

Victor BK4: Ch40

Book 4: Chapter 40: Iron

After that first day of practice with Yabbo and Karnice, Victor's day-to-day life fell into a kind of uneasy, watchful routine. At the start of each day, he'd go to the warlord's cultivation chamber, where he'd work on his Core, slowly pushing it closer and closer to rank nine of the "improved" tier. After that, he'd spar with Yabbo with Karnice's rather gruff and violent guidance. Then, he'd sit with Tes and Valla in their suite and study his spell pattern in the evenings, usually exhausted with dozens of new, rapidly fading scars.

The cultivation was going well; each rank was like a deeper trench in the ocean of Energy than the one before it, but he knew nine would be a sheer cliff the size of a mountain, and he hoped the tincture he'd gotten from the arena would be enough to push him through it. Still, his gains were huge with each cycle of his drill in the profound, rich Energy of the chamber, and it only took Victor four days to go from rank six to rank eight; he could feel that he was on the verge of nine.

The sparring was another matter. Each day Karnice tried to egg Victor into using a different set of skills, trying to push him into pulling from his different affinities. Knowing what he did about the Vesh, especially the powerful ones like Karnice and the warlord, Victor was reluctant to put his talents on display. He'd stubbornly refuse to use anything other than his Berserk and weapon skills with the deadly spearman, despite punishing lessons that left him bleeding and battered. Karnice typically stormed off after losing his temper, and Victor would be left to spar with Yabbo, which he much preferred in any case.

Tes and Valla kept him sane during those days—he'd come back to their suite to the scent of great feasts, and they'd drink and eat, laughing and telling stories for hours before Victor and Valla pulled out their studies. Tes helped them, Valla with her new spells, and Victor with the singular, impossibly complicated pattern that spanned more than a meter of rolled-up parchment. Still, he made progress, and with each section he memorized, Tes celebrated with him as though he'd done something inconceivable.

On the morning of their fifth day of this routine, Victor broke through to the ninth rank with his Core and was surprised when a System message appeared before him:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 45 Titanic Herald, gained 6 strength, 11 vitality, 6 dexterity, 6 agility, 6 intelligence, and 6 will.*****

"Nice!" he grunted, the word echoing in the circular stone chamber. He sat there contemplating for a moment, his immediate thoughts drawn to the Core breakthrough tincture. Should he drink it right away? He could wait until later and ask Tes about it, or he could ask Khul Bach now. "Or I could just drink it."

Setting aside the thought for the moment, he considered the other things he had yet to consume—the epic racial boost he'd bought with tokens and the various monster hearts still lingering in his storage containers, including the one from the ancient wyrm. Tes had said to save the racial boost until he'd gone through the other improvements he was working toward, and he knew she'd meant, specifically, his Core.

Victor pulled out his watch, saw it was nearing noon, and sighed. He was getting damn sick of Karnice—sick of taking his beatings and sick of holding back his talents. He wanted nothing more than to surprise that asshole with a sound thrashing, but he knew he wasn't up for it, not yet. "Well, if I'm going to go get my ass kicked, I might as well pump up my Core first." Victor rubbed his thumb along Lifedrinker's warm, pulsing axe head, steadying his nerves, and then he pulled Shouza's bulbous, honey-colored tincture from his storage ring.

He could feel the Energy pulsing within, and when he pulled out the cork stopper, a scent like the richest, sweetest syrup imaginable hit his nose, and his mouth filled with saliva. With a great effort of will, he steadied his hand and forced himself to drain the concoction calmly. When it touched his tongue, his tastebuds burst to life, tingling with ecstasy, and though Victor tried to savor the taste, he found his throat reflexively gulping, and soon, the mouthful of blissfully sweet syrup was in his stomach.

In the back of his throat, he felt the deep notes of herbs and spices, and he coughed a little, feeling a weird rawness in the wake of the tincture's passage. He sat for a moment, wondering if he should be feeling something, wondering if he'd done something wrong. Was he supposed just to drink it? It was for his Core—should he have tried to cultivate from it?

