

Victor BK4: Ch27

Book 4: Chapter 27: A Lot to Chew

The roar sounded again, and Victor ducked his head slightly, so the crown of his weighty helm led the way forward. He was furious, ready to fight, eyes blazing with the deep red Energy of his rage, but still aware of the rocks and dust falling from the high cavernous ceiling. They crashed on his mighty shoulders and shattered and bounced away from his immovable helmet, and Victor shouted, blood-drenched, ragged and savage in his anticipation.

He'd stalked some thirty paces deeper into the enormous cavern when he finally saw his new challenger. More accurately, he saw its eyes. Where the night brutes stood ten or a dozen feet in height, and their eyes were the size of small, red-glowing saucers, these new ones were angular, baleful, and hung some thirty feet in the air, surrounded by clinging, shifting shadows.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker and charged forward, too enraged from his battle, from his meal, and from his surging Energy to consider consequences. Perhaps a tiny voice of reason existed in his violence-oriented mind; maybe he simply had good instincts for battle. Whatever the cause, he ducked and rolled as a shifting wave of shadow swooped toward him, and claws like scimitars, dripping with inky darkness, cut the air above him.

He surged to his feet and continued his charge, frustrated that his foe was still wreathed in shadows, infuriated that it wouldn't show him its face. An echo of himself, a tiny voice railing at the barrier of his rage, seemed to shout, "Put some light on it, fool!" Before he could evaluate the advice from his rational self, he saw a curtain of thicker darkness shift before him and tried to roll again, but a scaly, spear-taloned foot crashed into him, sending him flying a dozen yards until he smashed into a rocky, moss-covered cavern wall.

Victor, especially enraged and full of Quinametzin vigor and pride, wasn't one to lie around. He rebounded from the wall, drove his feet against it, and performed a somersault, racing, mad-faced and still eager, back toward his foe. Before he closed the distance, though, he growled, in a voice few would recognize as his, "How about some light?" Then, again, he cast Dauntless Radiance, and the darkness split high above, and a great ray of golden-red illumination fell on his foe.

As the light bathed the immense monstrosity, blasting the shadows away, its dark scales began to smolder, black steam and smoke rising, and it howled in furious agony. Victor, despite his madness, paused, stunned by the visage of the horror before him. It was three times the size of the other night brutes but lankier, with a more humanoid face. Its lack of an elongated snout didn't seem to diminish the size or number of fangs that filled its great maw, made visible as it roared, shaking its head, side to side in Victor's light.

Victor leaped, straight for the long, muscular, black-scaled left leg of the monster, hacking with everything he had, aiming Lifedrinker's wicked edge for the creature's knee. She screamed her eager bloodlust, the air rippling behind her, such was her velocity. The atrocity was still distracted by the light, reaching up to claw at the high rip in the air where Victor's courage-attuned Energy poured forth, and it didn't even try to move, didn't lift its leg to step, didn't swipe at Victor to block his blow.

Lifedrinker impacted the midnight scales of that knee hard enough to create a small concussive shockwave that would have felled an ordinary person, flattening them with the grinding *crash*.

Victor, to his horror and suddenly sober mind, felt Lifedrinker's haft crack as she rebounded. The impact had shaken even his mighty Quinametzin bones, reverberating up through his arm and into his neck, stunning him as the force of his tremendous blow was absorbed and reflected into him.

He stumbled away from the monstrous leg, Lifedrinker hanging slightly crookedly from his hand, and shook his head, trying to clear the ringing and regain his clarity of thought. That's when the creature, still smoking from the light, still screaming its outrage, reached down and swatted Victor with its great, razored, inky claws, dragging enormous furrows through the flesh of his chest, shoulders, and stomach. The blow sent him head over heels, a dozen, two dozen, three dozen yards to tumble and flop over the stone, where he bounced to rest among a pile of dead night brutes.

