

Victor BK4: Ch26

Book 4: Chapter 26: Night Brutes

When Victor—hulking, furious, eager for battle—stepped into the gravel and scree-strewn cave entrance, his nostrils were assailed by a pungent scent, something like a cross between shit and ammonia. He scanned the long, craggy walls and ceiling, trying to find a source for the smell, but didn't see it. Growling, he strode forward, brushing past the little man covered in metal and his even smaller blue friend.

Before he stooped down to delve deeper, Victor glanced over his shoulder to see the approving nod of the tall, fair-haired woman, the one who led him on chase after chase. He grinned at the gleam in her eyes, eager to show her what he could do, eager to water this filthy hole with the blood of his foes. He kicked his way through the loose rocks, and as they gave way to his boots, the smell intensified, and Victor saw smears of black and white on the stones.

“Shit,” he grunted, then hunched low to pass through the jagged tunnel entrance, his helmet crunching through the rock, sending a trickle of dust and gravel down his neck and back. When he descended a few feet, and the cave's entrance became obscured by the cavern walls, his eyes began to adjust. He saw rough walls, more gravel, and the tendrils and ropes of ancient roots jutting out of the walls and ceiling.

Victor surged down the slope, kicking and smashing his way past more rocks and yanking or hacking away long roots. He had no patience for obstacles. “Careful, Victor,” the small voice of his blue friend said, and he wondered what she meant. Had he hurt her with a tossed, broken root?

“Back up,” he grunted, considering the matter solved. He felt the urgency of battle lust and didn't want to pause for the small ones. They said something, speaking to one another, but their words didn't register with him; why should he listen to the mewling of children? Something in this pit thought to challenge him, sought to spill his blood and stop his heart, and that was all he could focus upon. It was enough.

He surged down, eyes blazing with rage, shoulders low, head forward, smashing through the oftentimes too narrow tunnel, the thought of a collapse never crossing his mind. Every time he felt his rage begin to wane, Victor reached into his Core and urged more of it into his pathways; he knew there were limits to the hot Energy, but he wasn't near it yet. Ten minutes or more went by as he slid and stomped through the tunnels, ever downward, following the stench as it grew stronger and stronger, bringing water to his eyes and fueling his fury.

He began to hear coughs and more chatter from his smaller companions as they struggled to keep up, clambering over piles of loose rocks that Victor leaped or stepped across. Again, he tuned the sounds out; let the tall woman aid the less fit; he was too close to slacken his pace now. His instincts proved right—one more twist in the tunnel, one more slide down a loosely packed slope of stones, and he found himself in an enormous cavern.

Victor looked around, and as he took in a breath, ready to bellow a challenge, hundreds of baleful, red eyes opened in the black depths of the cavernous ceiling. The slow susurrations of leathery wings

unfolding and the weird barking chirps that echoed out of the darkness did nothing to cool Victor's bloodlust. Rather, the sounds further enraged him; why were his enemies hanging up in the blackness where he couldn't reach them?

He strode forward over the suddenly damp cavern floor, squelching his boots through thick pads of moss and lichen and . . . other things. He lifted Lifedrinker in the air, and he bellowed his fury. Suddenly the red lantern-like eyes moved. They dropped through the blackness, dozens of them, and then the owners of those eyes came into sight, falling on twelve-foot wings through the damp, dark air, clicking and barking as they descended toward the screaming, red-limned madman.

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"He went down this slope," Valla said, nimbly leaping from one large rock to the next, trying not to slide on the smaller, loose stones.

"Aye," Barn grunted, trying to balance with his immense shield on one arm and a heavy-looking, gray ball mace in his other hand. He had similar gray plate armor on almost every part of his body, and Valla knew it must be hard to keep from falling on these loose rocks with all that weight and lack of mobility. She looked up the dark tunnel behind him, wondering where Tes had gotten to, and that's when she heard Victor's furious roar.

