

Victor BK4: Ch31

Book 4: Chapter 31: Glory for the Ghosts

Victor looked through his piles of monster trophies, allowing his instinct to guide his hand as he pulled specimen after specimen out of his dimensional container and stacked them together on the sandy ground of the waste. At the bottom of the pile was the cultist crown, and he knew, in his gut, that his ancestors in the Spirit Plane—or Ghost Lands, as Tenecoalt called that otherworldly realm—would appreciate it as an offering. He wondered about that; would they like it for its Energy, or would they consume the spirit lurking within? At this point, nothing would surprise him.

Dawn was just brightening the eastern horizon, and most of the hunters were still sleeping off their excessive drinking from the night before. There had been no partying for Victor and Valla; they'd spent most of the evening in the tent working on assignments from Tes. Victor shook his head and grinned as he recalled the conversation that had spurred those hours of study.

“Tes,” he'd asked, watching the woman, now small enough to comfortably sit in one of Valla's plush chairs, “How do you keep changing your size so easily?”

“Oh? You've noticed?” she laughed.

“Yes! When I'm . . . bigger and running through the waste, you're my height. When we stop to talk, and I'm my usual size, you're my height. When you need to sit in a comfortable chair built for a much smaller person, you seem to fit just fine. What gives?”

Tes wrinkled her nose and shifted so she could pull her legs up under her, leaning against one heavily cushioned arm of the chair. She gave Victor a long, penetrating look and asked, “Are you wanting to sit in small chairs, or are you worried about dwarfing the people you've known, afraid you'll grow more distant in their hearts due to your size disparity?”

Victor glanced at Valla, still peering intently at a spell pattern she was trying to duplicate, and then his ears popped, and he turned back to Tes—she'd cast her privacy spell, perhaps to spare his feelings. “I guess so. Everyone I knew before I came to this world was pretty much human-sized. I think it would be cool to fit in anywhere I went . . .”

“Well, I can't help you with that—fitting in anywhere, I mean. The spell I have requires very Energy-dense flesh and is able, with the expenditure of enormous amounts of Energy, to make me nearly any size smaller than originally but not larger. I suppose I could modify it to do so, but the expense . . .” she trailed off, clearly trying to envision the idea.

“Would it work on me?” Victor felt hope in his chest and was surprised by it—he'd thought he'd come to terms with his largeness.

“I think so; your titan ancestry, your bloodline, has begun to manifest quite significantly in your physical form. I'm not sure you have the Energy to alter yourself by much, but if you study the spell, you should be able to accomplish

much as you grow in power. I believe your inspiration-attuned Energy would be a good fit for the magic.”

“Would you teach me?” Victor leaned forward, going so far as to scoot over the rug, so he sat closer to Tes’s chair.

“This is ancient magic, Victor. Many of my kin would be quite cross with me for sharing it, assuming you could master the pattern—it’s quite complex.” Something about the crooked grin on Tes’s face and the way she leaned forward to match his posture told Victor she wasn’t worried about what her kin might think.

“So, will you?” he pressed.

“I will. Tonight, I’ll give you a tenth of the pattern. Prove to me that you can master that much, and I’ll give you more.”

Victor chuckled as he stacked a long rib bone from the night brute prince onto the pile. He’d been up all night studying the wild, twisting, shifting pattern that Tes had drawn out for him on a piece of magical parchment. She’d said the most challenging part of the pattern would be forcing his Energy into it, but Victor knew he could master his Energy—his will was strong enough. No, for him, the hard part was comprehending the insane complexity of it and then trying to force his clumsy fingers to recreate parts of it.

Still, Victor knew he’d get it eventually, especially if he could manage to make a few more levels and boost his intelligence and dexterity a bit more. When he thought of Tes and remembered the glimpse she’d given him of her dragon form, he could only imagine the kind of Energy that went into shrinking that massive body into a petite woman; he didn’t need anything so severe, just the ability to shave off a foot or two when he wanted to exist among his smaller friends more comfortably.

He heard footsteps crunching in the sand behind him and turned to see Valla approaching. She looked past him to the pile of monster organs and bones and said, “Quite an expensive offering.”

“My ancestors battle in the Ghost Lands, and these are the least of the scraps I can offer,” Victor said before he even realized he was speaking. Were those his words? Were they the words of Tenecoalt? Was he human or Quinametzin? “I’m starting to think like one of them,” he said, deciding it had been him, but with ideas that were new to his conscious mind.

“Well, you’ve advanced your bloodline a lot. It makes sense. There’s nothing wrong with learning and gaining new ideas and ideals, though. I think it’s wonderful that you can connect yourself so viscerally to your ancestors.”

“Well, let’s say I have a lot more respect for you, I mean the Ardeni and Shadeni, and your reverence for your ancestors.”

Valla smiled and stepped forward, reaching up to rest one of her small, blue hands on his arm above his elbow. “Are you ready?”

