

Victor BK4: Ch46

Book 4: Chapter 46: "Home"

"Wait!" Valla called from behind Victor. He slowed, a little frustrated; his impulse, his instinct, was to hurry, to get to Boaeigh's tower and get off this world. He didn't want to look back at Valla, didn't want to see what he'd done. It wasn't that he regretted killing Karnice; it was a nebulous guilty feeling deep in his gut as though he'd done something wrong, even though he was pretty sure he'd only attacked the champion spearman.

He turned, though, and looked at Valla, saw her wide, imploring eyes, and, though some haunting fear still lurked behind them, they were bright. "What?"

"Take his spears! Take his rings! He was wealthy in this world!" She walked from around the wagon toward Karnice's corpse, and Victor had the presence of mind to wonder why no Energy was gathering around it.

"Is he dead?" He started back toward the body and the scene of his transformation and battle.

"Yes." Valla picked up the dark spear, the one that seemed like a dark stain in the air. "This spear . . . I'm amazed you didn't die."

Victor looked around, saw the deserted street, not even a hint of activity behind windows or doors, and the nature of his guilt hit home. He'd drained some Energy from the people watching the fight. Though he didn't think he'd killed or even hurt anyone overmuch with it, they'd been collateral damage and were probably still shaken by the nature of his Aspect of Terror.

He reached out for the spear. Valla released it with a shudder, and he felt the dark pulse of a kindred attunement. Entwined with the weapon's metal were deep, dense threads of dark Energy, darker than the fear in his Core; this spear was steeped in dread. "He tried to kill me with dread—a cousin to my fear. I didn't even feel it."

Victor slipped the spear into his ring, then walked over to grasp the haft of the silvery spear he'd driven into the road. Again, he sent it into his dimensional container and chuckled, wondering why Karnice hadn't thought of that. Maybe he hadn't cared; maybe he'd thought the dark spear was a better weapon with which to kill him.

"He has two rings; we can study them later. Here." Valla tossed the rings to him, and Victor nodded, stuffing them into his pocket. Then, impulsively, he reached down, took Valla's hand, and began to jog toward the nearby southwestern corner of the city wall. Valla didn't resist but clutched his fingers with her small hand and ran along with him. "I don't know how you killed him, Victor. He had to be more than tier eight."

"I don't know. His will was weak. When he walked toward me, I saw fear in his eyes and knew I had him."

“Thank you,” Valla said, squeezing his hand again. When he glanced at her, a puzzled look in his eyes, she added, “For warning me. For telling me you wouldn’t harm me. I almost ran, but I believed you.” She paused, looking around, then said, “The streets are empty. I don’t think it’s because of your fight with Karnice. Something big is happening back at Blue’s estate.”

“Yep,” Victor turned around a corner and was hit with the stench of charnel as the abattoir Tes had told him about came into view. It was a long, wooden warehouse-like building with stinking, fly-coated drainage canals that ran from its interior toward grates in the cobbled street. Victor held a sleeve to his face as he ran past, straight toward the squat, square building with the pennant-grasping gargoyles. They’d made it to Boaegh’s tower.

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“You lackeys may flee. The warlord and I will conduct some small business, and then I’ll be gone, and he will be free.” Tes’s words rumbled out of her massive maw, and she watched as Blue, Black, and the remaining members of the warlord’s Fist glanced at the defeated, crestfallen man. He stood stoically, staring at the ground, his great, silver sword still clutched in his white-knuckled hands. When he didn’t say anything, they fled, taking his lack of protest as confirmation enough.

Still enormous and still coated in shimmering, electrified blue scales, Tes leaned her great head down so her hot breaths ruffled the warlord’s disarrayed, dirty feathers. Her scythelike teeth, slick with saliva, slid against each other as she said, “Come, Warlord. Let us visit your citadel. Before I leave this place, I’ll have the mixture your court Artificer has devised. I’ll know how you and your ilk have been stealing bloodlines all these many years.”

