

Victor BK4: Ch32

Book 4: Chapter 32: A Wyrms Tale

Victor tore through the loose, dry scree scattered about the hilltop, and with crimson rage tinting his vision, he surveyed the final slope that led down into the box canyon where his quarry awaited. Despite his efforts, several challengers had reached the canyon ahead of him, one riding on a twisting serpent mount, another atop the shoulders of a lumbering, giant, armadillo-like monstrosity, and a third soaring through the air, her massive, red-scaled wings allowing her to leave everyone else in the dust. Still, Victor saw her circling up there, perhaps afraid to initiate the fight with the terrible beast that lurked ahead.

Of the wyrm, Victor could only see its hindquarters—the rest of its enormous body wound out of sight beyond a steep bluff-like hill to the east. Still, enough could be seen to give even Victor's rage-soaked mind pause; this was a monster of legend, a creature large enough to swallow him whole or drive him into the soil with nothing but its great girth as a weapon.

“Great men aren't made by fleeing from danger,” he said, pacing back and forth, clenching his fists and stoking his fury. He pumped his pathways full from the heat in his Core, focusing on the fact that he wasn't charging into battle. The thought made him angry, which further fueled his rage, and soon, his vision was such a deep shade of crimson that he could imagine he swam through air soaked in blood. He laughed and howled at the idea, and then he leaped off the hill, crashing to the hard, dusty floor of the canyon and racing toward the enormous black-scaled tail with its horrible, razor-edged barb.

“Ancestors!” he bellowed, “Witness our glory!”

Despite his fury and the urge to swing his axe, Victor forced himself to calmly utilize some of his other attuned Energy; he summoned his totemic bear using a surge of baleful purple-black Energy, and as an inky, dark, misty figure began to coalesce on the far side of the weaving, bobbing wyrm tail, he cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with inspiration. Before he gained enough ground to leap upon the mighty creature's tail, it began to thrash and surged forward—the other hunters must have engaged the beast's front end.

Undaunted, Victor bunched his legs into greater strides, charging forward, and that's when his bear fully materialized and roared so loudly that small rocks and dust began to cascade off the canyon walls. Victor howled at the sound, pleased, but then another sound burst through the air, one so vastly more tremendous that, at first, Victor's ears couldn't make sense of it. When it dawned on him that he wasn't hearing a volcanic eruption or a locomotive derailling but rather the roar of the wyrm, a mad exuberance filled him; here was a challenge worthy of demigods!

One more mighty stride and then an explosive leap that left a dust cloud in his wake, and Victor soared through the air to land atop that thrashing tail. He wrapped his powerful legs around it, just above where the lance-like stinger began. Before he could glance along the great length of scaled ridges that made up the wyrm's spine and, perhaps, grow discouraged, Victor began to lay into the bumpy, rough scales before him; he'd decided to try to manage this enormous beast one small piece at a time.

His first few hacks, aimed at the gaps between rough scales, were rebuffed by the tough hide of the ancient beast. Victor swung again, harder, and nearly unseated himself as the wyrm's tail lifted into the air. He bore down with his prodigious strength, squeezing the tail between his thighs and hooking his ankles together at the bottom. If he'd been less focused on his task and more aware of his situation, Victor might have laughed at the idea of riding a wyrm's tail like it was the world's biggest bucking bronco.

Growling with determination, Victor gripped the ridge of a rough, black scale and braced himself, hacking Lifedrinker into the crease between two scales over and over, his grip high on her handle so as not to apply enough force to damage the axe again. In his red-eyed fury, he could have lost himself to the effort, wholly given in to his Berserking nature, heedless of Lifedrinker's safety, but his attachment to her was too great, his recollection of her previous wound too fresh in his mind.

Victor frequently glanced at her gleaming edge to ensure she was holding up, and when he saw nary a nick or scratch, he redoubled his efforts, grinning as the gap between the scales gradually widened. He was aware that he wasn't the only combatant on the field—he heard concussions, saw flashes of light, and heard screams. He knew he was flying through the air as the wyrm thrashed and brought its stinger to bear on its foes, but Victor was singleminded in his efforts, refusing to let go, to loosen his death grasp on the beast's whipping appendage.

When Lifedrinker's edge finally bit through the thick dark hide beneath those scales, hot blood, like liquid fire, spurted out, singing a hole through Victor's leather pants and scalding his arm. He knew if it weren't for his Berserk healing and Flame-Touched feat, his flesh would have been rendered from his bones. As it was, the touch of that blood was painful and left pink welts on his skin, but they healed rapidly, and Lifedrinker didn't seem to mind it at all.

With the beast's flesh parted, Victor lifted Lifedrinker high and brought her down on the cut with all his might, driving her deep into the wyrm's meaty, muscular tail. Lifedrinker screamed with bloody intent as she tore into the wyrm, and Victor lifted his head into an ululating howl and screamed, with vicious bloodlust, "Dig in deep, chica! Drink!" Lifedrinker didn't need the encouragement; she shivered and throbbed, pulling herself deeper and deeper until only the very tip of her hammer spike was exposed.