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Tes heard the roar, and her head jerked away from where she'd been watching Valla and Barn. She willed her eyes to see further into the dark, peering through the magical shadows to the far wall of the cavern where a small tunnel led away. The stone above the tunnel had cracked, and it looked to be widening, great hunks of moss-covered stone falling to tumble and bounce on the cavern floor.

She reached out with her senses, willing whatever was roaring, whatever was coming, to reveal itself to her. What had she missed? That didn't sound like a night brute. When her senses couldn't pierce the stone and the thick veil of darkness-attuned Energy hanging behind it, she glanced back at Victor and saw his rage was surging beyond anything she'd yet seen—his aura dancing along his frame like baleful red flames. He screamed into the blackness, stalking toward the sound. "Oh dear," she muttered.

Tes gathered her Energy and, with a surge of will, teleported to the bottom of the cavern, appearing in a crackling flash of blue lightning behind Barn and Valla. "Time to go," she said. They both whirled to see the source of the noise her lightning had made and when they saw her and heard her words, Barn immediately started making his way toward the rough, narrow tunnel that led up to the surface. Not Valla, though; she watched Barn walking away, then turned back to the darkness where screams and roars echoed and reverberated.

"What about Victor?"

"I'll stay with him, help him flee if necessary." She knew it would be; anything that could obscure itself from her would be too much for the titan-blood.

"Promise?" Valla asked, finally starting to follow Barn.

"Of course. Come now, no time to waste." Another titanic roar shook the cavern, and Tes watched as loose rocks and dust tumbled from the high ceiling. "I mean it—go!" That got Valla moving, and soon she was behind Barn, urging him onward as they slipped into the tunnel. "At least I don't have to worry about those two . . ." she started to muse aloud when red-gold light split the thick darkness, and she laid her eyes on the source of the commotion.

"Old Gods," she hissed, rushing forward. "What are you?" The creature was at least three times Victor's size, smoking and steaming from Victor's light. Its eyes

and scales reminded her of the night brutes, but that's where the similarity ended. It was lanky where they were hulking, more humanoid and less monstrous in its design. More than that, malevolence reeked from the creature, and Tes could finally begin to get its measure, and she didn't like what she was feeling.

Again she hissed, "What are you," as she streaked through the shadows, noting that the night brutes, themselves, were nowhere to be seen. "So they don't count you a friend, hmm? Or maybe they're worried you'll mistake them as part of your meal?" She saw Victor gather himself and, as the monstrosity was distracted by his blazing light, charge forward to smash his axe into its knee. "Poor fool doesn't know how to flee."

There was no mistaking the cracking boom that echoed out from the source of impact; that lovely axe of his wasn't a match for those scales. Tes was contemplating the best way to extricate Victor and herself when the terror stopped fussing with the courage-attuned light and swiped at the young titan-blood. "Oh . . ." Tes said, her heart doing a flip in her chest as she saw those gigantic, darkness-tainted talons slash him and send him flying through the air, back to where the bulk of the night brute battle had taken place.

The creature strode forward, baleful red eyes focused on the fallen man, and Tes stood up straight, calling out with a voice that cut through the distance like a needle through parchment, "That's enough of that."

The monstrosity froze in its tracks and turned toward her, and, if she weren't mistaken, she saw a look of puzzlement on its shadowy, brutish face. "I think I should let you look me in the eyes instead of down upon me," Tes hissed, then began to unravel her carefully woven disguise, releasing the bonds of Energy on her flesh, allowing it to stretch and change. In just a few heartbeats, she crouched in the no-longer expansive cavern, easily thrice the mass of the shadowy giant.

"What are you," she growled, her enormous voice rumbling out, shaking dust loose from the ceiling and causing the mysterious monster to flinch back. There, fully back to her natural self, Tes allowed her prodigious senses to stretch forth, and she read the truth of things, saw through the creature's scales and flesh to its Core and spirit, and a laugh like cracking thunder escaped her mighty jaws. "A prince of night brutes, hmm? My, but I wonder what you ate to advance your monstrous race so. I suppose it doesn't matter now. Still, your heart will make a lovely gift for my young friend. Should he earn it, that is."

