

Victor BK4: Ch28

Book 4: Chapter 28: Weighty Decisions

“You’re level forty already?” Valla asked, her face twisted in something between admiration and disgust.

“Actually, I’m level forty-two, but the System says it’s holding two levels until I go through my Class refinement . . .”

“Ancient Fathers! Weren’t you thirty-six back in Coloss?” Valla shook her head and then sat on a rock to more easily scrub the ichorous black blood from her sword. Barn sat in the shade of a boulder nearby and worked with a small sledgehammer, trying to straighten his shield. Victor turned to Tes and shrugged.

“It’s a product of your high Energy affinity and, well, the fact that you did a lot of killing—the killing of things far more Energy dense than yourself.”

“Is that how you describe levels? More dense with Energy?”

“Creatures like giant spiders and night brutes don’t necessarily have levels, but they gather Energy, yes, and they evolve and grow in strength. These night brutes were once a colony of cave scavengers. Over a century or two, they gathered Energy and natural treasures to become what you fought down there. The prince was on another scale; it’s likely he stumbled upon a potent bloodline treasure deep below the surface.”

Victor frowned, contemplating her words. Tes looked from Victor to the others, then said, more loudly, “We’ll rest for a while; clean up your gear and contemplate your improvements. I’ll help Victor with his Class, and then we’ll harvest the night brutes.”

“My armor’s wrecked,” Victor said, looking at the tattered shreds of his scale shirt. It had completely lost its integrity and luster when the night brute prince raked its talons through it.

“Well, it’s a pity, but you need something more sturdy anyway. I’m sure one of the Degh back with the caravan will have an old breastplate or something you can barter for. You can look for something better when you get back to town.”

“Yeah, I guess.” Victor shrugged out of the ruined armor, sending it into his storage ring, and then he took off his shredded, blood-stained shirt. Tes stepped forward and traced one of the new, pinkish-white scars traversing his torso from the left shoulder to the right side of his stomach.

“You’re lucky you have such rapid healing while enraged.” Her light, cool touch had brought goosebumps to his flesh, and Victor shifted uncomfortably, forcing himself to look within his ring for a clean shirt. He pulled it out and stuffed his head through the neck hole.

“Yeah, I know. I’d be dead two dozen times if it weren’t for my ability to heal when I cast Berserk.” He shrugged his arms into the shirt and pulled it down.

“Well? Tell me about your Class choices.”

“I haven’t looked yet. Should I allocate my free attribute points first? I always wonder if the choices are determined the moment I hit the refinement level, or if I can still influence them . . .”

“No, the System isn’t so flexible. It has made its decision on what to offer you, and nothing you do will change that, short of a System-granted boon designed to enhance those choices.”

“Are those hard to come by?”

“Exceedingly. When individuals win them from dungeons or challenges, they rarely put them up for public sale.” Tes stepped a few yards away to pick up a large, flat boulder that had to have weighed three hundred pounds and carried it over so she could more comfortably sit near Victor. Victor shook his head and smirked, and Tes said, “What’s so amusing?”

“I mean, don’t you have chairs in your storage rings?”

“Hah! Indeed I do. Still, I’m comfortable enough. Come, let’s see what the System has thought of your progress these last ten levels.” She leaned forward, eyes eager.

Victor nodded, opened his status menu, and then selected the Class refinement option. He read through the first option:

Class refinement option 1: Titanic Warrior - Epic. Pre-requisite: The strong presence of a titanic bloodline originating from an Elder race. You’ve begun to unlock the secrets of your ancestry. By leveraging your bloodline to form class abilities, you will continue to build on the synergy between your Class and your heritage. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will.

“The first option I’ve seen before. It’s called Titanic Warrior.”

“Read it to me,” Tes said, resting her chin atop a fist as she leaned her elbow onto her knee. Victor complied, and she nodded, grinning. “Your current Class is epic-tier, correct?” When Victor nodded, she continued, “I like this option; it’s good to lean into your bloodline, considering its strength. Still, let’s see what else the System has in store for you.”

Victor swiped the option aside, and a new one appeared in his vision:

Class refinement option 2: Spirit Warden - Epic. Prerequisites: Spirit Core, ability to manifest spirit aspects and traverse the Spirit Plane. Your forays into the realm of spirits have given you deep connections to those lands that border the veil. Harness that understanding to further your abilities and enhance your potency. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence, Unbound.

“That’s a new one,” Victor said, eyes narrowing as he read it aloud.

“Interesting! Your spirit companions—totems—are already quite powerful. I imagine great versatility lies down this path. Well . . . let’s not overly contemplate this yet. What’s the third option? The System isn’t very creative—if it’s going to offer you a legendary refinement, it will likely be the final option.”

“All right,” Victor waved the option away, and the third came into view:

Class refinement option 3: Titanic Rager - Legendary. Prerequisites: Spirit Core, Rage Affinity, Titanic Bloodline. Your deep connections to your titanic bloodline and powerful rage affinity have converged to bring forth your legendary potential. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality. System Note: Selecting this refinement will alter several of your abilities and have an extreme impact on your Energy affinities.

“Shit,” Victor said, reading the description.