“Yeah.” Victor glanced back toward the tent, hoping to see Tes approaching, but she’d not returned from wherever she’d gone. After giving Victor the pattern to study, she’d said something about finding a dice game and a “strong enough drink.” He shrugged, turned to the pile of offerings, gathered his Energy, and cast Honor the Spirits.

White, heatless flames burst into existence at the base of the pile and rapidly spread through it, sending ghostly smoke into the air that faded into nothing. No smell accompanied the burn, and though the light was brilliant while it lasted, there was no afterimage in Victor’s eyes after it faded. It was as though the whole thing hadn’t been real. Still, the offerings were gone, and Victor felt a deep satisfaction in his heart; his ancestors would be pleased.

“That’s such a pretty spell,” Valla said, squeezing his arm.

“Yeah,” Victor inhaled deeply and smiled, turning to look down at Valla.

“So, I noticed you were still sitting there poring over that spell pattern Tes gave you when I finally went to sleep. What are you trying to learn?” she asked, meeting his gaze.

“What are you trying to learn?” Victor countered, “You studied all day on the platform and then all night in the tent!”

“I finally got it!” Valla laughed, apparently fine with his redirection. “Watch!” she said, backing up, and then Blue Razor was in her hands. She concentrated momentarily, and the sword crackled with white coruscating electrical Energy, surging and pulsing. She turned toward the desert and swung the sword in a downward, angled slash, and the white, pulsing electricity leaped off the blade, rippling and crackling into the night in a vast arc. “Cut of the Storm’s Fury!” Valla laughed.

“Pretty dramatic spell name, but shit, that was cool!” Victor held out his hand, meaning for Valla to slap it, but she sort of gripped his fingers awkwardly, clearly not used to the custom. Victor chuckled, squeezed her hand back, and said, “That’s awesome, Valla. You’re going to mess that pendeja up when that duel comes around.”

“I know it’s childish, petty, even, but I’m looking forward to it.”

“You’re not the one who started that shit!” Victor said. “That chick was downright nasty, and she’s the one who wants to make your skin into a cloak! If anyone deserves to get messed up, she’s at the top of the list.”

Valla smiled, but before she could say anything, Tes called out from near the tent, “I saw the flames of your offering, Victor, and I see you mastered your new spell, Valla! I’m proud.”

“Oh, look who finally made it home!” Victor grabbed Valla’s shoulder and nudged her along as he started to walk back to Tes.

“Home?” Tes peered at Valla’s tent and smirked, “I suppose in a very loose sense of the word . . .”

“Did you have fun?” Valla asked, hurrying over to the other woman.

“Oh, some. Cayle’s wine was well fortified, and she and some of the other hunters played an entertaining game—until I started to win too much, and then they grew cross. Still, it was an amusing evening.”

While Tes told them about some of her winnings and the irate reactions of the other players, Victor cooked breakfast, and Valla took down her tent. By the time they’d packed everything away and eaten a very hearty portion of eggs and sausages, the rest of the hunters were breaking camp, and word came around that Cayle wanted to hold a meeting at the head of the column.

Most of the others were starting to trickle into the meeting when the trio arrived, and they stood at the far right end of a big loose semi-circle facing Cayle, where she stood atop a crate. The hunters milled about, laughing, joking, drinking hot mugs of coffee, and generally ignoring Victor and Valla. Some deference was given to Tes, though, and Victor learned, through her short greetings and conversations, the names of many of the hunters nearby. He’d just decided to give in to his urge to ask one of the nearby hunters with coffee if he could bum a cup when Cayle shouted for everyone to be quiet.

“Listen up, you mongrels!” she called, chuckling with good humor. “Red just confirmed—he’s in sight of the wyrm, and it’s a big one! He claims it’s the biggest adult he’s laid eyes on, and you all know Red—he’s been on many hunts.” At those words, the hunters burst into excited babbling and cheering, and Cayle had to holler for them to quiet down again.

“What are we waiting for?” A huge Vesh with a single, enormous black horn jutting from his forehead called out.

“Calm yourself, Bricker!” Cayle said, smashing the butt of her enormous, lance-like spear against the wood of her soapbox. “Listen! Red confirmed, visually, that his wyrm is a fire-blood! He saw the smoke as it breathed and the smoldering scrub in its wake. That means some of you might want to sit out this fight!” Curses, grouching, and general discontent drowned out her next sentence, and she had to shout for order again.

“Listen, you devils!” The hunters didn’t listen, though, and continued to talk loudly and animatedly. Finally, a Degh hunter wearing darkly scaled armor walked up beside Cayle, looming over her, despite her elevated position, and turned to the crowd.

“Shut yer damned yaps!” he roared, and the words barreled over the noise, and almost everyone clamped their mouths shut.

“Thank you, Vormor,” Cayle said, then turned to the crowd and continued, “As I said, it’s a fire-blood, and you’ll be wise to note the risk; with a wyrm this age, you’re likely to see breath attacks, and blood that will ignite materials short of epic. I won’t stop any of you!” she added, holding up her hand, “but you’ve been warned. If you don’t have significant resistance to flames, you’d be wise to employ ranged attacks.”