The warlord frowned, but he didn’t speak. Tes chuckled, then lurched upward, shifting her weight onto her enormous rear legs. She snatched the white-feathered man up in her foreclaw, and, with a great surge of Energy and physical power, she flexed her silver-blue wings and burst into the air, scattering the corpses of those who’d died assaulting her.

Ten seconds later, she was gliding toward the vast courtyard before the citadel, and when she landed, Tes didn’t bother trying to be gentle. She tore up a hundred cobbles with diamond-hard claws as she slid to a stop. The guards who stood watch at the gigantic gateway looked terrified, leveling their spears her way, so Tes gave them a true roar, unleashing her full aura. As the terrible sound split the air and they felt her power, the men panicked and ran, not a single one able to resist enough to even think of closing the gates.

Tes set the warlord down, and, as he stumbled, shaken from the quick journey and her rough treatment, she growled, “I’ll revert to my less formidable form. Do not think of returning to your previous hostilities. My mercy has run its course.”

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A great roar split the air of the city as Victor and Valla approached the door to the tower. “Tes,” Victor said.

“Really?”

“Yes. She lives, and she’s giving the warlord hell.” His voice carried his relief, and Valla, still clutching his hand, looked up at him with moist eyes.

“I felt so guilty running from that fight. I was so worried about her. Should we go back?”

Victor shook his head. “She’s fine. I hope she can find us again, but we can’t hang around here, Valla. As much as I want to try to help her, if she’s still fighting with the warlord or his captains . . .” Victor sighed and slipped Lifedrinker into her harness, then rubbed at his head, staring at the tower. “No, they’re on a different level, and I can’t expect to get lucky with them as I did with Karnice. She wanted us to get away. The whole reason she’s fighting is so we can get out.”

“I know you’re right, but running still feels wrong.” Valla glanced over her shoulder, and her eyes widened. She yelled, “Get ready!”

“What?” Victor whirled, reaching for his axe, but then he saw what she’d meant. A thick wave of silvery, purple Energy was rushing toward them, and before he could so much as take a deep breath, it smashed into his chest. As he was lifted into the air in a paroxysm of euphoria, he saw Valla, too, lifted up. The Energy coursed through him, replenishing, restoring, and improving him, and when he fell back to his feet, still standing on the stoop of Boaegh’s tower, the System had left him several messages:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 47 Titanic Herald, gained 12 strength, 22 vitality, 12 dexterity, 12 agility, 12 intelligence, and 12 will.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Aspect of Terror - Improved.*****

*****Aspect of Terror - Improved: Prerequisite: Affinity - Fear or related affinity. You change your appearance to represent something terrifying. While you wear this illusion, you will passively harvest and cultivate fear-attuned Energy emanating from those who perceive you and cannot resist your will. You begin to understand the nature of fear, recognizing it in others and mastering it within yourself. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.*****

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new feat: Challenger.*****

*****Challenger: Time and time again, you have faced those with power that outweighs your own, and you have prevailed. Your unique abilities, affinities, and personal determination have made you a formidable foe. Henceforth, your aura will carry extra weight, and those who suffer its full impact will have to work hard to resist nagging doubts and fears. Effect: Your enemies, especially those of greater level and power, will find their resistance to fear reduced.*****

“Two levels!” Valla announced.

“Hell yeah! Nice one, Valla.”

“I don’t know why, though; you did most of the work against Karnice . . .”

“Because the System saw how important you were in that fight. You kept him off me while I figured out my Aspect of Terror. Anyway, c’mon,” Victor walked up to the door and slammed his fist against the wood. It opened almost immediately, and a brown-robed man stood before them, his reptilian face deep in the folds of the hood.

“I wondered how long you’d stand out there.” His voice was sibilant, more so than the other Yazzians Victor had met.

“Are you Hark?” He pressed forward, pulling Valla with him into the tower.

“I am . . .”

