

## Victor BK4: Ch34

### Book 4: Chapter 34: The Hunt Returns

The hunters' caravan traveled back to Coloss on the same route they'd used heading out, and the monsters of the waste seemed to be giving them a wide berth. Consequently, Tes didn't take Victor and Valla on more side hunts. That said, she did spend a lot of time on the return trip tutoring the two of them. In Victor's case, it was more that she gave him a peaceful place to keep working on his current projects: cultivating his Core, learning to control his aura, and studying the maddening, mind-boggling, utterly impossible spell pattern she'd given him.

He sat near the back of her floating travel platform and lost himself to the world each day. Victor started the day by making slow, steady progress with his Core in the morning hours. Then he'd break for a meal, and while he studied and tried to replicate the fragment of Tes's spell pattern, he'd dedicate part of his attention to wrestling with his aura.

During those early hours, while he worked through constructs of rage and fear and finished with an invigorating study of inspiration, Valla would hang behind the train with Tes, avoiding his aura and sparring with the dragon woman. Somehow Tes's platform trailed behind the monster hunters, always keeping him just far enough away so his aura didn't bother anyone, and by noon, Valla and Tes would race forward to join him as he ate his lunch.

When they hopped aboard the platform on the third day of leisurely travel—Cayle and her hunters seemed to be in no particular hurry to get back to Coloss—he grinned around a spoonful of bean and pork stew and proclaimed, "My Core just advanced to improved-five."

"I sensed it!" Tes said, chuckling as she and Valla sat across from him on a pair of lovely teak armchairs. Victor sat on a rug, preferring to be on the "floor" when he cultivated. "Your friend here is getting ever so fast at alternating her sword forms with Energy attacks; I'm pleased with her progress!"

Victor looked at Valla, saw her pale blue cheeks darken as she blushed, and chuckled, "Good for you, Valla. If we get back to town tomorrow, what does that leave until your duel? Something more than two weeks, right?"

"That's right," Tes nodded. "Valla will use the warlord's cultivation chamber while you're not in it, and I think with more sparring, she'll be more than ready to teach Reis a lesson in humility."

"I appreciate your confidence, Tes. Hopefully, I'll be able to afford some upgrades in town, as well."

"Oh, you certainly will." Tes glanced over her shoulder, and Victor saw that one of the hunters was approaching their platform. He was a tall, lanky Vesh with dark fur over most of his body, and he rode upon the back of a long-legged, pale creature that reminded Victor of a nearly hairless camel. "I don't think he intends trouble," Tes said quietly.

Victor swallowed his last bite of stew, stowed away the bowl, and watched as the man rode up beside their platform. "Hello," he said, his voice low and pleasant. Victor admired his armor—made

from scales smaller and more supple than the ones he'd won from the ancient wyrm. It gleamed in the bright sunlight, clearly well-maintained and full of Energy. The scales varied in color from red to burnt orange and contrasted nicely with the man's fine, turquoise riding cape.

"How fare you, Darnt?" Tes asked, and Victor shook his head, bemused—of course, she knew his name.

"Well enough. My grief and anger fade." Those words got a reaction out of Valla, and she jerked her head up from where she'd been preparing a sandwich of sorts.

She opened her mouth to speak, but the newcomer beat her to it, "I'm not here for trouble, Tes. I feel I should speak to your charge, though, to put this chapter behind me."

Valla snapped her mouth shut and locked eyes with Victor. "Who is this man?" her expression clearly said.

Tes didn't speak, and the man turned his gaze to Victor, still riding alongside their platform. He had a lupine look about him, with long, furry ears and big, golden-yellow eyes. He nodded his head in greeting, and that's when it clicked. "Krista?" Victor asked as a rush of emotion he didn't know he'd been holding back flooded his chest, constricting his throat.

"You see her in me?" Darnt asked.

"Yeah," Victor offered a quick nod, his face solemn.

"I'm not here for vengeance; what would be the justice in that? She sought death in the arena, and you gave it to her. Still, I thought you should know you didn't kill a monster. You killed my little sister, and she was good and sweet once."