“And stay the fuck out of my way!” Vormor bellowed, and Victor’s heart leaped in his chest—had that man just said fuck?

“Holy shit,” he said, and Tes turned to him with a grin.

“I know what you’re thinking,” she said. “He didn’t use the same word you’re so fond of; it’s an uncommon curse in the Vesh tongue, and the System translated it similarly to the one from your homeland.”

“Hah! I don’t care; it’s nice to hear another foul mouth.”

“Enough said, we’ll leave the wagons and attendants here, and we hunters will move out in ten minutes!” Cayle called, then quickly added, “I’ll be watching participation, and so will the other members of the Spears. No one has any looting rights until the battle is done, and I’ve awarded merits! Naturally, if you perish, your portion will be split among the survivors; there are no benefits paid to families on this hunt—use that information to inform your level of caution.” With that, Cayle hopped down from her crate, and Tes turned to Victor and Valla.

“You’ll stay by me, Valla. I know your Lightning Strike isn’t your best attack yet, but you’ll get some good hits in—I’ll help you. Victor, I suggest you avoid the beast’s maw, but I think your resistances will be sufficient to deal with the smoldering nature of its blood. Don’t hold back.”

“Doesn’t he need to worry about the other hunters? Will they be using area attacks?”

“Naturally; stay on your toes, Victor.”

“I will,” he said, resting a hand on Lifedrinker, where she lay nestled against his side. Tes led them away from the main group of hunters up a rocky hillside on the south side of the gully that supposedly wound its way to where the wyrm was roaming.

“I can feel it,” she said when they were away, standing high, back to the rising sun and facing down the meandering pathway through low, stone, and scrub-

covered hills toward a distant rocky canyon. “He’s old and angry, too big ever to sate his hunger in these lands. Stymied by his nature, he cannot find a way to progress. Wyrms aren’t terribly clever, even old ones like him, and he’ll respond with insane, frenzied attacks when he’s set upon by the hunters. Victor, you should unleash everything you have near his midsection. Try to spill as much of his guts as you can. Lifedrinker will be able to part his lower scales, though you’ll need to use all your might.

“Avoid the thick ridges on his back; if you thought the night brute prince’s bones were hard, those would give you a new level of understanding of the word. Still, if you can do enough damage, those very scales will be a part of your prize; you can bet on it, and with them, I can help you craft armor that will eclipse what you lost two days ago.”

“Shit!” Victor said, slapping a hand on his leather-clad chest. He was wearing one of the fringed and beaded vests Tellen’s people had gifted him. “I was supposed to buy one of these Degh’s old armor!” He gestured to the hunters below.

“Forget it,” Tes waved a hand dismissively. “Nothing you could buy from these men and women would be much use against an ancient wyrm. Better to not let it bite you.” She paused, considered for a moment, and added, “Or sting you with its tail.”

“Sting me?” Victor groaned.

“Oh yes. This type of wyrm has a barbed tail with venom that will ignite your blood. Literally.” While Victor let those words sink in, the other hunters began to ride, fly, and run forth, streaming over the hillsides with whoops, hollers, and jolts of Energy that lit up the gray shadows of early morning. “Let’s go!” Tes said, and then she was running over the hilltops, suddenly much larger than before. Valla cloaked herself in lightning and wind and sped after her, and Victor grinned, watching them go.

He unslung Lifedrinker and held her up so the morning sun flashed along her silvery edge and said, “Time to go to work, beautiful. I’ll be careful not to crack your handle again. I’ll find a perfect spot to let you sink your teeth into this old bastard.”

With that, he started to jog and gathered his Energy to cast Inspiring Presence. He whooped and laughed as the shadows fell away, and he saw the perfect path to run along. He checked his Sovereign Will boost to ensure it was still on his vitality and strength, where he’d kept it for days on end, no longer very fatigued or bothered by the constant use of the spell.

If he had to guess, he felt he was damn close to advancing the spell, so easy had it become for him to keep it going. Catching himself thinking that way, he wondered if his inspiration-attuned Energy was giving him the insight. He laughed and shrugged, shouting into the sky, “Does it matter if I’m right?”

Tes and Valla were small figures on the next hill, a solid mile ahead of him, and he decided it was time to quit messing around. He gathered up his rage and cast Berserk. When his body stretched and bunched with corded muscles, Victor roared, squatted his huge, powerful legs, and launched himself toward the next hill, soaring hundreds of feet over the blasted hillside to smash into the loose, dusty gravel on the next slope. Again, he laughed, turned to the bright, red-tinted sun, and howled, brandishing Lifedrinker to the baleful orb, seeking its blessing as he turned and charged up to the hill's crest.

Tes and Valla were no longer distant figures, and Victor, for the first time, managed to pass by Tes as he leaped again, soaring through the air to smash into the next hillside with a tremendous roar. The thrill of the chase didn't matter to him at the moment; he wasn't trying to catch Tes, he was rushing toward a mighty enemy, and there were weaklings ahead of him still, people bent on stealing his glory, and the glory he meant to win for his ancestors in the Ghost Lands.