“Time to open the portal. Tes says your debt will be repaid as soon as we get through it.”

Hark backed up a few steps and peered through the still-open door. Victor, meanwhile, examined the dim, stone antechamber. Hallways led away to the left and right, and a circular stairway led upward. “She said that? My debt will be forgiven?”

“Yes. What do you owe her, anyway?” Victor moved past him and slammed the heavy wooden door closed.

“If you don’t know, then it’s not my place to say. Come. The ritual is prepared; I simply need to activate it.” He started for the stairs, and Victor and Valla followed.

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Tes followed the warlord through his citadel, walking a pace or two behind, her body relaxed but her mind sharp and ready. He was a dangerous man, this warlord, especially here in his seat of power. Still, she’d thoroughly humiliated him and crushed his strongest retainers. She didn’t think he’d be foolish enough to try her again.

Before she’d constrained herself, binding her flesh with ropes of powerful Energy, she’d reached out with her senses and found that Blue and Black were lurking together in a deep cellar beneath Blue’s estate. The Fist was similarly scattered, all but the big oaf, Tronk, who she’d felt in the southern part of the city.

Tes grinned, imagining the big, likable fellow drinking away the memory of his part in her attempted abduction. She could forgive him, for she’d felt little resistance as she tore apart his portion of the net, and he was in league with Black. Someday he may come to Victor’s aid when the titan-blood returned to set this world on a new course.

Victor and Valla had been safe when she reached out; she’d felt them both hale and full of Energy near Boaegh’s tower. Tes’s biggest regret when it came to those two was the lack of a proper goodbye; she’d have loved to go with them to see their world briefly before returning home to face her judgment. If she weren’t wrong, Victor’s rapid growth and potential for disruption would likely see the System sending a tribulation or two his way.

She sighed, shaking her head; the poor thing had been through so much already! She certainly wished she could have spent a bit more time with him. Still, Victor had nearly mastered one of her spells, a true dragon working, and if he learned from that experience, there was no telling what he might accomplish. Some of his spells were quite powerful—with the proper alterations and enhancements . . . “Ah-ah, dear Warlord. Please don’t step too far ahead. Isn’t the tunnel to your Artificer’s lair just ahead?”

“Yes,” the man snarled, having found his voice and a touch of courage again when Tes took up her human aspect. “You know,” he said, over his shoulder as he ducked into the narrow tunnel, “Karnice was set on watch to wrangle that boy of yours should he run free. The man’s not gentle . . .”

“Oh, I’m sorry, Warlord. Your prizefighter has been slain.”

The warlord stumbled to a stop, reaching out a hand to the tunnel wall, and he barked a short laugh, “Impossible! Wait! Did you slay him?”

“No, no, that was all Victor.”

“But Karnice was a champion, high-tier, at that!” The warlord began to stumble forward again, shaking his head. “Who helped him?”

“None, save perhaps his lady friend, Valla. Karnice was a bad match for Victor, Warlord. The man had a pitiful will. His skillset was lovely when it came to arranged fights against his noble friends—men and women he’d studied exhaustively. Against a true killer, though? A man built for destruction? An iron-willed juggernaut of terror? Hah, he likely collapsed and suffered an ignoble fate. A pity we couldn’t have put the battle on display for the city in the arena. Still, I imagine some witnessed the fight, and the tale will travel.”

The warlord was silent as they continued through the tunnels, and even when they stepped through the doorway into Fough’s laboratory, he didn’t speak. Tes wasn’t surprised to find Fough on his knees waiting for them—the man knew better than to flee her. With a surge of her aura and whip of pure primal wind Energy, she pushed the warlord to the ground beside him. She announced, allowing some of her draconic pride and cruelty to taint her voice, “If you are quick to provide me the materials and design documentation for the ritual meant to steal my bloodline, I will leave you with only a small reminder of my wrath.”