Victor used her haft as a grip, better supporting himself as the wyrm writhed around the canyon, thrashing this way and that, trying to slay the swarm of attackers or dodge their more devastating attacks. He saw a spiderweb of luminous orange Energy flowing through the scales of the beast into Lifedrinker. At that sight, he knew she would profit immensely from this battle, whether he survived or not, and the thought brought him comfort and amusement. "You'll get yours, won't you, beautiful? No matter what that little woman decides I've earned."

Watching his axe drain vast currents of Energy from the wyrm, Victor lifted his head to the sky again, howling. He jerked his gaze around, looking for his bear. Somewhat at the mercy of the wyrm and in what direction it chose to thrash and flip its tail, Victor had a hard time finding not only his bear but his sense of direction.

At one point, Victor hung upside down as the tail lifted into the air and curved as though to strike at someone. Hanging there, the battlefield below his head, Victor finally got a good look at the

enormity of his foe. The wyrm stretched away from him for a hundred yards or more, and its long, twisting form was supported by no less than a dozen short, muscular legs.

That was when he saw his fearsome purple-black bear battling beside several Degh working to cut the tendons that operated one of the wyrm's legs on the right side. The one behind it was already hanging limp and bloody. "Good boy! Fuck him up!" Victor laughed, still clinging to the tail as it shot through the air and impaled an enormous, shaggy, mammoth-like mount, sending its Degh rider flying through the air to smash against a stone outcropping.

The hillock-sized mount wailed in agony as the wyrm lifted its stinger out and Victor with it. He watched, closer than he'd have liked, as the creature immolated from the inside out, gigantic goutts of flame shooting from its orifices. "Chingado!" Victor grunted, resolving not to let that stinger puncture his own flesh.

He wanted to do more, wanted to rip the wyrm to pieces, but even in his Berserk state, as large as he was, he was small and weak compared to the monster. If he pulled Lifedrinker out and continued to hack away, he'd do some damage, sure. Maybe he could get the stinger off eventually, but Lifedrinker was probably doing more damage by drawing the creature's Energy, and if not, she was undoubtedly benefitting more. For the first time that he could remember, Victor wished he had another decent weapon, something capable of truly harming the ancient monster.

Somewhere, deep in the back of his rage-addled mind, Victor remembered the enormous black metal maul he'd taken from ap'Horrin's blackguard when he'd defeated his ambush in Gelica. Grinning madly, he summoned the huge maul, and in his mighty fist, it was simply an overlarge warhammer. The handle was metal, just as dark as the heavy metal hammerhead, and it all seemed to be one piece. "Perfect," Victor growled, inching his way up the tail, past Lifedrinker, and then bringing it down with a tremendous smash into the hard scales of the wyrm.

To the bones in his hands, it felt like he'd just struck a great hunk of iron, and Victor's rage intensified as he was rebuffed so easily. "Piece of shit!" he roared at the hammer and tried again. This time the scale at the center of his blow cracked, but the hammer's haft bent. He screamed in fury and threw it to the side, heedless of its trajectory. Some ancient instinct took shape from deep within Victor, and he lifted his furious face to the sky and cried, "Ancestors!"

A sibilant voice came to him then, like a woman whispering in his ear, "I am Citlalicue, and you have pleased me, child of the Quinametzin. Borrow my grace and the touch of my whip. Make haste, though, for my power wanes quickly; I offer you these boons knowing you'll repay me tenfold!"

Before Victor could so much as whoop or laugh with delight at the contact with an ancestral spirit, he felt a surge of profound, rich Energy, heavy with the scent of rain and grass and the pulse of the verdant jungle. Suddenly a new understanding of movement came over him—the bucking and thrashing of the wyrm's tail was, to him, a gently swaying bough in the breeze. He released his hold on the knobby ridges of the wyrm's scales and leaped to his feet, running up the weaving, roiling spine of the creature as though it were a steady plank.

While he ran forward, Victor felt more Energy itching in his hand, and he lifted it above his head, and suddenly a twisting, luminous tendril of deep-green Energy flared and snapped into the sky. "Feel this whip, beast!" he roared and brought the coil of powerful Energy down to crack against the wyrm's side. The whip snapped out and down, the torrent of Energy condensing at its tip like a

miniature green sun, and when it tore through the wyrm's hide, the sound of the concussion was like a cannon going off.

That blow got the wyrm's attention; it bellowed another great roar that brought cascades of boulders and gravel down from the heights, and Victor laughed as he continued running along the thrashing beast, cracking that brilliant whip into its side over and over, blasting bloody, jagged holes in its flesh with each impact. Later, he might wonder just what his agility had been boosted to, but then, in the moment, all he could do was revel in his ancestor's power and bask in his foe's thrashing fury.

The ancient wyrm tried to unseat him by rolling to its side, but Victor nimbly hopped along the bucking, twisting surface of the monster, running over its ribs and cracking that terrible whip again and again. So desperate to remove him was the wyrm that, as Victor danced toward the front part of its spine, the creature tried to impale him with its dripping, lance-like stinger. Victor adroitly leaped forward, though, landing some twenty feet further toward its head, and the monster impaled itself.