Before his thoughts could spiral out of control, something happened in his gut. A tiny spark seemed to have ignited in there—a single hot spot in the center of his stomach, at first warm and pleasant, like you might feel after drinking a strong shot of liquor on a cold day. Then the spot of warmth became an ember, became a hot coal, became a scorching lump of magma. Victor doubled over in pain and, not knowing what else to do, turned his gaze inward to his Core.

Sure enough, he saw the dense, rapidly pulsing orbs of his affinities, and nearby, bleeding out of reality and into his inward vision, he saw the scorching sun of the ball of Energy that had to be the result of the tincture. Victor instinctively reached out with his will and began pulling threads out of that white-hot orb of Energy into his three attunement orbs. The Energy was malleable and easy to tug, and soon three wide ribbons were flowing, one each, into his fear, inspiration, and rage affinities. As the Energy flowed, the burning in his gut faded, and Victor knew he was on the right track.

The ball of hot, vibrant Energy seemed to be incredibly dense. Victor had to tug strands of Energy out of it for a very long time before it seemed to dim slightly. Meanwhile, his affinity orbs were pulsing and swelling, brighter than he'd ever seen them. Still, he kept pulling on those threads, kept pushing them into his Core, and as some inner sense screamed at him that his Core was ready to burst, he pushed and pulled even more.

"Let's go!" he roared, somewhere between discomfort and pain but feeling like a bomb was getting ready to go off in his gut. Still, his Core pulsed and stretched, each of his affinity orbs blindingly bright, even the dark, purple-black fear attunement—when he looked at it, everything else was obscured by its violent pulses.

The ball of Energy from the tincture was still flaring brightly, and Victor knew there was more he was supposed to do. Finally, in desperation, he began to channel the threads of Energy through his

pathways, running the full circuit around his body, filling them to bursting before he let them feed into his Core. Finally, that seemed to do something. The ball of Energy from the tincture was gone. Just the Energy in his pathways was left, and as it began to feed into his Core, he felt like he'd tipped some sort of scale, and suddenly he didn't have to push or pull on the Energy—it rushed into his Core like it was falling down a drainpipe.

Victor's Core pulsed violently. Each of his blazing attunements seemed to stretch, pushing outward into each other, bleeding together into a great ball of dark, shimmering Energy that expanded outward, flooding his pathways, burning them, stretching them, growing them. It felt like someone had filled his veins with magma, and Victor lifted his head and screamed as the process spread outward, through his chest and stomach, into his arms and legs, and up into his head.

It felt slow and agonizing, but before Victor could even contemplate allowing his conscious mind to slip away into oblivion, it was over. The Energy suddenly snapped back to his Core, and his three affinities contracted into tight, incredibly dense, slowly pulsing, calmly orbiting balls of attuned Energy. Gasping and sweating, Victor watched his Core for a long moment, admiring how the Energy seemed more solid than before.

The orbs used to look like they were mostly light, wispy, and bright, sure, but now they seemed more solid—truly weighty with their potential. Victor knew he'd have to cultivate for a long time, gaining levels and consuming treasures to make those newly dense orbs strain to hold what he fed them. "It's gonna take a while to get to epic," he chuckled, wiping sweat from his brow. He started to turn away from his Core, and that's when he noticed his pathways.

They were easily twice as broad as before; his one-lane road for Energy had become a divided highway. "Was this what Tes meant? Can I manage more than one powerful spell now? Can I go Berserk and still cast Inspiring Presence?" Victor knew the answer—of course, that's what she'd meant. "Hell yeah," he grunted, struggling to his feet. He picked up Lifedrinker and added, "Let's go see if we can cut that asshole, hmm?"

