

Victor BK4: Ch22

Book 4: Chapter 22: Into the Wastes

Victor stood outside the city gates, watching the other members of the hunting company gather beneath the dawn-lit sky; stars were still visible, but a hint of orange and yellow painted the eastern horizon. Valla shifted beside him, also watching the procession of animals, wagons, and people. So far, Victor had counted nearly fifty people and half that many beasts and vehicles.

He flexed his left fist, looking down at the thick band of dark metal covering his forearm's lower half. Fough's bracer had been designed for a Degh and made from a very dense, "Energy-rich" metal—some kind of ore that Victor had already forgotten the name of. Still, it was sturdy, and Fough had fitted the inner surface with gold-colored rings—another metal Victor couldn't name—in three columns of six; the center topmost was occupied by a pink gem that winked at him in the dim light.

Victor still didn't understand the magic that took the long, jagged Ancestor Shard and condensed it into a gemstone. He'd been worried the crystal shard had been altered somehow when he'd first touched it to the ring. The magic had snatched it from his fingers and snapped it into the mounting, making it much smaller and rounder than when he'd been holding it. Fough had reassured him, though, touching the gem and twisting it, pulling it away, suddenly long and jagged once again.

"Pretty cool," he muttered, rubbing a thumb over the pink gem. He'd already confirmed that he could still commune with the giant's spirit even when the shard was mounted on the bracer.

"Your new bracer?" Valla asked, shifting to look up at him.

"Yeah—the way the magic changes the size and shape of the shard."

"Mmhmm. Just remember, you have a lot to do before you traipse off around this world looking for more shards. We need to get back to Fanwath . . ."

"I know, I know." Victor sighed heavily and then changed the subject, "I feel like we should have bought some mounts. Most of the hunters are mounted." He gestured to a nearby Degh riding on the back of a lumbering lizard-like creature with black and orange scales.

"Many aren't, though. Besides, I need to practice my movement spells, and you, well, you're supposed to be Berserk; do you think a mount would tolerate that?"

Victor opened his mouth to reply but realized he didn't have any argument. He shrugged and said, "Yeah, I guess you have a point. Damn!" he sighed, blowing out a deep breath, "It's going to be a pain in the ass running around all these people while I'm Berserk."

Valla chuckled, eyes still on the other hunters gathering into a loose line. Victor followed her gaze and saw Cayle, the woman who'd recruited them, yelling at some Vesh in a wagon, hollering about how every person and vehicle would need to keep up; she wasn't slowing down for anyone. Valla cleared her throat and said, "Have you tried Spirit Walking here? I wonder if you can reach your friends among the hunters . . ."

“Oh, I tried. The Spirit Plane was strange here. I only stood around for a few minutes, looking at the weird way the desert was reflected there. I couldn’t feel any hint of Old Mother or Thayla, but there were plenty of other presences— heavy, old powers, and I felt like they’d noticed me, too. I ended the spell before I found out who they were.”

“It sounds frightening. It’s strange to think about; I can’t wrap my head around it, really—the idea of multiple ‘planes’ of reality. If you were on the Spirit Plane here and on Fanwath, why couldn’t you travel to where your friends were?”

“I don’t know. Maybe I can, or maybe someone with the right skills and power can. Maybe the Spirit Plane is just as big as this one, and it would be like walking millions of lightyears or whatever separates this world from Fanwath.”

They stood in silence after that, Valla deep in thought, and Victor watching the procession, trying to build up the strength of will to make himself cast Berserk again. He’d switched his Sovereign Will bonus to vitality and agility, figuring it would make travel easier. Even with his vitality boosted, though, he felt a little tired; he hadn’t slept at all the night before. Dawn had nearly come by when Fough finished with his bracer, and he hadn’t wanted to try to sleep for the scant hour or two before the sun appeared.

“Victor and Valla!” Cayle called, striding toward them with her magical tablet clutched in one hand. “Happy to see you showed up.”

“Glad to be here,” Victor said, grinning and reaching out a hand to grasp her wrist.

“Should we travel with any particular part of the procession?” Valla asked as Cayle clasped his wrist.

“Suit yourselves. It’s probably safest with the wagons, but you’ll see more action if you’re near the vanguard. No mounts? Well, we move at a decent pace, but nothing a strong Energy user should struggle to match.” She grinned and pointed toward the front of the gathered hunters and said, “My mount is up there; see her? The sky ferraga?”

“Sky ferraga?” Victor squinted, trying to see where she pointed.

“The winged serpent off to the side, there; the one with the yellow and black scales. She’s not big enough to fly with me yet, but I’ll be terrorizing the skies on her back in another fifty years!” She laughed and stomped off to check in another group of hunters—three Yazzians in their plain, earth-toned robes.