"He's found them!" she said, trying to increase her pace. Weird sounds echoed up the tunnel, clicking, hissing, and coughing barks. So many at once that, whatever night brutes might be, there must have been dozens of them.

"Gods, be good! That sounds like a lot of them!" Barn groaned with a note of panic tinging his words.

"Come on!" Valla said, finally giving into gravity and leaping more recklessly down the slope. She slipped about halfway down and slid a dozen feet through the gravel on her backside, but when she used her momentum to hop to her feet, she'd made it to the bottom. She glanced back to see Barn sliding after her, and she smiled; he might be nervous, but Victor's spell still had his eyes gleaming with golden Energy—he wouldn't turn and run, not yet.

She hurried down the stretch of tunnel toward a wide, moss-covered opening and noted how the yellow and green fuzz seemed to grow out of the cave like a carpet. Blackness filled the space beyond, but she could hear Victor screaming and howling amid the cacophony of the night brutes. "I think that's the night brutes," she amended, still hurrying forward. When she came to the opening, and the darkness seemed to wrap around her palpably, she felt an icy grip take hold of her heart, and she almost fled.

Something flared within her, though, bright, powerful, and full of hope and encouragement, and she knew it was Victor's will, his fragment of courage-attuned Energy. The black tendrils fell back, and Valla whipped her long, blue sword forward, wishing she could part the hazy, tangible shadows with

its edge. The clamor was almost too much for her, the screams, the clicks, and the weird, underlying, rasping sound—something like scales rubbing on scales.

“It’s black as a wyrm’s asshole in there,” Barn said, coming up behind her. Valla nodded and tried to summon an Energy orb, the first spell she’d ever learned, a light for when she was in the dark. The Energy poured out of her into her hand, and the ball of yellow light flared brightly. She winced in its glare and frowned when she saw it didn’t illuminate more than a foot of the space beyond the cavern opening.

“That’s no help,” Valla said.

“Victor! Summon your courageous light for your companions!” Tes called out from somewhere ahead, her voice clear as a crystal bell despite the din of battle. Before her words registered, Valla’s mind boggled at the idea—how had Tes gotten ahead of them? Before she could ponder her words, though, she heard Victor yell again—one of his strange curses from his homeworld—and then, high in the air, a new sun was born.

“No, not a sun,” she hissed, gripping Barn’s shoulder as she watched the rip in the darkness from which a dazzling, broad fan of reddish-golden light poured down to the cavern’s floor, creating a vast pool of light that chased the clinging darkness away. Valla and Barn both gasped at what they saw in that brilliant radiance.

Dozens, no, hundreds of hulking, black-scaled forms, something like a cross between a human and a bat, writhed on the ground, all surging toward a singular gigantic combatant—Victor, in the full glory of his titanic form. He stood head and shoulders above the brutes; he was larger, glowing redder, and more musclebound than ever. Valla guessed him to be nearing fourteen feet in height, and Lifedrinker, though she’d grown much recently, was still a one-handed weapon in his hands.

The axe screamed, glinting like a falling star in the reflected light of Victor’s courage spell as she hacked limbs, heads, wings, and scales. Victor bellowed in counterpoint to the axe’s cries, grabbing the thick, musclebound night brutes by their wrists or necks and flinging them away, smashing them into one another to give himself room to maneuver.

“Blood of the Gods!” Barn hissed, “look at the mess he’s making.” He looked at Valla, and his red-gold eyes seemed eager; she knew hers were a match.

“Let’s get in there!”

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Tes watched from her perch on the cavern wall as her two less enthusiastic charges finally joined the fray. Barn held his tower shield before himself as he waded into the back of the thrashing, jockeying brutes. Valla held back and threw out her lightning strike, targeting the center rear of the

mass, blasting at least two of the creatures solidly enough to stun them. “Well done!” Tes called, laughing.

This was an enormous nest, bigger than she’d hoped. She’d wondered, briefly, if it was too much—the creatures were rated a solid three tiers higher than Victor, but they were stupid, slow, unimaginative, and relied on their powerful darkness and fear auras to claim their victims, neither of which worked very well around her charges, not with Victor’s courage boon. And Victor, well, Victor was a monster.