"I . . ." Victor struggled for words; the man's statement had left a mark—it was true; he had built Krista into a monster in his mind. That's how he'd managed to kill her without a second thought. He didn't want to think of her as a sweet little sister; what the fuck was this guy's problem? He began to frown, a scowl forming on his face, but before he could blurt out something he might regret, Tes reached forward to lay a hand on his forearm. Her calm, light touch stole his attention, and he looked away from Darnt to her ever-changing, sometimes golden-blue, sometimes honey-green eyes.

"Hear his words, Victor." She didn't say anything more, but Victor felt his anger cooling, and he had to wonder at its source. Was it logical? He almost laughed aloud at the thought—when was anger logical?

"Krista was angry at life, and she did some terrible things," Darnt continued, oblivious to the battle Victor had been having within himself. "She would have killed you in that battle had she been able to. You see, she'd been married and

had a daughter—my niece. I won't take up your time with the tale of their demise, but they died a few years ago, and Krista was never the same—full of anger and hate, eager to see others suffer. I just wanted you to know, Victor, that though she wasn't a good person when you slew her, my sister was, once, a very kind, loving woman. I miss her."

Victor frowned again, feeling emotions making his throat thick—anger, guilt, sadness. "You know," he finally said, "I would have agreed to show mercy, but she insisted she would kill me. I'm not a monster." He nodded, setting his expression in firm resolve. "I'm not a monster," he said again, more softly.

"Well, who can blame you?" Darnt said, shaking his head. "I wanted to blame you. Wanted to be angry with you. When I saw your theatrics fighting the wyrm, I grew increasingly angry, but I spoke to Cayle and others, and they described what they saw in you, and I realized I saw through clouded eyes—what I took for grandstanding, others read as desperate valor: courage and determination. So, I come to offer you peace, Victor. I ask for one thing in exchange. Will you try to think of my sister as I once knew her? As a loving mother with kind eyes and not a hate-fueled bully?"

"I'll try," Victor said, and, to his credit, he did. He pictured Krista for the first time since the arena. He thought of how she'd taunted him before their fight, how she'd angered him, and how he'd turned her into a monster in his mind to avoid dwelling on her death. Then he realized he'd done similar things with the other people he'd killed. He felt a welling wave of disgust and gripped his hands into tight fists. "Yeah," he nodded. "I'll try to remember she was a person, not a monster."

"A hard truth that many of us must face," Tes nodded.

"Aye," Valla said, her eyes distant and her face somber. Who was she thinking of, Victor wondered.

"That's all I ask," Darnt said, then, holding up one hand in farewell, he clicked his tongue, and his long-legged, ugly mount began to trot, leaving the platform behind.

Victor sat in silence for a while, and so did Tes and Valla. When he finally spoke, he said, "I don't think I like arenas."

"Hmm?" Tes looked at him inquisitively, and Valla's far-off gaze refocused on his face.

"I know this world, well, this universe involves conflict. I know I'll have to fight again, but I don't like choosing to do so, not to the death. Not as a spectacle."

"You mean other people?" Valla asked.

At the same time, Tes asked, “Are you going to tell the warlord?” Victor was surprised to see a glimmer of amusement in her eyes.

“I guess it wouldn’t be right to keep using his chamber and whatnot if I weren’t going to fight in the next tournament.”

“What if you didn’t fight to the death?” Valla offered.

“Well,” he licked his lips, searching for the right answer. “God, it’s fucking tough! You guys don’t know how much parts of me love it in there! The heat of the crowd’s Energy, the brutal one on one competition—it all does something in here,” he thumped a fist against his chest. “I’m made for it! I guess if I could be sure I go in with the intention not to kill for others’ amusement, I could live with it. I don’t even have to tell the warlord, right? I mean, no rule in the next tournament says I have to kill my opponents.” He looked at Tes for confirmation, and she nodded.

“What if you should accidentally end someone’s life? Your dear axe is not a plaything, Victor.” Tes spoke lightly, and something told Victor she already knew how he would answer.

