aren’t true and we’ve nothing to fight in the caves.”

Cayle gave Tes a long look, then let her eyes drift to Valla and Victor, and he saw her stare at Lifedrinker for a long couple of heartbeats. “Okay, Tes. I’ll have Barn up and ready at dawn.”

“Perfect!” Tes smiled as she watched Cayle walk away, then she flicked her fingers, and Victor’s ears popped. Valla reached up to her ears with a puzzled expression, so Victor figured she’d been included in the spell. “I’m quite sure there are night brutes there. This will be wonderful experience; they’re usually around tier seven, but they’re simple beasts—all muscle and fear-attuned Energy, something you should be able to counter, if I’m right, eh, Victor?”

“I, uh, yeah, I should be able to . . .”

“Yes. This will be excellent—I predict a minimum of two levels for you each. Barn shouldn’t be a problem; I’ll have him turtle up behind his big shield, and you two can do most of the killing.”

“Two more levels, Tes?” Valla said, shaking her head. “Ancestors! I’m glad we met you.”

“Oh, I am too, Valla. It might seem like I’m doing you a big favor, and I am, but I fully anticipate a return on my investment.” She laughed, plopped back down in one of Valla’s chairs, and added, “Besides, I’m having a lot of fun!”

“Where are you from, Tes?” Valla asked, sitting in a chair opposite her, leaving the one with its back to the tent opening for Victor. He sighed, stood up from where he’d put out his bedroll, and walked over to sit while he listened. “I mean, you told me your people had common ancestry with Victor’s, but you’re not from his world. Can I know about your home?”

“Sure you can, Valla, but you heard that popping in your ears, right? That means our conversation is private, and I expect it to stay that way.”

“Understood,” Valla said, leaning forward to deposit an Energy-powered tea kettle on the little table between the chairs.

“Tea?” Victor groaned and produced a bottle of cheb-cheb he’d gotten from Tellen’s clan.

“Drinking, Victor?” Tes tsked. “You’ve still got cultivating to do!”

Victor groaned; he’d wanted to sleep soon, but he knew she was right—he’d promised Khul Bach to work on his Core. “It’s from Fanwath; it won’t be enough to get me drunk, especially with my vitality boosted.”

“Ah, well, does it have a good flavor? Pour me a glass.”

“Well, me too, then!” Valla said, putting away her kettle.

“That’s the spirit,” Victor laughed, finding three matching crystal tumblers in his second ring. “I bought these in Gelica; please don’t break ‘em ‘cause they’re my favorites. See how the bottom is nice and heavy?”

“Tut!” Tes said, “If I break one, I’ll give you one better; you should know that by now!”

“Fair.” Victor smiled, breaking the seal on his bottle of booze and pouring a couple of fingers for each of them. “I have thick fingers,” he laughed.

“Tes, my question?” Valla pressed.

“I’m from Aradnue—a beautiful, ancient world. My people were masters of Energy before the System was an inkling of an idea near the center of the universes.”

“An Elder race?” Valla breathed, leaning forward.

“That’s right, but I’m not so old myself—young, in fact, if you ask my closest kin.”

“Can you tell me about your world?” Valla asked. “What are the cities like? Are your people numerous? What sorts of wonders you must have!”

Tes answered some of Valla’s questions and several more from Victor, but while she spoke, he kept thinking about Earth, about the cities humans had created and the things they’d accomplished, like building ships to try to explore the universe.

He was proud of his people in that moment because, despite the fantastic things Tes described, the dragons had accomplished them all with magic—in Victor’s opinion, humans had it pretty damn hard, coming from a dead world with no magic and short life spans, and they’d done some awesome things. He tempered his pride with the sobering thought that they’d also done some terrible things.

Tes was telling Valla about a tower atop a mighty mountain that stretched so high into the skies of Aradnue that one could see halfway around the planet’s circumference from its top level. It sounded like hyperbole to Victor, but he supposed, with magic, anything was possible. He wanted to see something like that, wanted to experience wonders so far beyond what was on Fanwath or this world, Zaafor, that people like the warlord could only dream of them. Abruptly he stood up and said, “I’m going to cultivate.”