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The top room of Boaeigh’s tower was a bare, square, stone-walled room. High, narrow windows allowed diffuse light to fall on the marble floor, illuminating an interwoven spiral pattern laid out in black and red sand, punctuated with glowing amber gems at the intersections of lines. Hark stopped short of stepping into the pattern, pausing near the top of the stairway. He said, “Are you sure you’re ready? I won’t hold the portal open long, for the warlord has forbidden such magic.”

“Yeah, and don’t worry about the warlord. I’m pretty sure he has his hands full.” Victor stepped to the edge of the lines of sand and said, “I just wish we could’ve spent these dumb prize tokens.”

“Well,” Valla said, “if you actually come back someday, we can spend them with merchants in this city or others. They’re highly valued.”

“We?” Victor grinned at Valla.

“I . . . well, maybe!” Valla shrugged.

“It’s true about the tokens,” Hark added, unbidden. “If you don’t mind me asking, how many do you have?”

“Between the two of us? Like forty.”

“Ah! A true fortune. You’re right, though—such wealth will be useful should you ever return to this world. You could raise an army with that many. A small one, at least.”

Victor felt an urgency in his gut, and while Hark spoke, he began to pace back and forth. Finally, he said, “Right. Sorry, Hark, but we’re in a hurry. I feel like we need to get going. Can you open the portal?”

“Of course. The sooner, the better—I don’t want the warlord or his captains to learn of my involvement. As I said, I’ll be closing the portal right behind you.” Hark moved forward and gingerly reached down to touch one of the black sand lines with his left hand, and then he gently placed his right hand onto a red sand line. Victor felt a surge of Energy pour out of him, and then, at the center of the pattern, an oval rip in the universe appeared, wreathed in crackling orange flames.

It was about seven feet high and three feet wide at the center, and Victor shivered at the idea of stepping into it—something about the empty darkness beyond it reminded him of open space. “Is it safe?” he asked, belatedly wondering if he could trust this Geomancer, a one-time student of the arch-asshole Boaegh.

“Certainly!”

Valla reached up, took Victor’s hand in hers, and said to Hark, “Tes will kill you if this portal is anything other than what you’ve promised.”

“It is not a trick!” Hark wailed, apparently quite fearful at the mention of Tes’s wrath. “This is the doorway Boaegh used to venture to your world.”

“Okay. Make sure you destroy this pattern. Don’t tell anyone you know how to open it.” Victor squeezed Valla’s fingers, then stepped toward the portal.

“Ready?” he asked, pausing before it.

“Yes. Let’s go home.” She licked her lips nervously and looked up at him, mustering a brave smile. The choker at her neck glinted in the portal’s light, and Victor was once again struck by how pretty she was. He smiled, squeezed her hand, and stepped into the shimmering gateway.

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Advanced 2

Class:

Titanic Herald - Legendary

Level:

47

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 2

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

9274/9274

Strength:

202

Vitality:

302 (332)

Dexterity:

82

Agility:

105

Intelligence:

74

Will:

455

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger

Skills:

System Language Integration

Not Upgradeable

Spirit Core Cultivation Drill

Basic

Cooking

Basic

Animal Taming

Basic

Unarmed Combat

Basic

Knife Mastery

Basic

Spear Mastery

Basic

Bludgeon Mastery

Improved

Axe Mastery

Advanced

Grappling

Advanced

Sovereign Will

Advanced

Titanic Leap

Basic

Spells:

Iron Berserk

Epic

Channel Spirit

Improved

Inspiring Presence

Basic

Enraging Orb

Basic

Globe of Insight

Improved

Project Spirit

Improved

Dauntless Radiance

Basic

Heroic Heart

Basic

Spirit Walk

Basic

Tether Spirit

Basic

Manifest Spirit

Improved

Shape Spirit

Improved

Harsh Light of Justice

Improved

The Inevitable Huntsman

Improved

Aspect of Terror

Improved

Imbue Spirit

Basic

Honor the Spirits

Improved

Titanic Aspect

Basic