

Victor BK4: Ch25

Book 4: Chapter 25: Imbue Spirit

The next day, true to her word, Tes led Victor, Valla, and Barn—a large, gray-plate armored man with long, thick quills for hair and a very ruddy complexion that didn't do a lot to complement his bulging black eyes—out of camp before most of the other hunters had begun to wake. Barn wasn't a talkative fellow, and he seemed grumpy, despite the opportunity Tes was providing for the three of them. They traveled on foot, as usual, and fifteen minutes into their jogging progress, Tes started to urge Victor to cast Berserk.

"It's too early, Tes!" he moaned, not looking forward to battling his alter-ego for control.

"Did you level your Core last night?"

"No, but I just did yesterday! It'll likely take a while, don't you think?"

"Maybe, but maybe your brutish self will have a hunger for another heart. You still have some, yes?"

"Yeah . . ."

"Including the wurm heart," she grinned and added, "What a meal that'll make!"

Valla snorted in amusement, shaking her head, and Victor turned to her, "This funny for you? Must be nice to eat what and when you want with no one badgering you about it!" He was mostly joking; he was glad Valla was starting to feel comfortable enough with him to laugh a bit at his expense.

He glanced at Barn, saw his glowering face, and how he kept his eyes straight ahead, inhaling and blowing out his air in a steady cadence as they jogged, and said, "What's up, Barn? You have a bossy woman in your life, too, huh? Irritated that your sister sent you along with us?"

"Huh," he replied, then spat to the side into the dusty soil. "Sorry you got stuck babysitting me—Cayle saw me drinking with some of the other hunters last night and probably decided to send me off on runt duty."

"Runt duty?" Tes laughed, shaking her head. "Your sister did you a big favor, young man." Victor almost laughed at Tes's tone and choice of words, but he could see Barn's red cheeks getting redder with irritation. Tes continued, "You're going to see a lot more action today than the rest of the hunters, especially without a bunch of high-tier experts stealing all the glory."

"Really?" Barn gave Tes a second look and raised his weird, prickly eyebrows.

"Really. We're off to clear out a night brute nest." Tes winked at him as his mouth fell open, and he struggled for words, but then she turned back to Victor, "Nice attempt to change the subject, but don't you think it's about time you brought out your oversized friend?"

"Wait; last night I had a thought, and I wanted to ask you something . . ."

“Just the one?” Valla asked, interrupting him, and it took a minute for him to see the joke.

“What the hell, chica?” he asked, a laugh bubbling up, unbidden. “You’ve got jokes today! Okay, fair game. No more mister nice guy.” He gave her shoulder a shove as she grinned, then he turned back to Tes, “Anyway, I was wondering, if someone summoned me, do you think it’s possible to summon my abuela?”

“Your grandmother . . . it may be possible. I’m not an expert on that sort of magic, but with your blood, I’m fairly sure a summoning ritual could be made to target a person related to you. I’m not sure if it can be more specifically targeted. I feel like you were a bit of an unexpected result when summoned; the people who pulled you from your homeworld didn’t seem pleased with you if I recall your tale correctly. Didn’t you say they dumped you into some fighting pits or sold you off . . .”

“That’s right. But still, they must have had something that tied the spell to me, right?” He glanced at Valla and said, “Isn’t that what Rellia’s investigator found?”

“Yes, ‘biological material.’”

“Likely blood. You didn’t get any answers from the mage responsible?” Tes deftly leaped over a thorny bush as they continued running.

“No . . . he wasn’t in a talking mood. There’s the guy who hired him, though. What was his name, Valla?”

“Ap’Gravin. Boaegh hadn’t been working with him for a long while, though . . .”

“Still, that Ap’Gravin dude might have been the one who gave him the blood for summoning me.”

“Yes, it may be worth pursuing.” Valla nodded. “Provided we ever get back to Fanwath.”

“I would investigate,” Tes nodded, “if you find out what material was used and more about the summoning ritual, you may well be able to do the same for your grandmother. Do you think she’d appreciate it?”

“I . . .” Victor was about to say that, of course, she’d want to come to a world of magic and be with her grandson, but then he thought about her devotion to the Catholic Church. He thought about all the killing he’d done, and he tried to imagine his grandmother doing anything violent and couldn’t. Would she thrive in a world like this? Did it matter? He could give her treasures to advance her race. He could teach her to cultivate, and, sure, she may never gain a lot of levels, but she’d be alive. “I need to think about it some more, but maybe.”

