

Victor BK4: Ch29

Book 4: Chapter 29: A Herald's First Day

When Victor selected his class option, he was imbued with a sense of well-being, power, and confidence; he immediately felt that he'd done the right thing—this was his path. Energy surged through him, infusing every nook and cranny of his body, and he lifted his head back and howled at the pale blue sky, unable to contain his exuberance. System messages queued up for him to read, and he flipped through them, one by one, his grin widening with each:

Congratulations! You have refined your class: Titanic Herald. Class feat gained: Titanic Constitution: Your titanic bloodline has enriched and fortified the microscopic structures of your body, from your blood to your bones, to the hairs on your head. Henceforth, you'll automatically receive 5 bonus points in vitality each time you gain a level.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 41 Titanic Herald, gained 6 strength, 11 vitality, 6 dexterity, 6 agility, 6 intelligence, and 6 will.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Titanic Aspect - Basic.

Titanic Aspect - Basic: For a brief time, present yourself as the herald of your bloodline. Gain the aspect of a true Quinametzin Titan while maintaining cognizance and the utility of your full array of spells and skills. Energy Cost: 1000. Cooldown: Long.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 42 Titanic Herald, gained 6 strength, 11 vitality, 6 dexterity, 6 agility, 6 intelligence, and 6 will.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class skill: Titanic Leap - Basic.

Titanic Leap - Basic: Whenever your form reflects the aspect of your titanic bloodline, you will find that you are able to leap quickly and powerfully, covering distances seemingly implausible, even considering your tremendous size and power.

"I see you made a decision," Tes called from where she sat next to Valla. Victor grinned at her, then stood up, stretching his back and lifting Lifedrinker to his shoulder. She hummed and vibrated against his thick muscles, and Victor squeezed her haft.

"Soon, chica. Soon, we'll fight again." He raised his voice and said, "I gained a shit load of stats with this new Class." He walked toward Tes and Valla, then continued, "I feel fantastic; do I look different?"

"More hale. Your aura bleeds out, pushing more heavily than ever. Tes, can't you teach him to rein that in?" Valla shifted back, her hands behind her on the flat rock where she rested, looking up at Victor with squinting eyes and a friendly smile. He realized the sun was behind him, so he squatted down to make it easier for the two women to look him in the eyes.

"I can and will, but that's a lesson for camp. It's about time we harvested those night brutes and got on our way. Here," she produced her Hell Blade and handed it, hilt first, to Victor. "Go start carving the bones out of that prince; you

shouldn't have much trouble, using that knife. We'll catch up. You can tell me about your new class features when I get there."

"Oh, all right . . ." Victor stood up and then looked down at the two women with a raised eyebrow. "Did I interrupt something?"

"Tes was helping me understand how to better shape one of my spells when you started howling," Valla chuckled.

"Oh, damn. Yeah," Victor rubbed at his head ruefully, "I was just excited." He glanced over at Barn, who was still frowning as he worked to smooth out his shield, then he said, curiosity getting the better of him, "Doesn't his shield self-repair?"

"You can see how thick it is," Tes tsked, "He needs to hammer it into a semblance of the correct shape, or the self-repair will take ages."

"Aha, yeah. Got it." Victor turned toward the cave entrance, then, on a whim, he cast his new spell, Titanic Aspect. He felt Energy surge out of his Core, all three of his affinities. It flooded his body, filling his pathways and then pouring into his veins, skin, and bones. He arched his back, looked up at the sky, and involuntarily yawped as he expanded with the power of his spell. For the first time he could remember, he stood, huge and menacing but fully himself. No red rage filled his vision, no urge to fight or kill—he was just Victor but . . . more.

Victor shifted and turned over one of his boulder-like shoulders, a broad grin on his face, and said, "See you down there." His voice rumbled out, and he laughed as he heard it bouncing off the rocky sides of the cave opening.

Tes's eyes were alight with glee as she studied him, and she nudged Valla's shoulder and said, "Our young titan is showing off. Should we be impressed?"

"Oh, I suppose it would do more damage to his ego than it's worth dealing with if we didn't 'ooh' and 'ahh' a little bit." She giggled, and Victor snorted, happy to see their good mood, even if it was at his expense.

