

## Victor BK4: Ch33

Book 4: Chapter 33: Trophies

When Victor came to his senses, he stood among more than two dozen other hunters who'd similarly gone through an incredible influx of Energy. Many stood, swaying on their feet, dazed like Victor. Others, perhaps having received less, laughed and cheered, slapping the hands of their neighbors and whooping, waiting for Cayle to make her post-battle announcements.

Victor ignored everyone, including Tes, as she grinned at him expectantly, no doubt waiting for him to tell her about his gains. Instead, he carefully read through the System messages floating in the air before him:

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 44 Titanic Herald, gained 12 strength, 22 vitality, 12 dexterity, 12 agility, 12 intelligence, and 12 will.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have gained a Class feat: Titanic Presence\*\*\*

\*\*\*Titanic Presence: The blood of mighty titans surges in your veins. Something buried deep in the primal instincts of other peoples and creatures recognizes your heritage and respects it. Your aura is heavier, and threat and danger are pervasive in its dense folds.\*\*\*

Smiling broadly, Victor looked at his altered attributes:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

6554/6554

Strength:

159

Vitality:

244

Dexterity:

64

Agility:

87

Intelligence:

56

Will:

437

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence

“Well?” Tes finally asked, reaching out to nudge Victor’s shoulder. Victor glanced around and saw that the guy who’d been hassling him had wandered off and that everyone seemed preoccupied with their own situations.

“Where’s Valla?” he asked rather than answer right away.

“She’s up on yonder hill from which she tossed many a lightning bolt into this great old serpent.” Tes gestured to the rocky slope a hundred yards or so behind and to the left of Victor. He thought he could see his diminutive blue friend up there, sitting cross-legged and staring into the sky.

“I hope she got a good amount of Energy from it.” He grinned as Tes began to frown, staring at him pointedly. “Oh, all right—I gained two levels, a bunch of attribute points, and a new feat.”

“Something to do with your aura?” Tes guessed.

“You can tell?”

“Yes, you’re going to have to work harder to learn to control it. See how the hunters wander away, shifting subconsciously to be out of it? Your presence grows rather noticeable, and those with great power and pride might begin to take offense.”

“Ah, damn. Yeah, I’ll work on it.” Victor shifted Lifedrinker in his grip and then lifted her to look at her broad blade and gleaming silver metal. The amber luster lurking beneath her surface was less visible now, but he knew it was still there. He smiled at her with pride, then slipped her into the harness Tes had crafted him. “Do you think I earned some trophies?”

“Oh yes! If Cayle doesn’t recognize your contribution, I’ll speak up on your behalf. She has a sharp eye, though. I think you’ll be pleased. Look, here she comes.” Tes gestured back toward the wyrm’s corpse, and Victor saw Cayle’s tall, lithe figure striding along the downed creature, hopping nimbly between the humps of knobby scales. When she drew closer to the densest pack of hunters near the wyrm’s middle section, she lifted her arms, and everyone cheered.

“What a battle!” she howled. “Three cheers for the fallen; we lost seven brave souls today, but they’ll be remembered! I’ll mark their names on the memorial in Hunter’s Hall myself!” Again the crowd cheered, and Victor joined in, loudly shouting with each of the three repetitions. When the noise died down, Cayle yelled, “I have my preliminary assessment, but I’ll continue to analyze my memory stone,” she held up a perfectly round, bright blue sphere, “while the

beast is butchered. After we've gathered the trophies, I'll award each of you your lots. Time to get to work!"

As the hunters began to draw carving knives and butcher blades, some bigger than Lifedrinker, Victor glanced at Tes, and she held out her Hell Blade with a grin. "Time to learn how to carve up a monster bigger than many people's homes. I'll give you a hint: take it one piece at a time!"

Victor chuckled and took the offered knife, and then he followed Tes to the tail, where she showed him how to carve off the stinger without severing the long, springy tubes that carried the venom from a gland deeper along the spine. "The hunters won't want us to spill the venom," she said, pulling on scales and holding them up so Victor could slice them out of the flesh. Once that was done, following her instructions, he cut along the tail until he'd removed the venom gland, a great, spongy orange organ the size of a five-gallon bucket.

Several times people came to observe his progress, perhaps intent on carving out the same organ, but they all left, seemingly satisfied with his work. Valla approached when he was halfway through, and Tes told her to help with the head—several people were needed to hold the jaw wide while teeth, horns, and other trophies were carved out.

