

Victor BK4: Ch41

Book 4: Chapter 41: Blood for Blood

Victor sat on the stone railing of the balcony adjoining his and Valla's suite, staring at the strange and beautiful yellow, green, and red striations streaking through the sunset sky. Coloss and the wasteland around it were harsh, but they held deep beauty and mystery that reminded Victor of the size and age of the place. People had been living and dying in these lands for thousands of years, long before even the warlord had come to power. If you listened to Tes, there used to be many civilizations, rich forests, and fertile valleys filling the tens of thousands of miles swallowed by the wastes.

He wondered how Zaafor had changed so much. Was it all due to war and conflict using vast quantities of Energy? He knew the Degh were downtrodden, but had they been innocent? They had titan blood and had performed strange rituals to gain power, and they'd clearly not all been at peace with each other. Would the Vesh have resorted to the theft of bloodlines and genocide of entire species if they hadn't been desperate? Victor snorted—why was he trying to make excuses for those people? He couldn't deny an interest in the history of this strange world, and he wondered at that; he'd never been able to pay attention in history class before.

Was it a sign of maturity, or just that he was more invested in what was happening there on Zaafor? "Wars, stealing bloodlines, an ancient spirit asking me to save his people—I guess that makes things a little more interesting." Victor stole a glance over his shoulder, something he'd been doing more and more of late. He'd made an enemy of Karnice, one of the most dangerous fighters in Coloss, and he'd spent the last few days dreading what he felt was an inevitable reprisal.

He wasn't fool enough to think Karnice couldn't hurt him; sure, he'd gotten out of their latest little scuffle relatively unscathed, but Karnice hadn't dumped everything he had. He'd started off slow and tried to hector Victor into doing something interesting. If he went all out, using the full extent of what had to be a prodigious Energy pool and high-level spells, Victor wasn't so sure he'd be able to escape as easily.

Valla hadn't looked exactly pleased when she'd heard about his behavior on the practice field, but Tes had been amused. She'd encouraged Victor to keep sparring with Yabbo and to keep using the warlord's cultivation chamber as much as possible. She seemed to think Karnice would leave him alone as long as the warlord still expected him to fight in the next tournament. Victor counted on his hand, thinking about that, and came up with two days until Valla's duel and five days until the tournament. He still wasn't sure if he'd stick around—it felt very much like a trap.

"How's the spell coming?" Tes asked from behind him, and he jerked his head around, frowning.

"Damn! How do you do that? I just looked at that door, and it was closed."

"I have a lot of tricks. So? The spell?"

"It's getting easier and easier. I think my last level helped a bit—amazing how I don't feel any smarter, but I seem able to concentrate longer and hold more in my head. I can almost write the whole pattern out in one sitting. It takes me a couple of hours, but last night I only had to check for a hint a few times."

“Intelligence is a tricky attribute; it tends to sneak up on you. After a big boost, you’ll still feel like yourself, but you’ll find you might deliberate more about decisions, acting a bit less impulsively. You might find yourself interested in things you used to simply shrug off. For instance, as I improved my intelligence, I became more and more interested in crafting.” She grinned and winked. After Victor stared at her blankly for a moment, she added, “I was trying to hint at . . .”

“Our armor?” Victor turned and hopped off the railing.

“Yes! Valla is waiting inside, let’s go in, and I’ll show you both what I’ve crafted.” Tes, her face beaming with amused excitement, went inside, and Victor was hot on her heels. Valla was sitting on one of the two couches that faced each other just inside the balcony doors, and Tes walked straight to the long coffee table between them, pushing it away off the plush, decorative rug and onto the dark hardwoods. “Making space,” she said as Victor sat down next to Valla.

“Tes, how can we ever repay all that . . .”

“Hush, Valla,” Tes said, waving a hand dismissively. “I don’t do things I don’t want to do, at least not on this world. Now, Valla, your armor was much quicker to make; thankfully, you don’t tend to grow into the size of a giant at the drop of a hat. That doesn’t mean it’s not well made or durable, mind you, and if you ever had the opportunity to increase your size, it would weather the abuse quite well.