"I don't think you guys get it! I'm not Berserk right now!" He laughed again as if to prove his good mood, then waved and started into the cave.

By the time his Titanic Aspect wore off, he'd pulled most of the night brute prince's ribs from his charred remains, and he was working to carve out the bones in his legs when Tes and the others arrived. Between the four of them and Tes's uncanny talent for butchery, they managed to gather the valuable remains from the battle in just under four hours. After sharing out monster trophies, Tes's three charges each had a stack of precious bones from the prince and dozens of organs from the lesser brutes.

It was nearly dusk when they started north toward a place called Boyle's Crossing. Victor resumed his practice with Berserk, running madly after Tes through the desert wasteland while Valla and Barn, on his mechanical mount, kept pace just a few dozen yards behind him. The sun slipped away behind the western horizon, but the sky remained pink and purple for a long while before fading into night. A couple of hours into their run, Tes paused, and when Victor caught her, she smiled at him.

"Aren't you hungry, titan-blood?"

Victor tried to take stock of himself, grunting with suppressed anger, his fists clenched as his eyes kept darting past Tes, looking for something hostile to fight. With an effort, he turned his attention inward, saw his rage nearly depleted, and growled, "Yes."

"Perhaps one of those brutes' hearts might be worthy of a meal?" She grinned, somehow just as tall as he was, though still graceful, still beautiful, and as Victor looked into her gleaming eyes, he felt his rage begin to fade away. She punched him in the chest, not hard, but enough to jostle him and provoke a snarl, and she said, "Hurry now, angry one! Eat before your fury fades!"

"Ungh," Victor said, reaching into his storage ring for one of the dozen or so night brute hearts he'd salvaged. It fit in his mighty palm, dark maroon and glistening with undried blood. Victor's mouth began to gather saliva as he looked at it, and he didn't need further encouragement to devour the hunk of raw, tough muscle. Each swallowed lump of Energy-filled flesh flooded his pathways with red Energy, filled him to bursting, then pushed his Core to the point where it swelled and flared, pulsing like a miniature sun.

Part of Victor knew it was about to advance again, but his enraged mind didn't care. The pretty lady in the colorful dress was running away again, and he needed to catch her. He howled and yelled, aware that his companions were behind him; his pack was on the hunt, and a fight surely awaited them if he could only catch the lady.

The procession they made, their forms silhouetted against the darkening horizon, must have been a spectacle for any casual observer—a tall woman sprinting, endlessly energetic, with her ribbon of a belt and those in her hair flowing behind her, a great, hulking brute, leaping and charging, ever gaining on the woman, only to have her dart ahead out of his reach, and then a much smaller figure, bathed in jolts of electricity and wind, keeping pace with the brute. And, bringing up the rear, a squat, powerful figure encased in metal and riding upon a steaming, clanking metallic horse.

Not long before they came into sight of the crossing, Victor's rage-attuned Energy faded, and Tes didn't stop to encourage him to recharge it. She did slow, though, and when Victor, panting and sweating, crested the last hill atop which she stood, she gestured down to a brightly lit cluster of stone buildings gathered around the near side of a mighty stone bridge. Looking at the bridge, Victor let his eyes drift to the left and right and saw a dark ribbon in the starlit desert, and he said, "A river?"

"The river," Tes nodded. "The only one in the wastes. Even with its lifeblood so rich, nothing much grows around it, though."

“The buildings are Boil’s Crossing?” Valla asked.

“Yes, and you can see the hunters have already arrived.” She pointed to a staked-out circle of monstrous mounts near the most prominent structure. Bright lights flared from its windows, and Victor could see people gathered outside on a cobbled patio, glow lamps hanging from posts, and small fires burning against the encroaching darkness.

“An inn?” Barn grunted from atop his clicking, hissing mount.

“Aye,” Tes nodded. “Who’s hungry?”

“I am!” Victor grunted.

“How could you be? I saw that meal you had an hour ago!” Valla didn’t hide the note of disgust in her voice.

“Don’t judge your comrade,” Tes said, resting a hand on Valla’s shoulder. “He has a mighty furnace to fuel.”

Victor reached up to his chin, noticed it was still tacky with dried blood, and shook his head, “I don’t blame you, Valla.”