“All right. It’s time, Victor, no more stalling. Barn, do you have a movement spell?” Tes held up a hand, and they all slowed to a walk as she spoke.

“No, but I have a clockwork mount.”

“Take it out, please. We’re about to pick up the pace.”

“Right,” Barn stopped and stared into the sky for a moment, wiggling around the fingers of his gauntleted left hand, and then a brass-colored cube appeared in front of him in the dirt. It was about a foot to each side, and when Barn leaned forward and touched it, it began to vibrate and click noisily. It bounced once, then long, thin rods shot out of the four top corners. They writhed in the air for a second, and then the box underwent transformations too fast for Victor’s eyes to follow.

More, shorter, rods shot out, and it stretched, bounced, and, in less than a minute, a four-limbed mechanical skeleton shaped vaguely like a horse crouched before Barn, steam erupting from ports along its ridged spine, accompanied by clicks and whirring sounds.

“Shit,” Victor said, taking a step back and admiring the weird mount. “Do you have a saddle?”

“Sure,” Barn said, producing a cushioned, leather seat that he strapped onto the top of the ridged, metallic spine. Several pegs jutted out from the sides of the mount’s “ribs” that he fastened it to.

“That’s a marvel,” Valla said, stepping around the faintly shuddering mechanical horse.

“Yeah, it’s cool as hell.” Victor reached a hand toward the rune-covered head of the mount and then said, “Safe to touch?”

“Yep,” Barn nodded, then sprang into his saddle. Victor rested his palm against the metal, wondering if it was hot, but it felt just slightly warm.

“Is it fast?”

“Fast enough,” Tes answered for Barn. She turned to Victor and stared pointedly, and he sighed.

“Fine, here goes.” He cast Berserk, and there ended his relaxing morning. Tes, as usual, watched him transform with eager eyes, grinning at his involuntary growl as the red rage filled his vision and his Quinametzin self took in his surroundings. He had a terrible urge to smash the mechanical creature nearby, but Victor held himself in check, and then, as Tes sprang away, suddenly nearly as tall as Victor, he roared and charged after her.

At some point, Tes had changed her yellow dress for a pale blue one, and her ribboned belt trailed behind her, a shade of lavender that beckoned and taunted Victor over the miles. Valla and Barn

seemed content to follow several dozen yards behind his brutish, leaping, growling figure as he futilely tried to catch the lithely running woman. Somewhere, in a corner of his mind, Victor's rational self wondered just how fast Tes could run if she wanted to.

He tried to remember her dragon form when she'd given him a glimpse. Had she had wings? Yes, he chuckled, and the emotion translated to a wild, crazed laugh coming from his titanic form—of course, she'd had wings! He almost lost his rage as he imagined flying, soaring through the blue expanse, feeling the wind as it whistled over him . . . Victor shook his head and roared, urging more rage to pump out of his Core and furiously breaking into a sprint up a long, hard-packed hillside.

They seemed to be following a southwesterly heading, and their journey stretched into the afternoon. Tes didn't have to stop and urge Victor to release his rage when they arrived; his red-hot Energy had begun to fail several minutes before, and he was running as his usual self, trailing far behind Tes, Barn, and Valla. A part of him was irritated; why wasn't she pausing to let him recover? Then he figured they must be getting close, and she just wanted to get there and wait for him.

The desert still stretched endlessly around them, but they'd progressed into some low rocky hills for the last dozen miles, and it was at the base of one such hill where Victor finally caught up to the others; they were all sitting on a large red blanket. Tes was reclining, back in her more diminutive form, drinking from a crystal flask, and Barn was stuffing his face with a huge, dripping sandwich filled with meat. Valla waved to him, then returned to what she'd been doing—writing in her far scribe book.

“Don't mind me,” he huffed, leaning over, hands on his knees, purposefully breathing much harder than he needed.

“Oh, do sit down, Victor,” Tes chuckled. “Why didn't you eat a heart?” She pressed her lips into a pout as she asked the question, and Victor was struck by how beautiful she was. She had such big, clear eyes, and their greenish-brown irises glittered in the sunlight, and then there were those rosy lips and . . . he shook his head. He knew better; was her appearance even real? She was a dragon under all that beauty, right?