“That would be cool,” Victor said to Valla as they watched her walk away. “A flying mount, I mean.”

“It sounds amazing but dangerous. I supposed you’d have to have an elaborate saddle. Speaking of which, I miss Uvu.”

“Yeah, your cat would love it around here.”

“No, he wouldn’t. He’d hate all these other predatory mounts. I’d have to ride him a good distance from the train.”

“Hello, Victor. Valla.” Victor jerked his head toward the voice and saw Tes standing between the two of them and the gate; she’d approached noiselessly. He smiled when he saw her attire; high blue-stained leather boots that came to her knees, white stockings that rose higher, and then a simple, pale yellow dress that fell to about mid-thigh, cinched at the waist by a delicate-looking, laced blue ribbon. Her hair picked up the yellow and orange highlights in the morning sun, and the delicate blond curls framed her face like she was waiting for a professional modeling shoot.

“Uh,” Victor said, struggling to decide if he should comment on her appearance or if it was one of those situations where his mouth was going to get him in trouble.

“You look like you’re going for a picnic, Tes!” Valla said, chuckling and stepping forward to take Tes’s delicate-looking hand in her own.

“Well, I have all I need in storage, and I see no reason to be uncomfortable while traveling. I don’t plan to fight any of the creatures we encounter anyway. I’ve no need for prize tokens.” She smiled, scrunching her hazel eyes. For some reason, Victor had remembered them being blue, but he couldn’t be sure if his memory was playing tricks on him or if they’d changed color one of the times he’d encountered her.

“So, you’re really coming along to help Valla train? That’s pretty cool of you, Tes.”

“Not just Valla. I’ve a thing or two to show you, my burly friend. Am I mistaken, or have you grown in stature since Blue’s rather memorable party?” She stepped toward him, and suddenly she was looking him almost in the eye, towering over Valla. The growth had been instant and so thoroughly unexpected that Victor had to shake his head and blink his eyes to force some order back into his perception.

“Gah!” Valla said, also shocked by the shift in Tes’s size. “What sort of spell is that? Did you really grow, or is that an illusion?”

“Bit of both, dear,” Tes said, grinning at Victor. “Well? I believe I heard your companion mention that you’re supposed to be working on your Berserk ability. Let’s see!”

“You heard that . . .” Valla started to ask, but Victor knew better than to try to understand the woman—dragon. He had a feeling she could do a great deal more than she let on; if she wanted to listen to their conversation from a distance, that seemed like a tiny fraction of her capabilities. As Valla spoke, he sighed and released the spell he’d been building up, already intent on following Khul Bach’s instructions.

As the rage flooded his pathways and his vision tinted red, his perspective shifted, and he was looking down at Tes again, Valla more like a child than a grown woman beside her. He’d already begun to find it easier to hold most of his rage from his mind, letting it simmer and fume in his pathways, thumping with red-hot waves through his body with each of his heartbeats. He grunted and tried to smile at Tes, but a smile was a bit more to ask for than he could manage while Berserk—it came out like a savage, bloodthirsty grin.

“Goodness,” Tes said, glancing at Valla. “Even better up close! Can you feel the heat of his aura? That’s the smoldering potential of an Elder being—a true titan. Victor, you’ve done well to connect so deeply to your ancestor. Your bloodline is strong! I can feel it thrumming, and my heart sings with it; I feel a kinship; our ancestors used to hunt under the same moon.”

“Where are you from, Tes?” Valla asked, a puzzled look on her face.

Before Tes could reply, though, Victor rumbled, “I need to move. I feel the urge to fight.” It was true. His blood boiled and seethed, his muscles twitched, and his eyes kept darting around, looking for the reason he was there; where was his enemy? Surely there must be one nearby. Why were all these weaklings loitering around? He knew the ones near him; they were friends, but those others . . . no, they weren’t enemies. He had work to do; he needed to travel, needed to find a monster to slay.

“Come!” Tes said, and suddenly she was larger yet again, standing just a bit shorter than Victor’s towering, hulking form. “I know the route the hunt will take; let us get a head start, and perhaps you can tussle with a beast or two!” She laughed and started jogging, her long legs carrying her away from the gates, dust stirring beneath her feet, and her short, frilly yellow dress trailing behind her.

Victor didn’t have to think twice; he saw the pretty lady in yellow running away, knew she wanted him to chase, and knew no reason why he shouldn’t. He jerked Lifedrinker from his belt, holding her in one hand, and, ignoring the procession of weaklings and a few truly overbearing auras, he charged after her. His furious rage, held tightly in check by his will, found a new outlet; rather than killing, he was hunting, and he lifted his head and roared with delight, savoring the thrill of the chase.