Whatever fiery venom was in its barbed stinger didn't seem to bother it overmuch, as amusing as that would have been, and it pulled its stinger free just as a tremendous bolt of lightning, followed by a flaming boulder the size of a minivan, smashed into the center of its back. Victor made to leap away from the concussive explosion, but that's when his ancestor's gift dissipated, and he lost his footing on the rolling, flopping monster's spine.

As Victor fell toward the hard canyon floor, a great shadow followed him, and when he smashed into the dirt, the bulk of the wyrm's body rolled over him, pressing him down into the hardened ground. Had such a thing happened to him a few months ago, he would likely have had many of his bones reduced to shattered fragments and his guts pressed out of his mouth. Thankfully his body had undergone many improvements, and with his Berserking rage still coursing through his pathways, the pressure of the great beast smashing him down like a rolling pin on dough was only briefly painful and unpleasant.

When the monster's bulk passed over him, he grunted and jerked himself up to his hands and knees, part of his mind mildly amused by the Victor-shaped impression in the dirt. At that moment, his rage began to fade, and he laboriously pushed himself to his feet, backpedaling from the still-thrashing, gigantic body not a dozen yards before him. To his more rational mind, it became apparent then that the higher-tier hunters had ramped up their attacks and were finishing the direly wounded creature.

Lances of light, lightning bolts, smoking orbs of fiery magma, and even a ball of something that looked like crackling plasma tore through the air, filling it with fumes, smoke, and steam, making it hard for even Victor's powerful lungs to breathe. He turned and hurried up the side of a newly-formed slope of scree, wanting to get above the haze of powerful magic to witness the wyrm's final death throes.

He clambered atop a boulder and turned, standing tall to watch as, borne on golden wings of Energy, Cayle streaked through the air to drive her lance-like, red-limned long spear into the rolling Wyrms' breast, burying ten feet of its shaft with an explosion of smoking, hissing wyrm blood. Then, the huge Degh, Vormor, ran forward with another long spear, this one crackling with white and blue electricity, and drove it directly through the wyrm's scaled hide, running forward to bury it six or eight feet into its flesh.

Similar actions played out all along the wyrm's length as Cayle's troop, the Spears of the Copper Sunset, earned their names, burying great spear after spear into the wyrm until its thrashing finally stilled and the surviving hunters screamed and whooped their triumph into the air. Victor joined in, of course, lifting his fists to the sky and howling. When his voice was lost in the clamor, he cast Titanic Aspect and redoubled his efforts, and this time his roars echoed out through the canyon with the best of them.

He leaped over several dead or gravely injured hunters to land near the wyrm's tail and sought out his wonderful axe, eager to see how she'd fared. As he reached for the tail, meaning to twist it so he could see Lifedrinker's haft, a rough hand gripped his arm near the elbow and pulled him back, "Hold up, offworlder, we wait for Cayle to assign loot."

"I'm not going for loot," Victor growled, jerking his shoulder around to look at who spoke. It was the big Vesh with the enormous black horn jutting out of his forehead, Bricker. "My axe is stuck in the tail, and I'm going to pull her out." Victor reached his hand back toward the tail, but the guy jerked his arm again, and though Victor was titan-sized, the Vesh was stronger, much stronger, than he looked. "If you don't stop doing that . . ." he growled, feeling his rage begin to stoke, feeling it start to bleed into his pathways.

"What's the trouble here?" a cheerful, feminine voice asked. Victor turned his head past Bricker to see Tes strolling forward. "The beast's last heart just stopped beating. Energy will be flowing soon; no need to quarrel, Bricker."

"I'm not quarreling; I'm just making sure this offworlder doesn't get greedy."

"Nonsense! I can see his axe jutting out," she stepped past Victor and effortlessly lifted the enormous tail, "just here. See it?" she asked, pointing to Lifedrinker's half-buried haft. As Bricker grumbled, Tes winked at Victor, and he reached forward to grab Lifedrinker and pulled, with all his might, to free her buried head.

"Gods," Tes breathed as Lifedrinker came free. She'd changed again—her blade was broader, the bearded part longer, and no trace of the dark ore that used to be mixed with her Heart Silver remained. More than that, she gleamed and pulsed with amber Energy. At first, Victor thought she was just slick with the wyrm's blood, but that had sizzled and drifted into the air as dark smoke the moment he'd pulled her free. No, this new fiery gleam was something new, an aspect she'd stolen from the great monster.

"¡Que increíble!" Victor hissed, gingerly reaching to touch Lifedrinker's head, noting how the dark, living-wood handle had grown in girth as he held her one-handed. He hovered his fingers over the metal and was pleased not to feel any heat when he touched it, though he could feel the depths of the Energy beneath the surface, as though a lake of molten fire lurked in there.

“Do I please you, Victor?” her crystal voice asked in his mind, a new, smoky crackle lurking beneath the words.

“God, yes, chica. You’re amazing!” Victor laughed and hefted her in his mighty fists, and then he was crushed by an avalanche of Energy that surged into him—his share of the ancient wyrm kill.