“If someone makes me fight hard enough to let loose with Lifedrinker, then that’s on them, but I’m going to give them every opportunity to yield before it gets to that.”

“Such a heart in that big chest,” Tes said, grinning. She glanced at Valla and said, “It makes me pity those who won’t yield all the more.”

“Well, I just hope he won’t get himself killed. You can’t hold back against someone forty levels above you, Victor.”

“Yeah, I guess.” He frowned and said, “I’ve got some time to think about it. Maybe I’ll bail out before the tournament. I doubt the warlord would chase us to Fanwath, would he?”

“Perhaps not, though I feel your future and his are more intertwined than you think.” Tes glanced down at the pink gem on Victor’s bracer, and he sighed, rubbing a thumb against the jewel.

“Yeah, probably.”

“Enough dwelling on these topics, Victor. As you said, you’ve some weeks to think about things. For now, let me congratulate you on keeping your aura in check despite that unpleasant conversation.”

“True!” Valla added, “I didn’t feel it slip at all.”

“How fares your progress with my spell pattern?” Tes asked, pressing the conversation further into the topic of Victor’s studies.

“Slow and frustrating,” Victor said, a variant of his usual response when Tes asked him about it. “I don’t get how I’m supposed to replicate these lines,” he pulled out the parchment Tes had given him, displaying the convoluted, multi-colored, twisting, writhing pattern. He pointed to the lines that, in his eyes, seemed to move constantly. “I mean, they’re never in the same place when I look at them. They’re constantly shifting.”

“Tell me, do they seem as shifting to you as when I first handed you the pattern?”

Victor thought about the question and tried to remember how he’d felt when he first looked at the spell as Tes had written it out. “No. Definitely not—the lines seemed to jump all over the place back then.”

“And yet, I’ve not altered the pattern at all. You haven’t somehow changed it on the page where I wrote it. Why do you think they seem less . . . shifting, as you put it?”

Victor wasn’t stupid, so he sat there and thought about it for a minute, and then his face split into a grin as he replied, “Because I’m starting to wrap my brain around it. I just don’t realize it’s happening because it’s slow and painful.”

“Hah! Exactly, Victor. Keep working at it. Once you’ve mastered this portion, the next one will come to you even more quickly, especially if you continue to level and improve this.” She reached forward and tapped her pointer finger on Victor’s forehead, and the two women laughed.

“Love it when you two gang up on me,” Victor grumbled, but he grinned beneath the bluster and turned back to the pattern, quite pleased to realize that he hadn’t had to actively think about controlling his aura the whole while they’d been talking.

The next day, an hour or so before noon, Coloss came into view, and the hunters cheered, startling Victor out of his meditations. He stood up on the platform, admiring the enormous walls and tall towers of the city. As his gaze moved upward, seeking out the citadel atop King’s Hill, he was, once again, awestruck by the enormity of the construction. The wall was one thing, but that towering edifice, lording over the tens of thousands of stone buildings, reminded him of just how awesome the place was, how far he had to go if he was ever going to challenge the status quo of this world and try to help Khul Bach.

“Quite a city, isn’t it?” Valla asked, and Victor jerked his gaze around, surprised she’d approached so quietly. “When we first arrived, it was at night—it didn’t seem so intimidating back then.”

“Yeah,” Victor nodded. “Where’s Tes?”

“Talking to Cayle. She’s finding out where the Spears will sell their trophies so we don’t step on their toes while offloading ours.”

“We don’t trade them directly to the City Stone?”

“No. Apparently, there’s quite a secondary market for Prize Tokens, and she thinks we’ll be able to get a good deal if we’re discerning.”

“I’ve gotta swing by Shouza’s place. The Alchemist.” Victor gestured toward the city as if pointing to the woman’s shop.

“Oh! Your arena prizes. Have you thought any more about the arena? I mean, about the next tournament? We didn’t speak much last night, and you seemed troubled. Tes has a way of steering conversation where she wants it, and I wanted to ask you if you’re feeling all right about things. I mean, while she’s busy with Cayle . . .” Valla trailed off, clearly uncomfortable with the personal discussion but feeling like she had to broach the subject.