Tes breathed deeply, expanding her gigantic lungs, sucking the air out of the cavern, devouring the lingering shadows, and causing Victor's light to flicker and fade. The night brute prince, a monster, but not a suicidal one, turned to flee, springing toward the wide crevice from which it had crawled. It managed three long strides before Tes exhaled, and a torrent of jagged, blue arcs of lightning blasted into its back.

The burst of Energy lit up the cavern like a new sun had been birthed, and any lingering magical shadows were utterly evaporated. Victor's light of courage winked out in the face of the surge, and the prince was stopped in his tracks, transfixed by the jolts, so much electrical Energy tearing

through it that its head, hands, and feet exploded to allow faster egress. “I hope I didn’t ruin your organs with that,” Tes grumbled, striding forward on her enormous taloned feet. “I thought you’d resist me a bit more, honestly.”

With her greater senses awake, Tes was aware of Valla and Barn and knew they’d reached the surface. She also knew Victor lived, that his prodigious regeneration had saved him, mended the worst of his gashes before his rage had fled his unconscious body. “Hmm,” she rumbled, sniffing at the night prince’s corpse. “Something good is still within. Old Gods, I’m hungry, though. Should I save this snack for him?”

Tes dragged a long, blue-black talon over the smoldering flesh of the prince’s back, peeling back the meat and clipping through its adamant ribs, each one **pinging** loudly, echoing around the cavern. A little more digging revealed a smoldering heart, and Tes neatly plucked it out with two of her talons. “Hmm, I smell . . . I smell change. I smell Energy. I smell a mystery. Not enough for me, though. A drop in an ocean. For him, though, for my young friend . . .” The heart disappeared, slipped into one of Tes’s many dimensional containers.

Tes turned and sidled through the cavern to where Victor lay, his hand, even in his dashed and broken state, still firmly wrapped around the hilt of his lady axe. “Endearing,” she said, her enormous predator’s maw turning up at the corners into a smile. “Hmm, can’t have you waking with me looking like this, can I? Oh, bother, time to squeeze into something a bit more petite.”

Tes willed her form to contract and to change; she had to pour out a prodigious amount of Energy to bind her molecules into a more diminutive form, had to expend even more to make herself lighter so that her bipedal feet didn’t crack or shatter the floors she strode upon. When she stood before Victor, a woman much closer to his size, she was exhausted. “A lot of trouble you’ve put me through today. Still, you’re amusing, at least. More than amusing.”

Tes sat on a tumbled stone, watching him sleep while she gathered some Energy. What a handsome human! “Well, I don’t have many to compare you against, but still . . .” She liked how his dark brows shielded his—when he was wakeful—piercing eyes, how his straight, powerful nose almost curved downward at the tip. She liked the laugh lines at the corners of his eyes and the dimple in his strong chin. He had such straight white teeth, and he loved to show them when he smiled and laughed.

“How are you so full of joy? I think I’d be quite bitter had I suffered what you’ve been through.” At her words, he shifted and groaned, and Tes stood up. She moved closer and reached down to pick up Victor’s free hand, and then she cast Steps of the Tempest, encasing him and herself in its Energy, and with a flicker of her will, she flashed out of the cavern and up the long, crumbling slope of the tunnel, out into the brilliant sunlight.

When she stopped, Victor lay in the sand, just as he’d lain in the cavern. Tes crouched beside him and softly said, “I can feel it gathering below. Some Energy is coming your way.”

“Is he okay?” Valla asked from beside her, and Tes straightened to look at the blue-skinned, lovely woman.

“Oh, aye. He’ll be right as rain in a moment, well, scarred, but fine. You and Barn should brace yourselves. Some Energy flows this way.”