His response made her frown a little, and she glanced from Tes to Victor, then back again, and she opened her mouth as if to say something, but then she closed it again. The moment passed, and Barn said, “Well, I’m starved. Let’s get down there.” Without waiting for a reply, the big Vesh steered his weird mount down the slight incline, urging it into a cantor, kicking up some dust.

Tes put an arm over Victor’s shoulders, and he realized she’d matched his height again. She urged him forward, walking with him, and Valla hurried to keep pace, walking on Tes’s other side.

“You’ve both made much progress in the last couple of days. I’m proud of you,” Tes said, reaching down with her other hand to squeeze Valla’s shoulder. “We’ll get a good night’s rest, and then in a day’s hard travel, the hunting party will hopefully find its quarry. I think the two of you have a good chance to claim a piece of the prize!”

“I notice you never take a split of the trophies from the kills, Tes. Is it all too beneath you?” Valla asked, smiling up at the taller woman.

“Beneath me? No, not necessarily, but I have plenty of treasures and trophies. The things I seek are a bit more rare.” As she spoke, she glanced at Victor, and that sly smile and gleam in her eyes returned; he began to wonder what exactly she sought from him. He knew she wanted some of his blood. Was that all? He knew she found his bloodline and his antics while Berserk entertaining; did dragons get bored of life to the point where following around someone like Victor spiced things up?

As they approached the inn, Victor watched Barn’s horse explode into steam as it shifted and shrank, its many moving parts pulling in on themselves until only a quivering, metallic, clockwork

cube remained. He picked it up, stowed it away, and then turned toward the trio as they strolled up. “Thanks for everything, Tes.” He moved his gaze from left to right and added, “Nice to meet you, Valla and Victor.”

“It was a pleasure, Barn,” Valla said, reaching up to thump her fist against his armored shoulder.

“Yeah, take it easy.” Victor waved, hanging back by Tes’s side.

“You can join us anytime,” Tes said. “Tell your sister I was good to you, will you?”

“Of course! I had a lot of fun, and that was a fast level for me.” He eyed Victor again, sighed heavily, turned toward the inn’s cobbled courtyard, and walked away, his heavy armor and bulky body giving him an awkward, rolling gait.

“He envies you, Victor.” Tes hadn’t entirely removed her arm from him; she’d loosened her hold, letting her arm slip off but still clung to his shoulder with her hand, and she squeezed it.

“Who wouldn’t?” Valla asked. “He levels quickly and has such a potent mix of bloodline abilities and class skills . . . I’m glad I’m not his enemy.”

“Sheesh. Is that all I am to people? An enemy or an ally? We’re friends, Valla.” Tes’s grip on his shoulder tightened, and Victor rather liked the feeling; it was friendly and reassuring, and he could feel the Energy in her hand. If he were glad anyone wasn’t his enemy, it was Tes.

“No. No, I know, Victor. I’m sorry; I was just thinking in terms of what we have waiting for us when we get back to Fanwath. I’m pleased you’re Rellia’s . . . my ally.”

“Splendid!” Tes said, letting go of Victor and clapping her hands. “I was wondering what we’d talk about over dinner, and that sounds like an entertaining topic. Tell me about Fanwath and what you have waiting for you!” She strode ahead of them, not waiting for a reply, and Victor shrugged at Valla. She nodded, and they followed after, through the smoky courtyard with its braziers and glow lamps, past several hunters Victor recognized. Some of them called out, and Tes waved and bowed.

They claimed a table inside, next to a big stone hearth, and Tes ordered them several dishes she claimed were local delicacies. They reminded Victor of Indian food with similar spices and textures, much like curry. The food was served with warm, grainy bread with a thick crust that tasted wonderful when smothered with the herbed butter that came along with it.

Victor ate a lot, more than he had in a long while, and Tes and Valla laughed about it several times, interrupting Valla’s tale about the Untamed Marches and Rellia and her conflict with the other nobles in her household. Victor was a little surprised by how free Valla was with Rellia’s secrets,

but he figured it didn't matter—they were in a completely different world, and Tes had proven herself powerful enough to dig any secrets she wanted out of them if she really wanted to.

They drank a lot and laughed even more. At one point, Cayle joined their table and shared a toast with them, thanking Tes for getting her brother some fighting experience. She didn't stay long, though, and the trio was left to their own devices, telling tales, rolling dice, and joking about each other—with a preponderance of the quips made at Victor's expense.