“I’ve thought about it, and I think I’ll keep my mind open about things. I liked your idea, Valla, about not going into contests with the intent of killing, at least unless my opponent is a truly evil asshole. Although, I don’t think I can make that judgment unless I really know them beforehand. You heard Krista’s brother. She was tormented by grief!”

“Right. Just don’t get yourself killed with that big heart, Victor.” She turned, walking toward the front of the platform as it approached the enormous, wide-open city gates. “Here comes Tes.” She pointed off to the side of the column of hunters, and Victor saw Tes jogging their way, pale blue ribbons trailing behind her breezy, knee-length, lavender skirt.

She hopped onto her platform and announced, “I have a lead on a few brokers for your monster parts. Have you decided what you’ll keep as gifts to your ancestors, Victor?”

“I have, and it wasn’t easy. When I look through the prizes, a few things stand out, and no matter how I try to balance the scales with other items, I feel guilt in my gut, and I know they won’t be pleased if I hold back.”

Valla frowned at his words, but Tes grinned and nodded, “Well?”

“I have to give them one of the hearts and two of the fangs. Nothing else seems to call to me, but I know those are probably some of the most valuable items I got.” He frowned but shrugged, helpless to change how his instincts spoke to him.

“It’s wise to listen to your intuition; it’s part of who you are now.” Tes nodded and gave Valla’s shoulder a reassuring squeeze. “It leaves a great horde of trophies for you to work with, don’t worry.”

“For Victor to work with,” Valla agreed, apparently relieved that Victor wasn’t burning up half his haul.

“With the night brute trophies and your shares from the wyrm, I think you’ll both be rather pleased by what we can accrue. I’d like to offer you each a gift, as well.” Tes stopped speaking for a moment as they passed through the tremendously thick wall, the long tunnel swallowing up the sun and pitching them into cool shade.

“A gift?” Valla prompted.

“Yes! If Victor is willing to hold back some of his scales, I’d like to craft you each some wyrm-scale armor.”

“Um, Fough showed me a wyrm-scale vest he had for sale . . .”

“Bah! I was crafting better armor than Fough before I’d lost my egg horn.”

“Egg horn?” Valla narrowed her eyes.

“It’s an old saying from my world.” Tes waved a hand dismissively and continued, “What say you, Victor? Let me hold back a few dozen scales, and you’ll not be disappointed.”

“Yeah, of course, Tes.”

“Good! Here’s what we’ll do: I’ll go and arrange for some brokers to visit the citadel, and you can make your trades there this evening. In the meantime, you should visit the alchemist for your commissions. Valla, go with him and ask the shopkeeper about some acuity-boosting tinctures.”

“Acuity-boosting?”

“Yes! Let’s give your mental attributes a bit of an early jump as you embark on improving yourself.”

“Oh,” Valla nodded, though she looked a little embarrassed, “All right.”

“Good! Hop off the platform, please,” Tes said as they approached the end of the tunnel. “Time to pack it up. I’ll meet you at the citadel later.” Victor and Valla jumped off the platform’s left side, hurriedly climbing onto the sidewalk near the busy gate road. Tes remained on her floating vehicle, waving to them as she disappeared around a street corner, flowing with the quick-moving traffic of wagons and mounts.

“She just ditched us,” Victor laughed.

“Do you know the way to the alchemy shop?” Valla asked, leaning back into the stones of the gatehouse, avoiding a stomping, grumbling Degh.

“Yeah, I think so,” Victor nodded. “Follow me,” he said and cast Titanic Aspect, grinning as his height stretched to the point where he could look down on most Degh. Then he reached down, holding out a hand, and Valla giggled, almost childlike, as she stretched her hand up to grasp his pointer finger. Victor chuckled, his deep voice rumbling in his chest, then pushed his way into the Degh lane of pedestrians and, Valla in tow, lightly jogging to keep up, he cleared the way for them as they hurried through the city toward Shouza’s shop.