Somehow he’d flooded his channels with more rage than Tes had ever seen, sprouting another foot in height and gaining a significant amount of mass. “Did the ancestor lurking in your blood see the brutes and grow furious at their size?” she chuckled. As if in response, Victor bellowed another mighty yawp and split a brute from crown to crotch with that wonderful axe of his.

“What a treat to watch this old bloodline come to life again!” Tes laughed. She’d have so much to tell Yek’nakkara’ma’shohon. Hadn’t he told her it would be a waste of her time to come to this part of the universe? “Wait until you see this memory, old uncle!”

One of the brutes slipped up behind Victor and raked its claws, both sets, down his back, ripping his lovely, shimmering armor and shredding the skin beneath. Victor roared, whirled, cleaved both of the night brute’s taloned hands off, and kicked it in the chest, sending it flying into a cluster of the creatures, knocking several of them sprawling.

Tes narrowed her eyes, willing her vision to zoom in on Victor’s back, and watched as the deep grooves in his flesh filled in with scar tissue before her eyes. “Elder Gods, but you heal fast!” Something about the attack seemed to have driven Victor’s rage to new heights, and he went into a veritable frenzy as he charged among the monsters, hacking, throwing, tripping, and head-butting them. He was like a mad bull among swine, utterly brutalizing the brutes, never giving them a chance to press him with their sheer numbers.

When she’d watched him in the arena, Tes knew there was something special about Victor, and it wasn’t just his ability to Berserk—his spirit Core was so rich with potential, so overflowing with raw emotion, she’d had to shield herself from it when she first spoke to him. His aura was profound and pulled like the undertow of an ocean.

She’d marveled that the lesser folk in Coloss seemed oblivious to it, but then she’d considered how sensitive her people were, especially to the weight of feelings, and had realized that they simply didn’t have the capacity to comprehend everything pouring out of the barbaric young man.

“I’ll need to teach him some more control of that aura if he’s going to visit some of the older sectors of this universe.”

A different sort of scream interrupted her musing, and Tes jerked her eyes away from Victor to see that fifty or more of the night brutes had turned on Valla and Barn. Valla fought like a dervish, using the Steel Tempest spell Tes had taught her. It kept the brutes at bay just long enough for her to dance out of their reach, though it couldn’t harm them overmuch. Still, that sword of hers did plenty of hurting—she could surely dance a beautiful dance with that blade.

It became clear that it was in response to Barn's rather dire straits that Valla had screamed—the big, armored oaf was nearly buried under the onslaught of night brutes. One of them had peeled back the top of the Vesh's shield and was working to drive its long, fanged snout over the obstacle, gnashing its teeth inches from Barn's throat. Tes glanced at Victor, wondering if his enraged mind would try to aid his companion or not. He was still madly brutalizing the horde near the cavern's center, oblivious.

“Do I intervene? Should I give Victor a hint and see if he can save the Vesh? Oh, bother! I did make a promise to Cayle. Drink your escape potion, you dolt!” When it was clear Barn wouldn't be able to manage even that much, Tes sighed and centered a lightning blast on the group of night brutes pressing the man. An arc of blue electricity flared out of her hand, shredding the darkness hanging nearby to tatters and then exploding into the pack of monsters, reducing them—every single one—to charred corpses.

Valla had fallen back, shielding her eyes, and Barn was sent flopping head over heels from the explosion, but the brutes who'd been pressing them were no more. Tes smirked, “Sorry about stealing those kills, my darlings.” She glanced over the cavern floor, trying to get a count on the still-living brutes—Victor had maimed or killed more than half, but it looked to her like his furious red aura was waning. She licked her lips, smiling with anticipation, and sent a whisper into his ear, “Aren't you hungry from your efforts, titan? Why not send the brutes running? Give them a taste of true fear and then have a feast while they regroup?”

