

Victor BK4: Ch30

Book 4: Chapter 30: Old Treasures and Auras

Sometime around midday, Victor broke through and leveled his Core. As each of his orbs of attuned Energy surged and pulsed, then contracted on themselves, slightly denser than before, Victor looked up and smiled with satisfaction. He'd made a lot of progress since coming to Zaafor, and he had a feeling he'd make a lot more before he and Valla left. He looked at his Energy status:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

5280/5280

He waved it away and looked at Tes, who sat near the front of the floating platform working with some leather straps, and said, "Hey, why'd my Energy go up so much when I gained those levels back at the night hulk cave? I only got six points in will and intelligence each level . . ."

"Maximum Energy is influenced much more by intelligence than will. Will improves your recovery rate to a greater degree, though." She didn't look up as she answered, and her quick reply made it clear that she'd anticipated what he was thinking. As if to prove that point, she answered his next question before he could ask it, "Each rank you gain in your Core should give you a boost of around 100 Energy. Is that right?"

"Yeah!"

She nodded and said, "Most advanced races receive a similar boon."

"Advanced races?"

"Those with a decent connection to Energy—a measurable affinity and the ability to work it into spells or abilities. Some creatures have Cores and Energy, but their affinity is so low that it simply works through them as an extension of their natural instincts."

"Huh," Victor nodded. He looked away from Tes to his left, where Valla sat studying spell patterns, and then over her head to the vast, endless wastes. "We're going to have a chance to camp and rest before we hunt the wyrm, right?"

Tes closed her eyes and seemed to concentrate momentarily, then she nodded and said, "Yes, I'd say so."

"I need to honor my ancestors before the hunt."

That got Tes to look up from her work, and she narrowed her eyes and grinned at Victor, "Wonderful idea!"

Victor smiled, and then, while waiting for Tes to finish her work, he sorted through his storage containers, going over some of his long-neglected treasures. He had two items he'd gained back in the dungeon attached to Great Bone Mine that had sat, lurking like grim reminders of that foul place, in his dimensional pouch. He'd always intended to have someone with knowledge look at them but never seemed to get around to it.

The first, he could easily explain why he'd left alone—the twisted, silvery-green crown of the cultist who'd been guarding the portal to the dungeon. Victor loathed the idea of touching it, but he couldn't find the fear that used to keep his fingers away; if the thing tried to poison or curse him, he'd smash it down with his will. That determination firm in his mind, he snatched it out of his bag and held it in front of himself.

It was cold, and something definitely writhed beneath the metal, touching his flesh with its sickly Energy but quickly retreating as it felt his aura. Victor grinned at it and then looked at Tes. She'd lifted her head from her leatherworking and wrinkled her nose at him. “What's this, then?”

“A crown I found a long time ago. I used to be afraid to touch it, but it now seems more afraid of me. Do you know what it is?”

Tes stared at the crown for a moment, and Victor could feel the Energy build up behind her eyes as they glowed briefly. She shrugged and said, “It's a vile thing, possessed by a mad spirit bent on twisting the minds of those who wear the crown into worshipping a long-dead being—some sort of demon if my feeling is right.”

“Oh, shit. I probably shouldn't have had it in my dimensional container . . .”

“It was mad long before you acquired it. I get the impression it was dormant, hidden for millennia before it was found rather recently.”

“You could tell all that by looking at it?” Valla asked, looking up from her studies.

“Oh yes. I have very robust senses for that sort of thing.” Tes winked at Valla, then looked down at her project, but she continued speaking, “I would think your ancestors could make use of the Energy within that crown quite handily.”

“Oh?” Victor grinned at the idea. “Not a bad thought—I can let them deal with the nasty spirit.” He put the crown back into his container and pulled out his other item—the choker he'd won from the dungeon boss. Frost began to form on his fingers where they touched it, and he gingerly set it down on the platform before him so he could better look at it. The choker was pale blue with seven different crystals, all shaped like runes that held no meaning to Victor.