Even with dozens of hunters and just as many retainers, it took the rest of the day and long into the night to finish harvesting the enormous body. It was hard work, even though many of the hunters had magical spells that could make the gathering of great stacks of wyrm meat, magically reinforced barrels full of wyrm blood, and piles and piles of wyrm ribs and vertebrae easier.

The more common items were piled on gigantic tarps, while other, more precious items like the seven wyrm hearts and other organs were stored in specially enchanted glass jars, some of which were the size of fifty-gallon drums. The teeth and claws were kept under guard, apparently so valuable that a hunter might risk ostracism to steal more than his or her share. In the end, when the work was done, nothing but scraps of cartilage, flesh, and stained desert soil remained as evidence of the great creature ever having existed.

When all the prizes were stacked and laid out with bright Energy lamps illuminating the scene, the hunters gathered up and broke open some casks of, apparently, fine ale. Some of the retainers and a few hunters took up instruments, kicking off an impromptu celebration. Victor worked hard to keep his aura in check, which prevented him from having much fun; it still took too much of his concentration to keep it from slipping free of the net he'd cast with his will.

"When do you think Cayle will announce the shares?" he heard a large Degh ask Valla as if she had any idea. His friend smiled and shrugged, drinking her ale with a lopsided grin.

"Not sure, but it won't matter to me; I'm sure my part will be small. I'm just happy I participated in the battle; I gained a level and improved a spell!"

"Well done, then, little miss." The Degh held out his enormous tankard of ale, and Valla clinked hers against it, sloshing out a shameful amount onto the ground. She didn't seem to care, laughing and looking away shyly, and Victor realized she might be drunk.

“You’re doing well, Victor.” Tes had walked up to him where he sat in the sand, feet extended and one hand holding his own mug. He was on the outskirts of the gathering but still within the light of the glow lamps. “Hard to have fun when you have to concentrate so much, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, I guess, but I don’t want to make enemies accidentally. I figure after Cayle speaks and we get our shares, I’ll head off by myself to unwind.” He took a sip of his ale, careful to drink slowly so his control didn’t slip.

“You’re making good decisions. Aren’t you pleased with your growth on this hunt? I think it’s been very good for you.” Tes sat down in the sand next to him, and he saw that she held a red crystal goblet in one hand, the contents of which shimmered faintly in the glow lamp’s glare. He’d seen a jar of mercury once in science class, and it had looked a lot like what she was drinking.

“That looks like a potent drink,” he said.

“Oh, this? Yes—I’d offer you a taste, but I fear it would be a bit much. Perhaps when you’ve pushed your bloodline into the epic tier.” She grinned and winked at him, and Victor admired how the light lit up the depths of her eyes. They glimmered like deep pools of honey with hidden turquoise stones in their depths.

“You’re an interesting fellow, Victor. I’m sorry that this hunt is coming to a close; I’ve had more fun with you and Valla than all the rest of my time in this world.”

“Well . . . I’ve had fun, too, Tes. I really appreciate all you’ve done for me. I imagine Valla and I will be in Coloss for several more weeks. Won’t we see more of you there?”

“Surely!” She leaned closer, and he could smell something of her drink on her breath, something like whiskey and cinnamon, cloves and sugar, and, underlying it all, the coppery tang of blood. His mouth began to water. “I’ll visit you in the warlord’s citadel; how does that sound? I’ve more lessons for Valla, and you’ll want more of that spell pattern once you’ve mastered the first part. No?”

“Yes! Definitely.”

“Good!” She looked over her shoulder and said, “Here comes Cayle.” Victor followed her gaze but didn’t see Cayle for several seconds. Then she stepped around the pile of wyrm fangs, and the people who were drinking, singing, dancing, and carousing backed up, giving her room.

The instruments grew quiet, and Cayle produced her big crate, hopping atop it. Tes shifted so she could more easily watch the proceedings, sitting next to Victor, closer than she needed to, and he was very aware of her warmth as she leaned into his shoulder and whispered, “Some will argue at your share, but if they try to press the matter, let Cayle settle them down.”

“You know my share?”

“I have a good inkling.”

“Are you all ready to hear your shares of this amazing kill?” Cayle called, holding up a faintly glowing black slate. The crowd cheered in the affirmative, and Cayle smiled, gesturing around her to the piled wurm trophies. “All of this represents one hundred shares. First, I’ll award the tenth-shares.