As he walked through the citadel, Victor reached into his storage ring and pulled out an item he'd been holding onto for quite some time. He held up the belt he'd gotten so long ago from the creepy alien who'd been hunting Tellen and his men and, as he channeled a bit of Energy into it, reread the System message:

*****Dragonsteel Belt of Energy Absorption - Prerequisite for use: Advanced tier Core or higher. This belt will absorb Energy attacks aimed at the wearer. It will absorb a total of 4500 points of Energy before it needs to process the absorbed Energy and reset, becoming inert for up to twelve hours.*****

Considering Victor now had just a bit more than 7900 Energy, he figured being able to absorb 4500 Energy worth of attacks was a pretty big deal. If someone comparable to himself were attacking him, he could ignore half of their Energy abilities. "Am I thinking of that correctly?" he wondered aloud. He supposed the belt couldn't absorb physical abilities that cost someone Energy to perform, like a special weapon attack. Still, it should be able to absorb pure Energy—things like lightning bolts or fireballs.

He shrugged, unhooking his old belt and weaving the beautiful, shimmering, silvery-blue metallic belt through the loops on his pants. He'd taken on his Titanic Aspect and, so, made good time

through the Citadel. As he strode down the steps toward the practice yard, Victor contemplated what he'd already taken for granted—he now had over 7900 total Energy.

He knew part of the reason for his increase was, obviously, the leveling of his Core, but he also was cognizant of the enormous boost he was getting with each level thanks to the forced increase of his intelligence. The more he realized how valuable his other attributes were, the more he appreciated his new class; it was nice not having to deliberate what points to put where—having every attribute improve was a nice change of pace.

“Victor, you're late.” Karnice's voice was a harsh growl, and Victor didn't respond as he lightly jogged down the steps into the sand.

Yabbo was waiting for him with a raised fist, and Victor punched his hairy knuckles with a grin, “Yabbo.”

“Victor.”

“Now that the pups have greeted each other, are you ready for some work?” Karnice snarled, stepping closer and leaning on his spear. “I've already taught Yabbo a few new techniques. Do you know why, Victor?” When Victor just shrugged, he said, “Because he doesn't hold back! Are you ready to push yourself today? Are you ready to show me what you can do?”

Victor had heard the speech before, yet again, he tried to explain, “I'm trying to improve my Berserk and axe skill. You're a good whetstone.”

Karnice growled, clearly not pleased by being called a tool. “Go ahead and Berserk, but show me more! Damn it, Victor! We all saw you use a dozen other skills and spells in the arena. Why are you hiding what you can do?”

“My ancestors want me to keep working on this ability.” Victor grinned, pleased at his dodge. It sounded like something Thayla might say, and who could argue with the desires of someone's ancestors?

“So. Another beating, hmm?” Karnice's spear ignited with red, baleful Energy, and he beckoned for Victor to approach.

Victor sighed, lifted Lifedrinker, and cast Berserk. As his vision tinted with red and his form expanded in size, his muscles straining against his simple shirt as it hurriedly expanded, he noticed something strange. His mind felt clear, and he saw a message from the System:

*****Congratulations! Your spell, Berserk, has morphed!*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned a new spell: Iron Berserk - Epic.*****

*****Iron Berserk - Epic: Prerequisites: Affinity - Rage, One of Several Elder Bloodlines, Epic Will Attribute. You double your strength and speed for a short while, losing yourself in the glory of combat. Your body becomes more resilient, and you benefit from rapid regeneration throughout the duration. With this variant of the Berserk ability, your powerful will and experience with rage have allowed you to retain your sense of self and rational thought, and**

your body's resilience is peerless. Energy Cost: Minimum 500 - scalable. Cooldown: Medium.***

Victor laughed as he read the words and wiped the message away. He laughed again when a hundred balls of deep purple Energy burst into being around him and rushed toward his chest, flooding his pathways with the influx. Still, even euphoric and amused, he remained Berserk. He could feel the rage simmering in his pathways, feel it causing his heart to thud passionately. He could taste the lust for battle and desire to see his enemies ground to paste.