“Without further ado, I give you,” she held out her hands, and a shimmering blue-scaled hauberk appeared, hanging between them, “a lightning-forged, wyrm-scaled hauberk of alacrity.”

Victor sucked in his breath when he took in the armor; it was on another level compared to the one Fough had tried to sell him. Somehow, Tes had cut the scales into uniform shapes, much smaller than one of the elder wyrm’s scales they’d harvested. He figured she must have carved five of the little, perfectly matched scales for each original. More than that, they shimmered with Energy, their sheen vibrant and colorful, clearly having absorbed some sort of magic during the crafting process.

The scales were sewn into a supple, dark hide, and Victor asked, “What’s that leather?”

“Why, flesh from the wyrm you slew. I claimed enough from Cayle for your armor, and she didn’t object.”

“Ancestors, Tes!” Valla said, standing to lean close to the armor, blowing out a pent-up breath. “It’s so beautiful!”

“Watch,” Tes said, holding the hauberk aloft with one hand and gently running her hand down the center of it. As her hand passed lightly over the scales, they parted, opening as a jacket might if you unzipped it. “Once you bond with it,

you'll be able to do the same." Tes held it open and added, "Come, let's see it on you."

Valla didn't object; she took off her sword belt, resting Midnight on the couch, and then turned to slip each of her arms into the leather-lined sleeves of the hauberk. "It already feels perfect!"

"Wait until you bond with it," Tes grinned, turning Valla and tugging on the high collar of the hauberk, pulling it close around her throat. "Go ahead."

"How'd you get the scales to have that blue sheen?" Victor asked, watching as Valla rested a palm on the scaled hauberk and concentrated. Suddenly it flared with bright white light and shimmered as a wave of crackling electrical Energy ran through it. When the current faded, Valla stood with the biggest smile Victor had ever seen on her face, her eyes moist with tears. The hauberk had closed up and hugged her snugly, and Victor couldn't deny that it looked perfect for her—it was the most beautiful armor he'd ever seen.

"I've quite a few artificing skills, Victor. It wasn't hard to imbue those scales with a blue luster." As Tes replied, Valla turned and threw her arms around her, pulling her into a tight embrace.

"I love it, Tes!"

"Good!" Tes chuckled. "I used your old enemy Boaeagh's workshop. His apprentices were happy to accommodate me after I gave them news of their master's fate. Don't worry," she added, looking over Valla's head to make eye contact with Victor. "I told them he met his doom in an unfortunate run-in with a wyrm when he stepped out of his portal."

"They believed you?" Valla asked, stepping back from Tes's arms. "Why didn't you tell us you'd found his apprentices?"

"I can be quite convincing when I want to. As to why I didn't tell you, there wasn't a need, and you two have had plenty on your minds. Now, tell Victor about your hauberk."

Valla walked over to Victor so he could see it more clearly and said, "It's enchanted to make me faster. It uses air-attuned Energy from my own Core."

"That's right! Of course, it's also incredibly durable, can self-repair, and will shrug off most lightning-based attacks." Tes beamed proudly.

"It's so comfortable!" Valla said, stretching at the waist, rotating her torso, and flexing her arms.

"I'm pleased that you're happy. You've been a wonderful student, and I'm delighted to give you this gift." Tes surprised Victor, and perhaps Valla, by stepping close to her and gently cupping her face in her hands. She leaned

down and kissed her on the forehead. Victor knew the two of them had been spending a lot of time together, but he didn't think he'd quite realized how close they'd become. "Well?" Tes asked, stepping back from a moist-eyed Valla.

"Victor? Are you ready?"

"Hell yeah," he said, leaning forward on the couch, his hands resting on his knees.

"I cleared this space because I crafted your armor to fit your titanic frame. As you know, that will ensure it doesn't lose any of its strength and potency as you increase your own size." Tes stepped to the edge of the rug between the two couches and gestured with one hand. Victor's armor appeared on the floor with a loud *thud

* and a rattle of scales. It was the size of a blanket, and unlike Valla's full hauberk, this garment was a sleeveless vest. Had Tes known that's what he wanted? Victor couldn't remember if he'd described the armor Fough had shown him.