“Do tell!”

“You were right; it’s a legendary Class, but . . . well, here, I’ll read it to you.” As Victor read the wording of the selection to Tes, her eyes widened, and her grin broadened, but she surprised him by ultimately shaking her head.

“I don’t like it.”

“Huh?”

“The System ‘note’ at the end; I’ve only seen that a few times in my travels and studies, and it generally accompanies truly profound changes in the individual. Some people don’t care; they want power at any cost and embrace the change, but with this Class, with rage as its focus, I worry that you might be changed very much indeed—to the point where you wouldn’t recognize yourself, and I don’t mean physically.”

“Damn,” Victor said, rubbing his chin with his long, powerful fingers. He held his hand out in front of his face, made a fist, and then said, “I’ve changed a lot, Tes. I’m not much like the kid who got summoned to Fanwath, but, well, inside, I know I’m still me. Do you think this Class would change that?”

“That’s exactly what I worry about. That was your final option, yes? Usually, the System only offers three options as people progre . . .”

“Hang on,” Victor said, having just swiped the option aside to see if there were more. “There’s another!”

***Class refinement option 4: Titanic Herald - Legendary. Prerequisites: Sufficiently advanced titanic bloodline. You have embraced your ancient bloodline, giving air and light to a people who have faded from this universe. Continue down this path; give this world and others a reason to

know the name of your great, ancient progenitors. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Agility, Dexterity, Intelligence, Will.***

“Uh,” Victor quickly swiped the “window” to the side to see if there were more options but was met with a final message:

Class refinement option 5: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.

“Yes?” Tes prompted.

“Uh,” he repeated, licking his lips. “It’s another legendary option—Titanic Herald. It sounds . . . interesting.”

“Are you going to make me ask?” Tes reached forward and gripped Victor’s wrist, her fingers like warm, steel bands clad in velvety smooth skin.

“No, sorry; my mind’s just whirling.” Victor read her the Class description, and Tes’s eyes widened, and, though Victor couldn’t imagine how, they seemed to shine more than ever with eagerness.

“This is very interesting, Victor! How many total attribute points did you get with each of your current Class levels?”

“Um, twenty-eight.”

Tes nodded and said, “Not dissimilar to most System-bound peoples. You’re likely to get thirty-six with a legendary Class. That difference alone should narrow your decision down to your final two options. The only reason I would ever counsel against taking a legendary option would be because you’re trying to reach a specific Class and a lesser rarity was a stepping stone or because your legendary options had drawbacks that outweighed the benefit.”

“Like you think the, um, Titanic Rager would have?”

“The System rarely provides warnings; when it does, it’s wise to consider them deeply.”

“The final option, the Herald, doesn’t have any unbound attributes, but it lists every attribute. I haven’t seen that before.”

“Usually, in a description like that, the first listed attribute is awarded the most points. That’s not always true, though. Sometimes the attributes are increased equally, and the listing order is arbitrary. I would theorize that the Titanic Herald class is not specialized; it’s meant to help you gain further mastery of your bloodline. Future refinements will likely lead to specializations, perhaps into Classes that the System designs to mimic your progenitors’ ancient professions.”

“Designed to mimic?”

Tes glanced from Victor to Barn and Valla, then did her little trick that caused his ears to pop, and said, “Dragons and other Elder peoples did not have the System around to make our Classes for us. We learned to master Energy on our own, and the skills and spells we spent our time specializing in became our ‘Classes’ though each of us was rather unique.

“The System tries to make Energy more accessible for people newer to Energy. It creates Classes and helps to guide you through the process. Some might call it altruistic, but others know it’s selfish—as you gather Energy and grow in power, so too does the System’s tax from your efforts grow. It leeches but a tiny fraction of the Energy you gather, but combine the ‘tax’ of a trillion people, and you see why the System has grown so ubiquitous and difficult to circumvent.”

“So, as I uncover my bloodline, the System is learning about the Quinametzin, and it might offer me refinements that it finds . . . through me?”

“That’s right.”

Victor sat there, contemplating Tes’s words and also the decision he had to make. He, of course, saw the value in the legendary Class, but he also felt a little strange about it. Victor was a human; if he kept pushing his bloodline, would he lose that? Would he become more Quinametzin than human? Before he could stop himself, he gave voice to his concern, “Tes, will I start to lose my humanity if I keep pulling out my bloodline?”

She smiled at him and gave his wrist another squeeze. “You’re so different from dragons and titans I’ve met, and I mean real titans, Victor. Even when you’re enraged, well, maybe not at your most mad, like when you charged the night brute prince, you usually display some part of your nature—you, not the Quinametzin.

“How many times have I let you catch me as you chase behind as a Berserk lunatic? You never offered me harm; you never even spoke a cross word. There’s too much of your human heritage in here,” she touched his chest with her other hand, “for the Quinametzin to drive it out. You might become a titan, of sorts, someday, but you’ll never be solely Quinametzin.”

“Well, give me a minute to think, would you? Thanks for the advice, Tes.” She nodded and stood up, glanced at him one last time, a sly smile on her lips, then walked over to Valla. Victor sighed, stretched, and then put his finger on the pink gem of his bracer, sending forth a trickle of Energy. The world shifted, the colors bled away, and once again, he was inside the strange, angular world of the Ancestor Shard, standing before Khul Bach.