If he’d had eyes for anything other than his quarry, always so close but just a bit too far away to leap upon, Victor would have seen a much smaller figure trailing close behind him. Valla ran, blue sword in hand, her legs a blur of dusty wind and occasional bright flickers of lightning. Further

back, a woman mounted atop a long, colorful serpent rode up and down the line of hunters, excoriating them, shouting that the hunt was afoot and they'd be left out.

They ate up the miles, long, powerful legs that never tired carrying them up and down dusty hillsides and past the scattered scrubs and cacti; they didn't follow a road or trail, but Victor didn't have the presence of mind to wonder if Tes truly knew the way; he had one thing in mind—catch the woman in yellow. Every time he started to get close, she'd pull away, and the constant frustration kept his fury bright in his eyes.

Victor remembered Khul Bach's words, though: he was supposed to practice casting other spells while Berserk, so he tried. He reached into his Core and saw that his pathways were thick with rage and that his Core was slowly growing dimmer, but he ignored that. He clumsily yanked at a strand of inspiration and tried to cast Inspiring Presence. Could he do it? Could he be Berserk and also an inspirational force on the field of battle? He'd often wondered.

He felt the inspiration-attuned Energy fight for space in his pathways, felt it gather into the pattern for his spell, and then, with a rush of clarity, it flooded outward, and his rage receded. Victor stumbled as he rapidly decreased in size, and the urgency of the chase left him. Still, he was a big, fast man, and now he was inspired, and he laughed, pushing his legs to pump harder as he ran after the slender giantess in the yellow dress, her blue ribbon of a belt trailing behind her.

Tes stopped, though, and when he caught up to her, laughing, Valla close on his heels, she smiled and said. "You're not quite ready for that, Victor. Your rage dominates your pathways, and the inspiration fights with it for space; they're both potent spells. You'll need to level your Core and expand your pathways to manage both at once."

She paused and glanced at Valla with a smile, then back toward a narrow gully between some scrub-covered hills, "I sense a pack of sand spiders ahead; you should Berserk again—you're trying to improve that spell, right?"

"Right . . ."

"Hurry then, before Valla kills them all," she said, running toward the gully. Valla howled and charged after her.

"Shit!" Victor said, jogging after them and looking to his Core—his rage was nearly half depleted, but he figured he could manage another Berserk. "How long can I hold it, though," he grunted, canceling his Inspiring Presence and quickly casting Berserk. It failed to take hold, and he realized it was still on cooldown. "No fucking fair!" he wailed into the sky, watching Valla and Tes shrinking with distance as they ran into the hills.

He started running, really running, not jogging. Part of him wanted to cast The Inevitable Huntsman, but he knew better—he didn't know exactly how to choose his quarry when that spell took shape, and he didn't want to lose control of himself. "Come on," he grunted, pushing himself as hard as he could, straining his leg muscles, pumping his lungs like a bellows as he tore over the rocky, barren soil, leaping shrubs and cacti, never wavering from his bee-line toward the splash of yellow in the distance.

When he finally entered the gully, the low scrub-covered hills rising around him, he looked at his Core again, saw his rage nearly recovered, and tried to cast his Berserk. As the rage flooded into him, as his perspective changed with his renewed height, and as his muscles surged with power, he roared in furious excitement, leaping a dozen yards up the side of a hill.

He tore through the dirt and smashed a brittle tree apart, the only obstacle in his path that he couldn't leap. He saw the yellow-clad woman stop, standing before a brush-covered depression, and then the more diminutive whirlwind of a woman—Valla, he reminded his dulled, angry mind—kept running. He was half a mile away when the sand and shrubs burst upward into the air, and dozens of pony-sized, furry, brown and orange arachnids exploded out of the ground, charging toward his friend.

Victor renewed his frenzied pace, roaring out a challenge as he leaped and ran over the desert landscape. He allowed his Berserking Energy to flare through him, pulling back his will. As his body heated up with the volatile power of his rage-attuned Energy, he seemed to find a new gear, exploding over the ground, leaving smashed and ruined obstacles in his dust-clouded wake.

His thoughts had grown blissfully simple; all the background noise that lived in the corners of his mind faded away, and only one single objective filled the totality of his consciousness—kill the creatures that threatened his friend. With the joy of simplicity of purpose, Victor leaped into battle, Lifedrinker singing like a whistling executioner as he whipped her left and right, wading through the frantic, clicking, hissing, thrashing arachnids.