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In the midst of his frenzy, Victor heard a familiar, lilting voice in his ear, “Aren't you hungry from your efforts, titan? Why not send the brutes running? Give them a taste of true fear and then have a feast while they regroup?” Even in his rage, he knew what she meant, and when he thought of the hearts in his storage ring, his mouth filled with saliva.

He looked around at the scattered night brutes—a few pursued him as he rampaged, a dozen or two, while others milled about, bewildered by the furious beating he'd been dishing out or stunned by the mighty bolt of thunder that had erupted out of the darkness. “Yes,” he grumbled, hacking his beautiful axe through another scaly, flat, shelf-like brute skull. “Why shouldn't I?”

Purposefully, Victor reined in some of his fury, forcing himself to act with his mind instead of his instinct, and then he moved out of his circle of radiance into the dark, clinging shadows generated by the night brutes. The blackness wasn't nearly as thick as when he'd first arrived, a mere echo of what it had been now that so many of the brutes had been slain or wounded. One of the largest of the creatures tried to follow him, leaped at him, and he met it in the throat with Lifedrinker's shimmering edge.

Blood and viscera spattered, and Victor reached into his Core and grasped his fear-attuned Energy, using his will to gather up a massive river of it. It moved sluggishly, the rage in his pathways pushing against it, fighting for space, but Victor forced it through. Then he cast Project Spirit, driving it out in a cone of writhing, purple-black, miasmatic Energy that slithered through the darkness to seep into the minds of the dozens of brutes that tried to press their advantage now that Victor was out of the light.

Victor saw them slow, saw the red gleam of their wide eyes dim and darken, saw how they shook their heads and struggled, unable to comprehend what was happening. They were the makers of fear; how could fear be taking hold in their dull minds? Victor finished off their resistance with an enormous roar, digging it out of the center of his gut, sending out the frustration and rage of countless torments in a palpable wave.

The night brutes broke, leaping away, flapping their wings, howling in madness as they flung themselves to the heights of the cavern or its far, shadowy edges. Victor laughed in his maniacal fury, and, the memory of the seductive voice fresh in his mind, he dug out the heavy, red, still-warm heart of the rock wyrm. Saliva gathered in his mouth at the scent of hot copper, and he bit a huge, grisly chunk out of it, ripping through the tough meat with his powerful jaw.

It was good, far better than the arachnid heart. Victor chuckled and grunted, heaving for breath through his nose as he worked to devour it. By the third bite, he could feel the heat spreading through his stomach, out into his pathways. He saw the red fury of his vision darken and deepen, and he knew his Energy was being replenished.

He noisily grunted as he swallowed another bite. Then the Energy began to grow heavier, hotter, seeping out through his pathways into his flesh and bones, saturating his every cell, enriching and strengthening them. Victor ate with such a frenzy, speeding his wild wolfing of the meat as he felt its effects begin to infuse him, that he made short work of the heart. Panting, blood coating his mouth and chin, his chest and his hands, he lifted his head to the cavern ceiling and howled his glory, rewarded by a System message, even in the heat of battle:

Congratulations! You have advanced your race: Advanced 2.

Congratulations! You have gained 10 Vitality.

Victor laughed madly, a giant, blood-covered visage of terror, his armor hanging in shreds, a gleaming, red-soaked axe hanging loosely from one mighty fist. He roared and roared, stomping and fuming, hectoring his enemies, daring them to return. He walked well away from his circle of light, shouting, raging, and brandishing Lifedrinker, furious that his enemies had yet to answer his challenges.

He thought he saw movement in the shadows near the far edge of the cavern wall. He turned toward it, stomping further from his small friends and the bright rays of courage-attuned Energy, and then, with a grating rumble of shifting earth and stone, something roared back at him, something with a voice so loud and furious that it shook the walls of the enormous cavern.

Some might have fled from such a sound; some might have cowered. Victor laughed. He lifted Lifedrinker over his head and stalked into the darkness, leaning into the noise, unable to feel fear, unable to consider caution in his absolute and utter, furious madness.