He grunted and sat down, forcing a frown, and he thought he saw something like approval in Tes's eyes as she looked away and took another drink from her flask. “Well,” he said, “I'm not going to lie—I forgot about the hearts until I'd already lost my rage, and I'm, well, I'm just not up to eating a raw monster heart when I'm not mad with fury.”

“I'll help you remember next time,” she said. “Eat something. Drink. The cave is up yonder among those tumbled boulders.”

“Okay.” Victor sat across from Tes, next to Valla, and dug around in his storage ring until he found some bread, butter, and a bowl of still-steaming noodle soup he'd bought months ago in Gelica.

“That smells good,” Valla said, leaning close to sniff his bowl.

“You want some?”

“No, thank you. I don't like to be full before a battle.”

“Yeah, I used to be the same when I wrestled. I think that’s mostly because I was worried about making weight, though.”

“You’re a grappler?” Barn asked around his mouthful of sandwich.

“Yeah. Well, not as much as I used to be. I’ve become quite fond of fighting with an axe,” he patted Lifedrinker, where he’d laid her next to him.

Tes eyed him and the axe and then said, “I’ll make you a proper sling for that axe when we camp tonight.”

“Really? Thanks, Tes. Yeah, she outgrew the loop I had on my belt . . .”

“Yes, I’ll make you a shoulder sling so the head rests further up under your arm.”

“You craft?” Valla asked, looking up from her book.

“Oh, I have a hobby or ten. Speaking of which,” she produced two small vials and tossed one to Barn and one to Valla. “Should you find yourselves in dire straits, quaff those.”

Barn held it up, peering with one bulging, solid black eye into the milky contents, “What’s it do? Heal?”

“No, you’ll disincorporate for a time and be drawn toward this rod.” Tes held up a rune-covered dull gray rod about a foot long and, reaching back over the edge of the blanket, firmly drove it into the hard-packed dirt.

“Truly?” Valla said, her eyes widening. “I don’t think I can afford such a gift, Tes.” She held it toward the woman, and Tes chuckled.

“Not to worry—I crafted it myself, and I’m hoping you won’t need it. Still, I did promise to help you and Barn; I wouldn’t be much of a mentor if I didn’t give you an escape plan before walking into a night brute nest.”

Victor watched the exchange with an arched eyebrow, waiting for the explanation for why he’d not been offered one of the escape potions, but when none was forthcoming, he just chuckled to himself and took another big spoonful of soup. “I wish it wasn’t so hot out; I was in the mood for soup, but it would be so much better if the weather were chilly.”

“What about Victor?” Valla asked for him, ignoring the small talk about soup.

“He’s going to be completely Berserk, and the night brute’s magic will have little effect on him. Speaking of which, Victor, tell me about that ‘Imbue Spirit’ spell again.”

Victor let go of his spoon and straightened up, looking over the blanket at Tes. “I’ve cast it on my armor before. Basically, it takes a little piece of my spirit and puts it into an object. Well, also an individual, according to the description.”

“And?”

“Oh, when I cast it on my armor, I used inspiration-attuned Energy, and it seemed to gain a bit of a will of its own. When I was about to be struck, it was like a ghostly hand reached out and parried.”

“Truly?” Valla seemed impressed, leaning back from her book with wide eyes.

“But you haven’t cast it upon a person yet?”

“Nope.”

“I believe you mentioned you’re able to make Energy attunements other than the three in your Core, yes?”

“Right, courage and justice.”

“Courage?” Barn said, an eager note in his voice. “That’ll come in handy against night brutes!”

Tes clapped her hands and nodded at Barn. “Exactly! Victor, can you try to imbue Valla with a bit of your spirit using courage-attuned Energy?”

“Imbue me with his spirit? Will he be in control of me?”

“It says I’ll grant some of my ‘power and will’ to the recipient, not that I’ll gain control of them.”

“You trust Victor, yes?” Tes asked, locking eyes with Valla.

“Of course . . .” she licked her lips, and Victor felt a little sorry for her being put on the spot like that. “Okay, Victor.”