The scales were much larger than on Valla's finely crafted hauberk. Victor guessed they were nearly the full size of the back scales on the elder wyrm, almost four inches from side to side. Still, they were shaped differently, more regular in size—Tes had clearly done some work to refine them. More than that, they were all dark in color, a beautiful blend of near-black that faded to a deep, almost burgundy red at their tips. Just like Valla's armor, Victor could see the lining of his wyrm scale vest was darkly stained, supple wyrm-hide.

"Wonderful!" Valla breathed.

Victor grunted, nodding in approval, and approached the enormous garment. "Should I grow to put it on?"

"No, it's fine. Just touch it and bond." Tes was still grinning, ear to ear—had been ever since she'd produced Valla's hauberk. Victor found her good mood contagious, and he quickly leaned forward, rested a palm against the warm, hard wyrm scales, and trickled some Energy into the vest. A message appeared in his vision, and he remembered what he'd learned a long time ago from someone he couldn't remember—had it been Gorz? Whoever it was had told him that sometimes an artificer would create a description for the magical items they made and that the System would incorporate it into its . . . system.

*****Wyrmscale Vest of Resilience: This artifact, crafted by the master Artisan, Tesia'liveen'ashalah, has been constructed from the hardest, oldest back scales of an ancient wyrm. Each scale has been imbued with a drop of dragon blood and will be nearly impervious to damage from fire or acid. Additionally, the vest will rapidly regenerate if it suffers physical damage. Finally, the vest imbues its wearer with a fraction of its resilience, providing a ten percent boost to vitality.*****

“Holy shit, Tes,” Victor breathed, so stunned by the description that he hadn’t noticed the vest rapidly contracting to a size he could wear in his present form.

“Put it on, Victor!” Valla said, but Victor had other thoughts. Tes had made him this incredible armor, had put her own blood into it, and he’d done nothing for her. He knew he couldn’t train her, couldn’t fight for her, couldn’t reward her with trophies or wealth, but he knew one thing she wanted.

“Hang on. Tes, do you have an empty, uh, jar or vial or something?”

“Hmm?”

“You know, an empty glass container with a cork or screwtop.”

“Well, of course,” Tes frowned, a slightly puzzled expression on her face as she perused her storage containers and produced a crystal bottle, maybe big enough to hold four or five ounces. It had a stopper made of a material that appeared too dark and pliable to be cork. Victor wondered if it was some kind of rubber. She passed it his way, and he nodded, walking out to the balcony, leaving his new armor glimmering faintly on the ground.

Valla and Tes gave each other puzzled looks, but as Victor unsnapped Lifedrinker’s harness and leaned over to whisper to the blade, Tes’s eyes narrowed, and she nodded. “I see,” she said, smiling at Valla.

Victor, for his part, lifted Lifedrinker a few inches out of her harness and quickly ran his palm along the top edge of her blade. She sliced into the meat of his palm, and he hardly felt it. He squeezed his fist, pulled the stopper from the vial, and held it under his bleeding palm so the blood dripping from it began to gather inside the crystal container. While he did that, he felt a warm hand grip his shoulder, and Tes came to stand beside him.

“I didn’t expect anything in return for the gift I made you.”

“You bled for that armor. It’s the least I can do.” He shrugged.

“I swear to you, Victor, I have no ill intent for you. I’ll never let this blood fall into the hands of your enemies.”

Victor almost spilled some of his blood onto the polished marble tiles on the balcony when he turned his gaze to her. It was his turn to frown, for he hadn’t considered how the blood might be used other than to open a passageway to Earth. “What sorts of things could my enemies do with my blood?”

“Those with the knowledge could make a poison more effective against you. They could use it to create a binding ritual. It could be used to send terrors to you in your sleep. I could list a hundred, nay a thousand ways a powerful Ritualist could harm you with your own blood.”

Victor opened his hand and squeezed his fist again—his cut was already half-healed, and the flow had slowed significantly, but the bottle was nearly full. “How much do you need?”

“That’s enough.” Tes held out a hand, and Victor passed the little crystal vial to her, then handed her the stopper. “Thank you for trusting me, Victor. Though, to be honest, I could have scraped enough blood from the night brute lair to accomplish what I needed.” She saw Victor’s widened eyes and declared, “But I didn’t!”

