

## Victor BK4: Ch36

Book 4: Chapter 36: Desperation and Trust

When Victor and Valla stood before the huge bronze-colored door to the warlord's cultivation chamber, she paused and looked at him with a raised eyebrow, "You think this will open for us? I hadn't thought about if we'd need an escort to get in there."

"One way to find out. Give it a try." Victor shrugged and leaned one shoulder against the wall, watching.

"Why me?"

"Are you afraid it'll zap you or something?"

"No . . . well, yes," Valla chuckled, then, moving quickly as though to avoid any further doubts, she reached up and slapped her hand on the smooth metal pad Tronk had used to open the doors. She didn't cry out in pain or jerk her hand away, and after a second, a deep, resounding \*click\* sounded from the door, and it parted slightly from the other.

"Nice," Victor said, grinning. "Guess you're first."

"Are you sure?" Valla turned to look at him, eyes wide, as though suddenly filled with doubt about whether she should go into the chamber.

"Relax! If the warlord cared, he wouldn't have set the chamber to open for you. Just cultivate for an hour or so and drink your tincture, and then I'll go. I'm sure Tes will be a little while anyway."

Valla nodded, her hair bobbing in its ponytail, and Victor realized, likely quite belatedly, that it had grown considerably since they'd begun traveling together. He opened his mouth to say something, then wondered if she'd be annoyed that he'd noticed, and before he had a chance, she'd slipped into the cultivation chamber, bathing him in a wash of potent Energy before closing the door behind her. "Huh," he shrugged and sat on one of the stone benches lining the chamber's entry.

Victor pulled out the two stat-boosting tinctures he intended to consume and looked at them. The first, the one he'd gotten long ago in the dungeon near Greatbone Mine, was about the size of a soda can, and he wondered if the liquid, which seemed far too much like blood to him, would taste better than it looked. "Hope so," he grunted, then held up the shimmering silver tincture that Shouza had made—one swallow, and it would be gone. "You're first."

He set them on the bench beside him and then settled in to wait. On a whim, he took Tes's partial spell pattern out of his ring and began to study it for the hundredth time. He was pleased to see the shifting lines, shapes, and angles seemed less random than the last time he examined the pattern, and that's when something clicked for him: the shifts were, themselves, part of the pattern. The more he watched them, the more he realized that Tes had created a spell pattern in more than one dimension—it was like one of those old-school holograms that looked different if you altered your viewing angle.

“What the fuck?” he whispered, drawing out the curse softly as he watched the pattern change back and forth before his eyes. “I think I get it, chica,” he said, resting a hand on Lifedrinker’s warm metal. If he really concentrated, he found he could force the pattern to stay still, see the first version, and then allow it to shift and see the other. The more he did so, the more he began to understand how it worked; he saw the delicate lines Tes had made that created the extra dimension in the spell.

“Holy shit,” he breathed again, thinking of how he could copy the design. Before he could lose the inspiration, he summoned one of his notebooks and then laughed at his thought, “Inspiration!” Shaking his head, he cast Inspiring Presence and summoned a Globe of Insight, and then, in the light of true inspiration, he began to try to recreate the weird, multi-dimensional spell pattern.

When Tes had drawn the original, Victor had watched with awe as she delicately scribed the complicated lines onto her parchment, and it had taken her more than ten minutes. His first, proper attempt at the pattern, sitting there before the closed door of the warlord’s cultivation chamber, stretched on and on, and when Valla pushed open the door and stepped out, he didn’t notice her, so rapt with his efforts was he.

“Victor?” she asked, and when he didn’t look up and she felt the inspiration of his spells, she nodded and turned to re-enter the chamber. Quietly, over her shoulder, she said, “I’ll check on you again in an hour.” Then she stepped through the door, and it clicked shut behind her.

Victor was lost to the world, though, and if he’d noticed it at all, her presence didn’t shake his attention. He could feel that he was on the right track; the bits of the pattern he’d finished were working. He could shift his attention and see both versions of it, and with each successful line and twist, he grew more confident and more determined to finish. By the time Valla stepped out of the chamber again, she could see the grin on his face and the light in his eyes, and when she spoke, he looked up to meet her gaze, “You figured it out?”