“Right. Give me your hand.” He turned his hand, so it rested on his knee, palm up, and waited for Valla to place her much smaller, blue fingers in his. She hesitated at first, but then her brows drew together, and with a determined, perhaps involuntary growl, she reached forward and snatched three of Victor’s fingers in her grip.

“Careful, Victor, be sure to channel the correct Energy,” Tes said, leaning forward, that familiar, eager gleam in her eyes. Barn brushed the crumbs from his hands and audibly gulped his last bite, also shifting to watch what happened.

Victor still held his bowl of soup in his other hand and sighed as he sent it into his storage ring, only half eaten. He closed his eyes, focusing on his Core. His rage-attuned Energy was already nearly full, pulsing balefully, and he smiled at its familiar heat, gently tugging some of the Energy out of it to combine with inspiration, building the weave for courage in his pathways. When it was ready, he clamped down hard on his fear attunement, then cast Imbue Spirit.

The spell took shape and pulled forth more of his two Energies, filling the pattern to bursting with courage, and then he sent it forth into Valla. While the Energy flowed out of him into her, he watched, locking his gaze with her seafoam green eyes. He felt her grip tighten on his fingers, saw her shoulders curl forward with tension, and then she pulsed, briefly limned in a golden glow, and

her eyes blazed with it, the green giving way to brilliant red-gold. Her lips peeled back in a smile, and she laughed.

Victor knew the spell was complete, so he let go of her, but Valla held on, squeezing his fingers, her eyes still shining with brilliant golden light. “Is this what it feels like to be you?” she asked brightly. “Ancestors! I feel ready to fight anything!” She gave his fingers another squeeze, then let go and hopped to her feet. “I still have control of myself, so that’s good . . .”

“I believe the spell has imbued you with some of Victor’s will and clearly with courage. You should fare well against the night brutes’ magical attacks. I think because your armor was inert, Victor, your will played a more . . . active role in its imbue-ment.” Tes stood and continued, “Can you spare the Energy for a similar boon to Barn?”

Victor had suffered a brief moment of weakness and nausea just as when he’d cast the spell in the arena, but he felt fine already. “Each casting costs me ten percent of my will and ten percent of my maximum Energy. I should be good . . .”

“Yes; your will is prodigious, and you’ll be Berserk. I think you’ll be fine.” Tes nodded, then gestured for Barn to move closer to Victor.

“I feel incredible! This is amazing, Victor; nothing will stop us!” Valla had produced her blue sword and moved off to the side, performing the forms of her fighting style against imaginary enemies.

“Glad you like it,” Victor said. Then Barn reached out a thick, pinkish-red hand, and Victor grasped it, noting how dense the callouses were on the man’s palm. “Courage again?” he asked Tes.

“Yes, for this battle. I do wonder, though, what would happen should you use your fear affinity . . .” Tes smiled mischievously as she spoke, and Victor saw a change in the way her eyes glinted as she looked at Barn; it reminded him of a cat playing with a mouse.

“Uh, please don’t,” Barn said, tugging his hand. Victor held on, though, and shook his head.

“Tranquilo, hombre.” He gripped tighter then, just as before, he built the pattern for courage and cast his Imbue Spirit spell. Barn’s body, just like Valla’s, briefly pulsed with golden Energy, and then his eyes took on the red-gold glow of courage. In Victor’s opinion, it was a massive upgrade from his usual bulging, bug-like eyes. Barn immediately released Victor’s hand and jumped to his feet with a whoop.

“Outstanding! Let’s crush some enemies!”

“Get your shield out, Barn,” Tes said, chuckling as she, too, stood. Victor groaned and clambered up, barely making it to his feet before Tes summoned her blanket back into storage.

Victor shook his head, trying to clear it; the malaise after casting the second imbue had hit him a lot harder. “Hey! What if I wasn’t ready to . . .”

“Oh, hush,” Tes laughed. “You know you were.”

“Yeah,” Victor chuckled, “good call.” He stretched, popping his back between his shoulders, trying to play off his sudden fatigue. He knew he’d adjust and didn’t want Tes to think he needed to cancel one of the imbue spells.

“Okay,” Tes said, looking at her three charges—Valla dancing about with her long, blue blade flicking through the air, Barn shrugging his arm into the straps of a shield nearly as big as he was, and Victor. “Pick up your lady axe, Victor, and call forth your titan self; it’s time we plumb the dark depths for glorious battle.”