Several different musical artists entertained the patrons of the tavern throughout the night. The last of which was a woman who played the lute alone on stage and sang in a haunting voice about war and loss, love and death, and generally put a damper on things. Tes proclaimed it an excellent time to get some sleep, so they retired to a proper common room—a big space behind the tavern where cots were lined up for weary travelers to sleep in.

Victor claimed a cot big enough for a Degh, and Tes and Valla found empty beds nearby, and the three of them fell into sleep rather quickly. At least, Victor thought they did; he only really knew for sure that he did. The next thing he knew, bright light was streaming through windows, and the smells of bacon and fresh bread filled the air.

After a hearty breakfast, the hunters gathered outside, and Victor gravitated toward the rear of the column, where he could see Valla and Tes standing near a large wagon filled with barrels. Valla hadn't been at breakfast, and when Victor first approached the pair, he waved and called out, "Hey! How'd you sleep?"

"Not at all, to be honest. Too many people in one room. Too much snoring and grunting and, excuse me, farting. I spent the evening near the mounts, cultivating and enjoying the fresh air." Valla folded her arms in front of her chest as she spoke, a frown touching her lips at the memory.

"Oh? Well, I didn't hear a thing. Closed my eyes, and the next thing I knew, the sun was shining through the windows." Victor shrugged.

"You see, Tes? He even has to boast about being a better sleeper than I!"

Tes chuckled and said, "With what his body went through yesterday, I'm surprised he was able to wake up. You'll be fine and are probably better off for the cultivation you got in. Well," she said, looking around at the hunters getting mounted and lining up, "I don't have a field trip for us today. We'll travel with the column and camp tonight, and I have a strong feeling we'll find Cayle's quarry on the morrow."

"Should I Berserk again?" Victor asked, a note of dread in his voice. He didn't want to have to battle with himself all day around the column of hunters, cargo handlers, and beasts.

"I have another idea." Tes backed away from the wagon, walked a dozen steps, toes to heel, as though she was measuring something, then nodded and said, "Stand behind me." Victor and Valla hurried over to stand behind her, and she nodded, then gestured with her hand, moving it as though she were pulling something large from a sack in front of her. Suddenly a bronze platform the size

of an SUV appeared. It floated above the ground, kicking up a bit of dust on an invisible air current that seemed to be holding it aloft.

“What’s this?” Valla asked, walking forward and leaning over to look under the platform. Victor copied her, and sure enough, nothing but air separated it from the ground. The platform was about four inches thick, twelve feet long, and six feet wide. The surface was carved with myriad runic symbols, many of which were inlaid with precious-looking metals like silver and gold.

“A travel platform I won from a rather combative Wizard on a different world. I rarely use it, but I think today you both would benefit from some study and cultivation. Victor, your Core is ready to burst, so you may as well push it through to the next level. While you do that, I’ll craft you a new sling for that axe, and then I’ll give you some lessons on aura control. Valla, I have two more spells to teach you before we meet the wyrm tomorrow. Go ahead! Hop aboard,” Tes laughed as she saw Valla eagerly pushing against the platform, not moving it at all.

“Seriously?” Victor laughed. “I get to ride in comfort and style? Tes, you’re the best!” He laughed again and leaped aboard the floating platform, and when his full bulk made contact with the rear quarter, it dipped, though only a few inches, and then it resettled, completely stable. “This thing is awesome! How fast is it?”

“Depending on how much energy the driver puts into it, very fast. I have plenty of Energy, so we’ll keep up with the caravan rather easily.” She climbed aboard and sat near the front, and Victor held out a hand to pull Valla up. She found a seat near the middle and immediately began to pull notebooks and writing utensils from her storage ring. Victor sighed, watching her, imagining she’d definitely be the type of student with straight As in school. He sat at the back as Cayle blew a horn near the front of the column, and the hunters got moving.

Victor hung his legs over the platform's edge and watched the countryside go by. When they got to the bridge, he stood up to look over the edge, watching the slow, dark green water lazily ripple by beneath the stone structure. Something with enormous, rough scales surged up momentarily, splashing loudly as it dove back under, and he reminded himself not to swim in that water.