“Hell yes, I did!” he replied, holding up his notebook for her to see the wild, endlessly complex pattern. “I’ve been going over and over it—I can’t find any mistakes! It looks just like Tes’s.”

“So . . . you can change your size now?” Valla leaned forward, trying to get another glimpse of the pattern, but he closed the notebook, sandwiching Tes’s original inside. He laughed, stretched, and shook his head.

“Nah, this is only the first part of the spell. Now I get how it works, though, Valla!” He stood up and increased the intensity of his stretching, grunting with pleasure, “God! How long was I working on that thing?”

“Nearly two hours.”

“Hah! So it’s my turn in there, I’d say.”

Valla nodded, sketching a silly bow, and stepped away from the door, gesturing for him to pass before her. “Be my guest! I’ll wait out here. I imagine Tes will be here soon, don’t you think?”

“Well, I guess. It’s just now evening time, though, and she said ‘tonight,’ so who really knows.” Victor laughed again, his mood beyond good thanks to his breakthrough with the spell pattern, and walked up to the cultivation chamber door. Valla had left it open a crack, so he pulled it further open and walked in, savoring the richly dense Energy in the air. “Be out soon,” he said as he pulled the door closed behind himself.

He turned and inhaled deeply, letting the Energy wash over him for a moment, acclimating himself, and then he climbed to the small circular platform at the chamber’s center and sat, crossing his legs before himself. He clutched the tincture and potion in one of his hands, carefully set the blood-like jar in his lap, then held the silver mixture before himself. “Well, here we go,” he muttered, running one of his thumbnails around the wax seal, loosening the outer edges so he could carefully pry the black lump from the mouth of the little glass tube.

As soon as the wax came out, Victor, still flooded with inspiration-attuned Energy, tilted it to his mouth, not wanting any of the potent fumes to escape. The glass must have been enchanted because not a single molecule of the mixture clung to it—every last bit of it slipped into his mouth, and he swallowed it in one gulp. It was surprisingly tasteless, almost like swallowing an oddly heavy mouthful of water. It didn’t sit in his stomach like water, though.

Victor felt it bloom with Energy in his gut, and then, almost painfully, it surged out through his body in a powerful wave that sent tingles and shivers through every inch of his skin and made his muscles contract so, by the time he recovered, he found himself balled up, his muscles aching from the prolonged contraction. “Oof,” he grunted, then, bleary-eyed, he studied the System message in his vision:

“Congratulations! Your Vitality and Strength have each been permanently enhanced by 25 points.\*\*\*

“Damn,” he said, surprised by the number. “Fifty stat points just like that?” He reached for his other potion and almost panicked when he found it had rolled to the side of the platform, knocked out of his lap by his convulsion. He snatched it up, glad it hadn’t fallen off the raised dais to shatter on the stones below. He held it carefully in one hand while he stretched and arched his back, trying to get his blood flowing again.

Victor felt good, healthy, and strong, and he knew if he’d drunk that tincture when he was new to Fanwath, it would have been like shooting himself up with pure endorphins and PCP, but twenty-five points for him now were just a couple of percentage points or so of his strength and even less for his vitality. Still, it was good to see those numbers jump—twenty-five points in strength before casting Berserk was seventy-five after.

“Nothing to sneeze at,” he said, grinning as he broke the seal on the cork stopper and carefully pulled it out of the jar. He wasn’t surprised but wasn’t exactly happy when his nose picked up the potion’s coppery tang. It might be an

alchemical mixture from the System, but it definitely had some kind of blood in it. Victor wasn't squeamish about a bit of blood, though. How could he be after all the raw hearts he'd consumed? Sure, he'd been Berserk, but he'd be lying if he said he didn't remember the taste. "Mierda," he grumbled, then, taking a deep breath so he didn't inhale while drinking, he tilted it to his mouth and gulped it down.