Despite those influences, Victor was still himself. He grinned at Karnice and stepped sideways, further into the sand, hefting Lifedrinker before himself, slapping her haft into his other hand, and holding her sideways. On a whim, he cast Inspiring Presence, considering Yabbo his ally and Karnice his foe, and, sure enough, the spell surged through his pathways, finding space alongside his rage.

Victor grinned, his vision growing brighter, though still tinted with a haze of pink. Everything seemed more clear—Karnice was angry but intrigued. The way he held his spear made it evident he'd be sweeping it from left to right, attempting to take Victor off balance and strike him with the haft as he charged in. It was so obvious that Victor had to laugh again.

“Quit laughing like a fool and let's dance,” Karnice spat, literally, chasing the words with a gob of thick saliva into the sand.

Victor didn't need another invitation. He charged, lifting Lifedrinker but only feinting with her. Just as he'd envisioned, Karnice brought his spear around in a sweep, but Victor was ready; he raised his left foot, stomped down on the haft, and then, fast as he could, he brought Lifedrinker down toward Karnice's topmost left shoulder. Victor had been boosting his agility and vitality with Sovereign Will, and with Iron Berserk increasing his speed and Inspiring Presence helping his timing, Lifedrinker cut the air like a thunderbolt.

Karnice, off balance because of Victor's stomp to his spear, surprised by his accuracy and speed, cast some sort of Energy spell, causing his body to shimmer with red heat and flash back over the sand, abandoning his weapon. Still, the furthest edge of Lifedrinker's blade sliced a straight, razor-clean gash in his shoulder as he retreated.

Victor stood atop Karnice's spear, turned his axe so he could see the tiny, bloody smear on her gleaming edge, and he lifted his head to the sky and howled. Karnice was furious. He rubbed at his shoulder, smirked at the tiny wound, and then spat into the sand again. Then he did what usually took ten or fifteen minutes to provoke—he swelled himself with Energy, created his giant, fiery doppelganger, and proceeded to try to beat the hell out of Victor.

It was different this time, though. Victor was rational and clever—inspired, you might say. More than that, he was exceptionally resilient. Karnice and his double pushed him back, driving him away from his spear, but it wasn't easy, and Victor saw the strain on Karnice's face as he bent to retrieve his weapon. With his spear in hand, his fiery double suddenly sprouted four spears, as usual, and attacked Victor with speed and vengeance.

The spears bit into him, but unlike before, when they left painful, deep, throbbing holes that ate up Victor's rage to heal, this time, they hardly sank into his flesh. The fire's touch was more a singe

than a burn, healing almost instantly. Karnice roared in frustration and redoubled his efforts, summoning spells that Victor hadn't yet seen.

A sheet of fiery Energy blasted out of the sand, engulfing Victor, burning his clothes, and reddening his skin. He rolled out of it, angry at having yet another pair of pants ruined, but otherwise hardly hurt. Karnice looked fit to burst, and Victor felt the full weight of his aura and his prodigious store of Energy when he lifted his spear above his head, screamed, and cast a spell that darkened the sky with red clouds. Suddenly lances of bright, burning, crimson Energy shot down in their hundreds, peppering Victor and the sand around him with tiny magmatic explosions.

Victor dove and flipped, sweeping his axe left and right, and finally, as a few of the spears made contact, driving deep lances of Energy into his flesh, he simply turned toward the citadel and used Titanic Leap. He exploded out of the pit in a shower of sand, flying out of the dark, red cloud's area of influence and landing with a concussive thud on the top steps, some fifty yards away from where they'd been "sparring."

Victor could hear his belt hissing and ticking, and he knew it had eaten some of those fiery lances for him. He patted the hot metal thankfully, then looked at Karnice, standing in the pit, fury writ on his face. Victor lifted Lifedrinker in a mocking salute, then he turned to Yabbo and shouted, "Catch up with you later, Yabbo. I'm done with these lessons."