“Ah,” Tes said, leaning closer and peering at the choker. “This is another matter. What a lovely item!”

“I can feel it from here!” Valla said. “It's heavy with elemental Energy.”

“Yes, currently charged with a water attunement, but I think it can hold other elements. Where did you get this one, Victor?”

“From a dungeon boss. I was only tier two, so I didn’t think it could be that great . . .”

“You were only tier two, but what was the boss?” Valla asked, eyes still locked on the choker.

“Uh, good question.” Victor shrugged.

“Regardless, that item is quite valuable. May I?” Tes asked, leaning further forward, arm outstretched but stopping short of touching the choker.

“Yeah, sure.”

Tes picked up the necklace, and Victor noted with interest that frost didn’t seem to form on her fingers. She smiled as she turned it around in her hands and then said, “This is a focus for the primary elements. A focus and an elaborate power cell.” She glanced around at the wagons and mounts traveling nearby, then held the choker out to the side. A moment later, Victor sucked in his breath as he watched an honest-to-goodness, miniature winter squall stir up out of the hot, sandy wasteland and blow rapidly away into the distance leaving six inches of snow in its wake.

“Holy shit!”

“Hah! Well, I purged it of water Energy. It’s ready to receive a different element. If only you had a friend who could channel some sort of elemental Energy, Victor.” She gave him an obnoxious wink and nodded toward Valla, who was still staring out into the wasteland, watching the black, swirling cloud as it faded into the distance.

“Do you want it, Valla?” Victor asked, quick to take the hint.

“Hmm?” She jerked her head back to Victor and then glanced over at Tes, still holding the choker delicately in one hand. “I couldn’t, Victor! It’s a precious artifact!”

“True,” Tes nodded, “Though you are working together, and surely Victor would want his partner to have every advantage. Besides, you could owe him one. Perhaps you’ll win a prize that he could benefit from someday. Would you rather he kept it stowed away, gathering dust, or sold it for some beads?”

“Yeah,” Victor nodded. “What Tes said.”

“Here.” Tes tossed the necklace to Valla. “I’ve removed my bond. It will always work as a focus, but you’ll need to spend some hours charging it to use the power cell function.”

“Power cell?” Valla asked, gently holding the pale blue choker, running the runes between her thumb and forefinger.

“A generic term for items that can hold a store of Energy. Once you’ve charged it, you’ll be able to amplify spells you cast with the stored Energy. Until it’s depleted, then you’ll need to spend time charging it again.”

“Oh, right. Back home, they’re usually called power stones because, well, because we tend to use gems for the purpose.”

“Yes,” Tes nodded, then turned back to her leatherwork.

“Thank you, Victor,” Valla said, gesturing with the delicate, beautiful choker.

“You’re welcome. I hope it works well for you.”

“It’s the loveliest thing anyone’s ever given me. I’ll be sure to flaunt it to Rellia when we return.” Valla grinned as she put it around her neck, hooking the clasp at the rear. A moment later, Victor saw little charges of electricity flicker over the runes.

“It looks really nice on you.” Feeling some heat in his cheeks, he glanced away and almost laughed at himself. “You’re charging it?” he asked to change the subject.

“Yes, it’s quite easy! I just focus a strand of Energy from my Core through my pathways into it, and it slowly absorbs it. I’ll need to rest before it’s full unless . . . I think I can keep up with the draw if I cultivate at the same time.”

“Yes, you should, and as you grow in power, it will become more and more easy.” Tes held up the leather strap she was working with and eyeballed Victor briefly before nodding and picking up her stitching tool.

Victor continued to organize his rings, moving mundane items into one and his more valued items into another. For a while, he spaced out sorting through the ring he’d won from Jikrak, the one filled with building supplies for a “hermitage.” He wondered how valuable those materials were; it seemed like a lot of exotically named woods and stone, glass and fixtures, tiles and . . .