"Yep, blood!" he coughed, forcing his mouth closed so as not to lose any of the supposedly precious liquid. He breathed in and out several times, waiting to see what might happen, and he began to think he, or Shouza, he supposed, had been tricked. "Ack," he said again, sticking his tongue out, about to reach into his dimensional container for some cheb-cheb or wine to wash his mouth out, and then he felt a terrible cramp in his gut and gasped, doubling over and falling to his side on the stone platform.

The cramping continued, and it seemed to be spreading. With each convulsion, more of his muscles joined into the protest, his arms curling in, his legs painfully bending, and Victor struggled for breath, wanting to scream but unable to pull in a deep enough breath. "Jesu . . ." he managed to get out between two particularly brutal convulsions, and then, as quickly as it had begun, the cramping started to diminish. Within a minute or two, Victor found himself on his back, one arm sprawled out over the platform's edge, panting, blinking away the sweat that had run into his eyes.

"Holy shit," he gasped. "That was fucking brutal." He rubbed at his eyes and was relieved to see a System message—hopefully, he'd made some gains and not just survived a poisoning attempt.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have gained a new Feat: Desperate Grace.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Desperate Grace: When near death or suffering from severe blood loss, your body will rise to the occasion, allowing you to move with adroitness far beyond your usual means. When this effect is triggered, your current dexterity and agility will double for a short time.\*\*\*

"What the hell, Shouza?" Victor chuckled, relieved and surprised by the notification. Another part of him was dismayed that he'd sat on that potion for months. How many times might that feat have come in handy? Groaning, he struggled to his hands and knees and then laboriously to his feet. He felt weak, drained even, and decided that cultivating would have to wait. He stumble-walked to the door, slapped a hand on the metal plate, and then shouldered his way through as the door clicked open.

"Why am I not surprised to see you both sitting there," he asked as he took in the sight of Valla and Tes, shoulder to shoulder, on the stone bench, both carefully scrutinizing a textbook on Valla's knees.

"You look awful," Valla laughed.

“Ancient Gods!” Tes said, eyes widening, though her lips also twitched up at the corners.

“Yeah, that fucking Shouza!” Victor couldn’t help it and laughed, too, shaking his head. “Nah, I’m good, but that old potion of mine didn’t raise my stats. It twisted me into knots and gave me a feat.”

“Oh?” Tes asked while Valla’s eyes widened.

“You’re the luckiest . . .” Valla trailed off, shaking her head, though her smile remained intact.

“Well,” Victor shrugged, “what can I say?”

“Tell us about the feat to begin with,” Tes said, leaning back and crossing her legs. She wore the same brightly colored yellow skirts she’d worn on the early days of the hunt, and Victor admired how at ease she always seemed.

“It’s called Desperate Grace, and it boosts my agility and dexterity when I’m about to die. I mean, I guess that’s assuming I’m dying slowly.” He laughed, thinking about how such a feat was essentially useless if he suffered some sort of catastrophic injury.

“The more powerful you become, the less likely you’ll die suddenly. Battles between old . . .” she winked at Victor and continued, “masters on my world sometimes last for days.” He wondered if she had been about to say dragons, then chuckled at his naivety—of course she had; that’s what the wink was about.

“What about you, Valla? I forgot to ask how your tincture worked?”

“Oh, wonderfully!” Valla beamed. “Shouza treated me well, Victor! I gained thirty intelligence and fifteen will!”

“Seriously? Damn! She makes good stuff, doesn’t she?” Victor turned from Valla to Tes, then said, “Well, did Valla tell you?”

“Tell me what?” Tes asked, glancing sidelong at Ardeni woman who looked just as confused.

“About what I did before I went into the chamber?” Victor stared pointedly at Valla. When she still looked confused, he said, “Seriously, Valla? I finished your spell pattern, Tes!”

“You did?” Tes leaped to her feet and reached forward to squeeze Victor’s shoulder. “I thought you’d be another week or two at it!”

“Well, it just clicked for me today; I figured out the double patt . . .”

“Tut-tut,” Tes said, holding four delicate fingertips in front of Victor’s mouth, “let’s not advertise one of the secrets of my people’s magic. I’ve agreed to share this

one with you, at a bit of a risk to myself, but let's not speak about the details publicly.”