Lifedrinker severed limbs, smashed carapaces, tore through fangs, and cleaved apart clusters of black, bulbous eyes. Gore flew in her wake, and Victor's other hand didn't idly rest while she worked. He grabbed legs, yanking spiders left and right, smashing them together and flinging them apart. All the while, he suffered countless bites and stabs from the creature's claw-hooked legs.

He was in full, glorious rage, though, and Victor's body was far sturdier than the last time enemies had swarmed him. The bites left shallow punctures in his flesh that mended almost instantly, and the claws scraped along his thick, sturdy skin, leaving a wake of pink, healed flesh; he hardly lost a drop of blood before the shallow injuries on his arms, neck, and legs closed up.

When he finally cleared a path to Valla, he found her surrounded by charged, metallic dust, jolts of stabbing electricity flashing out to strike the spiders that leaped at her, stunning and scorching them. Her blue sword was like a long specter's finger, leaving dead and broken spiders with each liquid flick of its metallic touch.

Victor was so lost in his rage that he couldn't register Valla's effortless grace, couldn't see that she was holding her own just fine. He simply saw her and knew she was a friend in need, so he continued to rampage, leaping upon a particularly large spider and burying Lifedrinker into its fuzzy, many-eyed head. She sank in, and he heard her valkyrie warcry and laughed with gore-soaked madness. He let Lifedrinker go and leaped away into the legs and snapping fangs of another group of spiders.

Victor grabbed spiders' limbs and punched spiders' abdomens; he grabbed fangs and pulled, breaking the chelicera and pulling them free, trailing gray flesh and blue blood. Victor sank into the mad, gore-filled horror of battle, and when the rage finally stopped flowing from his depleted Core,

he fell back into himself, a smaller, less titanic warrior. Then, he channeled his inspiration-attuned Energy and began to battle with wits and adroitness rather than brute, mad force.

He'd come out of his rage empty-handed, and knowing finding Lifedrinker amid the carnage would take too long, he pulled out his old baton. At first, it bounced from his foes, harming them not at all, but he cast Channel Spirit, flooding it with fear-attuned Energy, and it began to have an effect, warping and smashing spider flesh with weird purple-black clouds born from each concussive strike.

He ducked, rolled, slid, and leaped, avoiding the remaining spiders' bites and claws. Several times he found himself face to face with a rearing, hissing spider, and he lunged forward, feinting low and then driving up with his heavy, dense juggernaut helm into the fangs and hard carapaces, cracking them like eggs.

When he finally stood, some fifty yards away from Valla, both of them surrounded with mounds of gory, twitching, dead spiders, it felt like he'd been fighting for hours. Tes, still as tall as a Degh, stood to the side, spotless and fresh in her yellow dress, and clapped, "Well fought! Brace yourselves!"

"Huh?" Victor looked around; was there another threat? But then he saw it—thick globes of purple Energy were forming around the site of their battle, coalescing out of the air around the dead arachnids.

In moments they began to flow together, creating two streams. One surged toward Valla, and the other, thicker stream exploded toward Victor, poleaxing him with its flow, lifting him high in the air. He imagined something similar was happening to Valla, but he couldn't spare her a glance; his vision was filled with explosions of light, and his mind was drowned in the powerful euphoric effect.

When he finally came back to himself, Victor saw a System message waiting for him:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 38 Spirit Carver, gained 20 will, 20 vitality, and have 16 attribute points to allocate.

"Two levels?" he said, laughing.

"Congratulations, Victor and Valla!" Tes called, stepping closer, and Victor realized she'd matched his height again.

"I leveled!" Valla called. "And my Steel Tempest spell is already improved! You were right, Tes." She started to jog through the mess toward Tes and Victor.

"I can feel the hunt master and her troupe approaching. She'll take stock of the slain monsters and award you your prizes. Don't frown, Victor! You're working as part of a monster-hunting company—all kills must be shared. If I sense more packs like this, I'll try to lead you away so you can get the majority of the kills, but you'll want the others around if we meet something much stronger."

"Huh," Victor managed to say, his mind still reeling from the Energy rush and the battle before it.

“Thank you, Tes!” Valla said, though. “Before I learned the spell you showed me, there’s no way I would have survived that; I think I killed nearly ten of the monsters, and I’m hardly scratched!”

“Of course! I said I’d help, didn’t I?” Tes laughed, and then a horn sounded, and she glanced over her shoulder, then back at Victor. “They’re almost here. Better pick up your axe—she’s going to draw some greedy stares now that she’s evolved.”

Victor’s eyes bugged out, and he quickly started scanning the battlefield. “She’s . . . evolved?”