“My student returns and stronger than before, I see.”

“Hello, Khul Bach.” Victor offered a halfhearted wave. “I thought I should give you a chance to weigh in on my Class refinement options.”

“Wise.” Khul Bach nodded solemnly. “Read them each to me, lad.”

“Right. Option one . . .” Victor read through each option, and, to his credit, Khul Bach never interrupted him, listening and nodding as he progressed. When Victor finished, he grunted and rubbed at his chin, mulling things over for several moments before he spoke.

“What do you think, Victor?”

“Well, I think it would be smart to take a legendary Class. I’m worried, though, about losing myself, my nature, to the Quinametzin in my blood.”

“You would like my opinion?”

“Yes! That’s why I’m here.”

“Mmhmm. I’ll tell you what I want you to choose, and then I’ll tell you what you should select. Perhaps they’re the same.”

“You don’t know?”

“I’m still thinking it through. Let’s go through my thoughts: I want a scion who will one day be able to bring my people back to glory, someone who can save us from withering into obscurity. A ‘Titanic Rager’ might well win many battles, but will he be crafty and versatile enough for the great challenges to come? Perhaps. Perhaps he could slaughter his way to each of the shards and unite the Ancestor Stone. Perhaps he’d cause so much strife and misery and become so focused on slaughter that he’d lose sight of the greater goals, though.

“No, I’d rather you chose one of the epic options over that one, Victor. The choice, to me, is obvious; you should select the final Class and herald in your titanic bloodline. Are you not intent on saving the Degh? Do we not want to restore my people’s titanic nature? It seems a perfect match.”

“So, I should pick that one.” Victor nodded.

“Wait, Victor. I wouldn’t be a good mentor if we didn’t discuss why it would be a good choice for you.” Khul Bach leaned forward and thumped a thick round finger into Victor’s chest as he spoke.

“Right . . .”

“Do you enjoy your rage affinity? So much that you’d like to give up the others?”

“I . . . feel close to my rage, and if I’m being honest, I like the release I feel when I give in to it. I’d gladly give up my fear affinity, but . . . no—I can’t see myself willingly parting with my inspiration attunement.”

“The System is warning you about this for a reason; I believe if you accept the Titanic Rager Class, your rage will grow lopsided in your Core to the point that it may drive out the other affinities. The Herald Class, though, offers you a balance

of attributes. It offers you a chance to gain power and knowledge and learn from your Bloodline to find a specialization you can happily embrace. I'm certain it's the right choice for you. What causes you to hesitate?"

"You'll scoff at me, but I'm worried about becoming too much like the Quinametzin ancestor I see in my bloodline visions; already, I act differently when I'm Berserk through my Titanic Rage feat. I not only act differently, I think differently—sometimes I catch myself thinking and speaking like I'm a Quinametzin, and . . . it's weird. I get so fucking full of myself and, like, reckless. I act as if it's my right to smash anyone who dares to stand up to me."

"Ah. So these Quinametzin from which you gain your titan blood were a haughty people? Likely they dominated their place in the universe for millennia, long enough to grow certain that they were the strongest of peoples. We Degh suffered from similar delusions for a while, but we had our challenges. Still, it's possible we never reached the heights of your progenitors—I don't believe we ever felt it our right to conquer all whom we met—a difference in culture, perhaps.

"Still, no matter the strength of your bloodline and how sincerely you embrace it, you are still Victor, and if you assert your will against your instincts, if you keep in mind your desire to keep those traits that you value in your heart and spirit, your bloodline will not overpower that nature. It's possible the ancestor you've witnessed through your visions does not holistically represent the Quinametzin; could it not be possible that you had other ancestors who weren't so brutally domineering? Perhaps you'll meet others as you explore more deeply."

"Uh, I guess it's possible, yeah." Victor liked the way Khul Bach spoke, the rhythm of his words, and his logical, positive way of exploring the topic. "I feel better about things, Khul Bach. Thank you for your advice."

"I've had a long time to think and vicariously experienced many lives, Victor. I'm happy to share my wisdom with you because I want to see you succeed, and I'll always be honest in reminding you that I have selfish reasons for that. Still, I have begun to grow fond of your spirit, and I'd like to help you prosper and flourish. Trust my advice."

"I'll give it the weight it deserves. Thanks again. I'll be back soon," Victor said, then he severed his connection to the shard. The world snapped into being around him; the bright blue sky, Valla speaking softly to Tes, Barn banging away at his shield, and the hard rock under his butt. Victor sighed and opened his status sheet, pushing his sixteen free points into will; for all he knew, they were

the last free points he'd ever get, and he wanted to give his will a final boost. He looked at his status:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Advanced 2

Class:

Spirit Carver - Epic

Level:

40 (42)

Core:

Spirit Class - Improved 2

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

3963/3963

Strength:

135

Vitality:

200

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

413

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched

“Well, here goes,” he said, then opened the refinement menu and selected the fourth option, Titanic Herald.