Victor looked toward the closed cultivation chamber and down the long flight of stairs into the empty, vaulted corridor and shrugged. Either Tes didn't want Valla to hear about the spell's details, or she thought maybe others were listening or capable of listening to their conversation.

Victor didn't think it was the former—Tes hadn't asked him not to show her the pattern or anything like that.

He supposed it made sense that the warlord might have some kind of magical ability to feel or sense what was going on in the citadel, his domain. Victor had no idea what a person with nearly a hundred and twenty levels under their belt was capable of. Glancing at Tes, he supposed he had an inkling, which made him wonder exactly what level she had reached. He almost asked, but then Valla stood up and spoke.

“Tes has a broker waiting for us in the garden.”

“Oh?”

“Oh yes! I believe you'll be pleased; he's interested in wyrm trophies but has a particular interest in night brutes. Let's go and put your wares on display for him, hmm?” Tes stepped away from Victor and gestured toward the steps as though she wanted him to lead the way.

“Right,” Victor nodded, stepping lithely down; he was already starting to feel better. With his near-constant use of Sovereign Will these days, his vitality was almost always boosted, and with it now sitting at nearly 400, his aches and pains faded rapidly.

He wasn't an expert on the layout of the citadel yet, but he knew he had to get to the ground floor and had a general idea of the location of the major stairways. Equipped with such knowledge, Victor led them rapidly down, and into the enormous central hallway, and from there, it was just a short jaunt to the central gardens. When they stepped into the artificial moonlight and the brightly-lit lamp posts that followed the main pathways through the thick foliage, Victor had to pause to marvel at the garden's beauty. It was great in the bright light of false daytime, but this nighttime version was even better.

Cloying perfumes from the myriad varieties of flowers filled the air, and the dim light made it easy to imagine that they weren't in the citadel, that they were outside in a wonderfully manicured little forest with shrubs and pathways, fountains burbling, and night birds singing. Glancing at Tes and Valla, Victor suddenly wished he were with someone else, someone closer. He imagined how much Chandri or Thayla would love the garden. Still, Valla had a bright grin on her face, and Tes, well, Tes was always fun to be around.

“He'll be near the western entrance,” Tes said, steering them onto a pathway leading to Victor's right.

“It's beautiful at night,” Valla said, echoing Victor's earlier thoughts, and he smiled down at her.

“Yeah, I was thinking that. Do you remember Deyni? The little Shadeni girl I gave my other vidanii to?”

“Of course. Thayla’s daughter.”

“Right! I wish I could show her this wonderful place.”

“There are many wonders in the worlds, Victor.” Tes turned to walk backward and smiled at him and then at Valla. “I think the two of you have many amazing places and things yet to experience. I hope I’ll be able to see the marvel in your eyes as you behold some of them.” She nodded quickly, then turned and hurried her steps. Victor glanced down at Valla again, saw her pleasant expression, and at that moment, he appreciated Tes even more. She was powerful enough to be a tyrant or a bully, but she seemed to enjoy helping people—he’d never seen her speak a cross word, only hardening her voice when it came to defending Victor a time or two.

Something tickled the back of his mind as he followed her springy steps through the garden; was anyone really that good? He knew she wanted a sample of his blood, but that would be easy enough to take; she didn’t have to spend weeks or months helping him and Valla. Did she get a kind of vicarious thrill from helping people? If so, he wouldn’t begrudge her—better that than enjoying other people’s suffering. Besides, she’d trusted him with her spell pattern, and he’d never felt uneasy with her. His gut trusted her, and Victor trusted his gut.

“Here we are!” Tes called, hurrying her pace toward an opening in the cobbled path. Victor looked over her shoulder to see a strange, hirsute Vesh wearing a silky, creme-colored vest and a black top hat. His bulging yellow eyes lurked behind thick, brass-wired spectacles, and his smile, though toothy, was warm as he raised a hand in greeting.

His voice was jovial and welcoming, rolling through the garden as he called out, “Wonderful! I look forward to seeing your wares!”