“What do you think?” Tes interrupted his thoughts. He jerked his attention away from his dimensional container and looked at the leather harness she’d made for him. It was a beautiful work of craftsmanship, and Victor knew some Energy must have gone into it. Runes lined the leather, silver rivets held the axe-loop part to the shoulder harness, and soft white fur lined the inside of the strap that would rest on his shoulder. The ring meant to go around Lifedrinker was also silver, and Victor wondered what he’d do if she outgrew it.

“It’s wonderful, Tes. Thank you!”

“Try it on,” Tes said, and Victor nodded, reaching out to take it and then hanging it over his neck so it rested crossways over his chest. The loop for Lifedrinker

rested against his ribs about at the height of his elbow. “Stand up and put her in there.”

“Right.” Victor stood, lifting Lifedrinker from the floor of the floating platform, and then slipped her haft through the ring. She hung there, comfortably snug against his body, her handle hanging down alongside his leg.

“If she evolves to become larger, the ring will resize itself. I also enchanted the whole thing to grow and self-repair. I used Boilercrock leather—very dense and capable of holding a lot of Energy, so you can get quite large without harming it.

“Sheesh, Tes!” Victor said, rubbing the dark, supple hide between his fingers. “I didn’t expect something this nice. Can I pay you or something?”

“Foolish man!” Tes scoffed, “Don’t offer to pay for gifts, especially when given them by one of . . .” she glanced around, “my type of people!”

“Right. I am foolish, Tes. I didn’t mean any offense.” Victor spoke earnestly, and his words brought a smile to Tes’s face.

“Good! Now, I sensed your Core expanding. Are you ready to learn to rein in that aura a bit?”

“Please!” Valla said, smirking.

“Hey! Didn’t I just give you a fancy necklace?”

“I’m sorry,” she chuckled, holding up her hands in surrender, then turning back to her spell pattern.

“Mmhmm,” Victor grinned, then he took Lifedrinker out of her loop and sat back down, resting her on the platform next to him.

“You could tilt her handle back so you can sit with her still in the harness,” Tes said, watching him.

“Yeah, but I don’t know; I like to give her room to breathe when I’m not walking around.”

“Does she speak to you often?” Tes leaned forward, and Victor saw her hand twitch as though she was about to reach for the axe but held herself back.

“Do you want to hold her?” he asked rather than answer her question.

“May I?” Tes reached forward, taking the invitation as answer enough, and very carefully picked Lifedrinker up by the haft, her fingers wrapping around the dark, star-speckled wood just beneath her metallic head. “Oh, she’s wonderful!” Tes’s eyes lit up as she turned Lifedrinker this way and that, staring into the depths of

her living-wood haft. She traced some dark streaks of metal in the shiny Heart Silver with a finger, one of her blond eyebrows raising with interest.

“Her edge used to be the only shiny part; the Heart Silver spread as she woke up and evolved. She speaks to me, but not all the time, to answer your earlier question, by the way. When it first started, I felt like I could feel her emotions before I could hear her words.”

“I’ve seen many conscious weapons, but this one has such a strong spirit, Victor. She must love you.” Tes smiled, handed the axe back to him, and Victor rested her on his knees.

“Well, it’s mutual. We’ve seen a lot together.”

“A brave man to open his heart so. I like that about you, Victor; I think you’d proclaim your love for your axe no matter who listened.”

“He would.” Valla didn’t look up; her words were quick and spoken from experience. Tes laughed, and Victor shrugged.

“All right, let’s get down to business. Victor, you have a powerful will for one so young and newly into the fourth tier. I think you’ll find this lesson very easy.” She looked into his eyes and waited for Victor to nod before she continued, “You can feel others’ auras, yes?”

“Yes, especially from powerful people like the warlord or Tronk or . . . well, or you.”

“Mmhmm, but you don’t feel the pressure of my aura right now, do you?”