“All of you retainers who didn’t participate in the battle but aided us in our long journey and with the massive undertaking of cleaning our kill will be paid with a tenth-share. One hunter, Graga of Hot Rocks Spring, will also be paid in a tenth-share. I’m sorry you were knocked senseless so early, Graga, but be happy not to walk home with empty hands.”

Victor saw a tall, lanky Vesh woman with a white mohawk laugh and bow as many of the hunters chuckled. Cayle smiled and continued, “Quarter-shares will be awarded to Thole, Furvett, Astor, Beysha, Cadric, Moon, Qanit, and Jasper.” Victor shifted and smiled nervously at Tes. Neither he nor Valla had been called, and it seemed the shares were getting bigger.

Tes returned his smile, her bright teeth winking in the light, and, for the first time, he noticed she had a small gap between her two front teeth. He wondered if that was a choice or if her dragon body would reflect that tiny imperfection. He decided he quite liked it. So focused was he on Tes’s smile that he almost missed it when Cayle called out Valla’s name for a half-share.

“Nice!” he said, looking for his friend and waving at her. She was beaming, clearly pleased, and many nearby hunters raised their drinks to her.

Cayle continued to call out names, going from half-shares to full-shares, and still, Victor hadn’t heard his name. When she read off several names, members of her hunting company, who’d earned five full shares, he began to grow nervous. Victor looked at Tes and said, “Did I miss my name?”

“No, you silly oaf.” She shook her head, a look of wonderment on her face, presumably at his goofiness.

Cayle continued to call out hunters, going more slowly now that people were winning larger and larger shares, allowing for some celebration. When she got to ten-share awards, she named herself, three other members of the Spears of the Copper Sunset, and then Victor. Cheering resounded for each name until she called out Victor, which was followed by some hisses and grumbling.

A few hunters, much higher rank than Victor, who’d been awarded a single share or less, started to argue loudly, and he could feel the angry glares coming his way. Victor remained seated, remained steady in the control of his aura, and tried to follow Tes’s advice, waiting for Cayle to sort the matter out. When some of the louder, more powerful hunters began to walk toward him, and the grumbling crowd refused to listen to Cayle’s shouts, he began to get nervous, preparing himself to leap to his feet.

He needn’t have worried, though—when Cayle’s shouts went unheeded, she seemed to lose patience and produced her enormous spear, smashing the haft against the crate, sending an explosive bolt of howling, brilliant Energy into the night sky. As the wasteland canyon lit up like noon on a bright day, people turned to see what their angry leader had to say.

“Before you try to undermine my tally, perhaps you’d all like to hear why Victor has won such a share, hmm? Do you all feel you can grant me that tiny bit of respect?” She didn’t yell, but her voice was full of venom, and the grumbling malcontents looked away from Victor as Cayle began to list his accomplishments during the battle.

“How many of you were burned with the wyrm’s magma breath?” She looked around, and when not one hunter spoke up, she continued, “That’s because Victor planted his Heart Silver axe, Lifedrinker, directly into the great beast’s primary Energy pathway! The axe never allowed it to build up the Energy necessary to pour forth a gout of terrible liquid magma!”

Some appreciative grumbles sounded around the gathered hunters, and Cayle continued, “How many of you witnessed a great dark spirit in the shape of a bear? Did you see how it tore out the tendons on not one but two of the wyrm’s legs before it was destroyed? Victor summoned that bear!”

“Victor!” one of the Degh giants howled into the night, and a few others cheered along with his cry.

“How many of you saw Victor striding along the wyrm’s back, tormenting it with a whip of powerful Energy that tore through its hide and caused it to thrash so madly that it gave us its belly?”

“Victor!” the Degh cried again, and this time others echoed his shout, “Victor! Victor!” Cayle nodded at the sound and raised her spear, looking over the heads of the gathered crowd to Victor, offering him a salute of sorts. He stood up, held a fist high, locked eyes with Cayle, and nodded back to her.

After that, it was just a matter of divvying up the goods, and Victor was glad to stand on the perimeter, waiting for the others to get their shares first. None of the hunters were hostile to him after Cayle’s little speech describing his accomplishments, and Tes said he was probably safe to relax his hold on his aura for a while as the others picked up their shares.

Valla approached, though she grimaced as she drew near and said, “Could you make your aura any heavier? I don’t quite feel enough of a strain!”

“Hey, I’m working on it! I held it in check all damn night.”

“It’s true,” Tes smiled at Valla and walked over to give her a brief hug, “I’m proud of you, Valla! A half-share at your rank is nothing to be ashamed of.”