The crystal vial of his blood winked out of existence, and Victor heaved a deep breath and moved back inside. Valla sat where they’d left her, and it was clear from her expression that she’d figured out what Victor was doing. She pointed at his new armor and said again, “Put it on.”

“Right, right,” Victor chuckled, unslinging Lifedrinker’s harness and resting her on the couch. He leaned over to pick up the wyrm-scale vest and staggered under its unexpected weight. “Sheesh!” he laughed, making a show of struggling to lift it.

“The enchantments added some density to the already heavy scales. Let’s not forget that it’s reduced in size at the moment!” Tes nudged Valla and added, “I hope it’s not too heavy for him.”

“Hey, now!” Victor said, then lifted it and started to try to pull it over his head.

“Wait!” Tes laughed. “You can open it like Valla’s armor, run your palm over the center, starting at the neck and think about what you want.”

“Aha!” Victor pulled the armor off his head, followed her instructions, and found that he could feel, like a line of invisible Energy, the seam at the front of the armor. He pulled his hand down over it, and the scale vest parted. “Much better,” he said, shrugging one arm and then the other into it. He held his hand over the opening and brought it up, sealing himself into the suddenly light, incredibly comfortable piece of armor.

“Very dashing!” Valla said.

“Indeed!” Tes nodded, walking around him in a slow circle. “Exactly as I imagined it. Fine work, if I do say so, myself.” Victor turned left and right, stretching his waist to try to look at himself. His vest fit him differently from how Valla’s hauberk hugged her. Where hers fell almost to her thighs, clinging tightly to her form, easily resting under her swordbelt, his vest was shorter and not as tight around his waist. It rested over his metallic dragonsteel belt, ending just beneath it.

“Did you make it to hang over my belt? Should I take off the belt and put it on over the top, like Valla’s?”

“That wouldn’t look right, Victor,” Valla said.

Tes nodded along with Valla's words, "Your belt is remarkable, but this vest is a hundred times more durable. Let it protect your body, belt, and whatever you might tie to it."

"Did you run out of scales for his arms?" Victor couldn't tell if Valla was trying to tease him.

"No, but he told me about his favorite armor, a chain vest he lost when he was much smaller."

"I like having my arms free." Victor shrugged.

"I'm afraid we need to change topics, you two," Tes said, clearing her throat and moving to stand where she could see them both. A moment later, a popping sounded in his ears, and Victor knew Tes was trying to keep their conversation private. "Please sit down. I have much to discuss with you, and it begins with news of a portal to Fanwath."

"A portal?" Valla echoed, sitting down. Victor followed her lead and sat opposite her on the other couch.

"Yes. I mentioned I was using Boaeigh's workshop to make this armor. Well, you know the reason I went to his tower was that I was following a lead, a rumor that he had an apprentice who could work most of the same spells as that rather nefarious wizard." She frowned, then clicked her tongue, and Victor saw an expression he hadn't seen on her face before—anger. Her eyes grew dark, and she hissed, baring surprisingly sharp, white teeth.

"What is it?" Valla asked, standing up, reaching for Midnight.

Tes tapped her ear with one delicate-looking, blue-polished nail and gestured at the air around them. "Come, you two. Let's take a walk. I'd like to hear about Valla's practice for her duel and Victor's preparations for the tournament."

Victor nodded and stood. He knew the warlord had power, more so in his citadel than outside it, but it still chilled his heart to think that Tes was worried about him. "Right," he said, "I've got a few strategies I'd like to ask you about."

"Yes," Valla nodded and added, "Tes, can we talk about what sorts of weapons are typically allowed in duels?"

Tes grinned at them both like a proud teacher and beckoned toward the door. "Wonderful. A bite to eat while we're out?" As Valla and Victor both professed their hunger, the trio hurried out, down the stairs, and toward the exit of the warlord's citadel. Despite their forced enthusiasm to be out and about, the three of them felt a shadow of dread hanging over them, as though a favorite book had been closed and another, gloomier one had been opened.