“No.” Victor frowned, trying to remember the last time Tes’s aura had pressed down on him.

“That’s because I’m holding it back. It takes some conscious effort, but less and less the more practiced you become. In some worlds, were you to walk around with an overbearing aura, it would be taken as a signal that you sought violence or that your will was so weak that you couldn’t contain yourself. We don’t want that to happen to you, do we? When you unleash your aura, you want it to be intentional.”

“Makes sense.”

“So, just as you manipulate Energy with your will, you must learn to pull your aura back and hold it down. The first step to that process is being able to see it. Close your eyes and turn your attention to your Core.” Victor did so, finding it easy to look “inward” at his Core and the three orbs of Energy therein. “Now, expand your view, keep the Core at the center of your awareness, but allow your perception to see your pathways. Simply widen the perspective.

Victor tried to do as she asked, but he felt his view of his Core slipping away as he looked at his pathways, and he grunted in frustration. Somehow able to see his problem, Tes spoke again, “Slowly; relax and broaden your view, but keep that Core at the center, don’t look away. Let your pathways fill your peripheral vision.”

Victor nodded and tried again, carefully focusing on his inspiration-attuned Energy and letting his inward-seeing eye expand its field of view. He almost whooped with glee when it began to work, and he saw his pathways stretching away from the Core at the center of his perception.

Victor continued trying to expand his view, and soon he saw the extent of those pathways, all the way to his fingertips, toes, and the center of his forehead. When he smiled with satisfaction, he noticed something. At the edges of his perception, outside his pathways, hung a flickering, pulsing curtain of reddish-purple light, glowing as it surged and retracted, seemingly at random.

“Holy shit,” he breathed, “I think I see my aura.”

“I knew you’d be a quick study!” Tes sounded almost smug. “Reach out with your will and pull that aura in. Hold it tight to the edges of your pathways.”

“All right,” Victor said, gritting his teeth, squeezing his eyes tight, and twisting his lips in concentration. He pulled at that pulsing field outside his pathways and managed to restrain part of it while other parts flared out. “It’s hard to get ahold of it all!”

“Come, Victor. I’ve seen people with half your will do this. Keep your focus on your Core! Don’t look at one part of the aura and grab at it. Reach out like you’re casting a net and pull it all in.” Victor decided to take her words literally, and he envisioned his will forming into a net. He urged it to expand, wrapping around that pulsing, flaring aura and pulling it to himself, binding it tightly to the edges of his pathways.

“Woah!” Valla said.

“You did it!” Tes cried, clapping her hands.

“Ancestors! I can’t remember the last time I wasn’t under that pressure . . .”

Victor opened his eyes, his mouth wide in a smile of pride, and then Valla reached up and cradled her head, groaning. “Ugh! You let go!”

“Doh! Shit.” Victor closed his eyes and began to repeat the process.

“Victor, you’ll need to maintain some concentration on holding your aura back. With practice, it will get easier and easier, and, eventually, you won’t even realize you’re doing it.”

“Let me see here,” Victor said, biting his tongue in concentration as he finally reasserted his web of willpower, pulling back his surging aura. For the next several hours, he worked on the process, slowly allowing more and more of his attention to leave the view of his Core and trying to interact with the world while

a part of his mind kept concentrating on holding back his aura. He got better at it, but by the time the wagons were grinding to a halt at the base of some low, rocky hills, he had a blinding headache, and with an apologetic shrug to Valla, he let it go.

“Well, I had quite a long break from it, and I’ll get used to it again. Promise me you’ll keep working at it, though!” she said, standing up and stretching.

“I will, Valla. Promise.” He looked over at Tes, who’d hopped off the platform and was looking around the campsite, presumably choosing a spot for the three of them to set up their tent. “Hey,” he said, turning away from Tes and back to Valla, “I’m going to sacrifice some stuff to my ancestors. Wanna watch?”