“Some . . .” Valla said, then realization dawned on her. “From the night brutes.”

“Yes, dear, Valla.”

“What was that thing, Tes?” Barn asked, but before Tes could answer, several winding, flashing, coiling ropes of Energy surged out of the gravel-strewn cave and poured into the four of them. The thickest, by far, silver-tinted and wild, flowed into Tes. She frowned as she absorbed it, pulling it into her Core and replenishing more of her spent power. She frowned because she’d rather it went to one of her charges. Still, they were reaping their own rewards.

Victor had been lifted off the ground by his flood of silver-tinged purple Energy. Valla and Barn had much smaller shares, but still, they looked ecstatic, and she figured they’d gained a level. When Victor settled back to the dusty ground, his eyes were open, but they weren’t happy; he’d lifted his axe and stared at the jagged crack in its elegant handle.

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Congratulations! You have achieved level 40 Spirit Carver, gained 20 will, 20 vitality, and have 16 attribute points to allocate.

Level 40 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Human Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 50. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.

Congratulations! You’ve achieved level 42 - Attribute advancement is being banked until you’ve completed your level 40 refinement selection. Any progress beyond level 40 will be lost if you lose consciousness before making the selection.

Victor brushed aside the System messages and lifted Lifedrinker so he could look at her more easily. When the Energy surge had woken him, he’d quickly realized where he was—Tes must have dragged him out of the cave. He wondered what that thing had been, how it had so easily brushed off his attack, but he didn’t really care, not while Lifedrinker lay wounded in his grip. “¿Qué pasó, hermosa?”

“Is she hurt?” Valla asked, stepping over the rocky ground to kneel close to him.

“I fucking split her haft . . .”

“It will heal, Victor,” Tes said. “Bind it up with some strips of cloth; give the wood time to mend. It’s alive and full of Energy; she’ll be none the worse for the wear, though she may bear a scar for a while—until you help her to evolve again, I’d say.”

Victor sighed with relief at the words. He knew Lifedrinker would live if her haft broke, or he used to know that—when she’d evolved and grown with her haft, it seemed to have become more a part

of her than the old handles she'd had in the past. He sat up and summoned one of his shirts from his storage ring, ripping it into long lengths of cloth.

"I have bandages . . ." Valla started to say, but he'd already begun to tear the shirt, so he just shrugged.

"Small price to pay. I'm sorry, beautiful," he said as he tightly bound her split handle together, tying the strips of cloth into knots.

"I leveled!" Barn said, apparently done dwelling on Victor and his damaged axe. "Hey, what was that thing, Tes?"

"A night brute prince," Tes smiled and laughed, "Beyond level one hundred and quite evolved, if I'm not mistaken. You're lucky to escape with just a few new scars, Victor."

"I think I bit off more than I could chew. Did you pull me out? Thanks, Tes."

"My pleasure; it's a joy to watch such verve for combat!"

"Are you sure it won't follow?" Barn asked, backing away from the cave entrance.

"No need to worry, Barn," Tes laughed, moving over to slap the big Vesh's back, making his armor rattle as dust and bits of gravel fell out of it. "I killed it."

"Seriously?" Victor asked, his voice raising slightly with excitement.

"Oh yes. I'm sorry, but I hit him with a bit too much lightning—ruined most of his organs. Still, his bones are worth much. We should harvest everything we can—from the night brutes, too. I think you'll earn more from this nest than most of the hunters on this expedition."

"Sounds like a plan, Tes. Thank you again for the rescue." Victor gently squeezed Lifedrinker's haft, ensuring the bindings he'd put on were holding her damaged wood tightly together. "What about you?" he asked Valla, changing the subject before he forgot to ask.

"What about me?" She looked confused.

"Did you level too?"

"Oh! Yes!" Valla smiled and hooked her thumbs in her belt, pulling her shoulders back proudly. "What about you?"

"Yep! How about it, Tes? Wanna give me some advice on my next refinement?"