“Thank you, Tes. A pity I can’t compete with this lunatic, though! Still, all joking aside, I’m proud of you, Victor.”

“Oh, man. Can’t you insult me? I’m not used to people being nice.” Victor chuckled, then added, “I’ll share my rewards, don’t worry. Though you’ll have to wait and see if anything’s left after I share with my ancestors . . .” Valla’s mouth

fell open, and her eyes widened, and Victor laughed, shaking his head. “I’m kidding. I mean, I will be sacrificing some of my share to them, but I’m sure there’ll be plenty left over.”

“Wise! Thanks to your ancestors, that battle went much better than it could have. People are stealing glances your way, Victor, and I see respect in their eyes.” Tes stepped away from Valla and reached up to squeeze Victor’s shoulder. “Your axe, Lifedrinker, she’s going to be as famous as you, I think. I’m glad Cayle realized what she did—how you interrupted the flow of the wyrm’s Energy. Its breath could have killed many more of the hunters.”

“I, well, to be honest, I didn’t know that would happen; I just wanted her to get a good long drink.” Victor chuckled and gently patted Lifedrinker’s haft hanging by his side. In an effort to get the attention off himself, he looked at Valla and asked, “Did you get your share?”

“Yes! A gallon of the wyrm’s blood, a rib, five side scales, and two back scales.”

“Shit! Not bad, I guess,” Victor shrugged; he had no idea of the value of those trophies.

“Outstanding, Valla. Those back scales, alone, are worth a handsome sum.” Tes, ever-cheerful, smiled broadly at Valla as she congratulated her.

“Well, I can attest that they’re hard as hell,” Victor chuckled.

“People are clearing out, Victor. I think you can walk forward to claim your prize. Perhaps reign in your aura one more time tonight.” Tes took his elbow and urged him back toward Cayle’s big crate and the remaining wyrm trophies. Valla followed along, breathing a sigh of relief as Victor’s aura receded.

“Victor,” Cayle said as he approached. “I told you I was fair, didn’t I?”

“Yes, Cayle and you were true to your word.”

“Well, you earned this.” She turned and waved to the pile of Wyrms parts on a large tarp. “A full ten shares.” She walked around the tarp, pointing to each item as she listed them off, “Four fangs, twenty ribs, a hundred side and belly scales, forty back scales, a heart, fifty gallons of blood, a pint of magma venom, a quarter liver, seven pounds of the brain, five horns, two claws, and your option: the stinger or another heart?”

“Chingado,” Victor breathed, looking at all the paper-wrapped and jarred wyrm parts. The barrel of blood looked like an oil drum he’d seen in vids back on Earth. He glanced at Tes and raised an eyebrow, “What should I take? The stinger or another heart—I mean, I know the obvious benefit of a heart, but . . .” his voice trailed off as he looked at the seven-foot length of hard black stinger.

He supposed the venom tubes and gland had been severed so the hunters could divvy out the venom itself. Still, that stinger looked like something special to him.

“The stinger can be made into a powerful weapon,” Cayle said before Tes could speak.

“Yes. The right smith could make a mighty spear or lance. Would Lifedrinker grow jealous, though?” Tes asked, gingerly reaching out to gently brush two fingers along the axe’s haft.

Victor thought about her words—he doubted Lifedrinker would react that way, especially if the spear weren’t intelligent and he kept it in a dimensional container. Besides, wouldn’t it be nice to have a long, pointy weapon when Lifedrinker didn’t quite suit the circumstance or when she was busy drinking the life from a foe? He chuckled and said, “She knows she’s my favorite.” As if to confirm it, he reached down to feel her silvery head, letting the heavy hammer spike at the back rest against his palm.

“What about it, chica? Do you care if I have a spear, too?”

“A spear is but a tool. I’m your weapon, your companion; your spirit and mine are bound. I care not.”

“Well said, love, well said.” Her words struck a chord within him, and Victor suddenly found the idea of using any other weapon rather unappealing, at least as long as he didn’t have to. Why would he want to run around with some wurm stinger when he had Lifedrinker? He looked at the three women standing nearby and their questioning expressions and said, “Lifedrinker doesn’t care, but I’m not feeling it—I need to get my axe skill up to legendary, anyway, right? I think I’ll take another heart.”

“It’s settled then. Take your share, Victor. I hope you,” she turned to Valla, “and you, Valla, will consider hunting with us again. The Spears were impressed by you both.”