

## **Victor BK4: Ch9**

### Book 4: Chapter 9: Visualizing a Goal

Victor felt the roar of the crowd more than he heard it. He could feel their emotion and the Energy they were pouring out, flowing through the air toward him; it was palpable, thick, and hot, and his body and Core responded to it. He stretched his arm upward, Lifedrinker's edge glinting in the morning sunlight, and turned in a slow circle, displaying her gleaming silvery blade to each corner of the arena.

**"I yield!"** Kreecia said again, panting in pain.

Victor turned to her, his eyes dark with bloodlust, and she flinched back. He walked around her, circling, turned toward the high, crenelated stand where he assumed the nobility were seated and roared. It wasn't anything spectacular, that roar—he was just his normal human size, not even Berserk. Still, the savagery in his voice wasn't something that could be mistaken, and he drove it forth from his throat with a burst of potent, pure, rage-attuned Energy.

If the crowd responded to his scream, he couldn't tell—already, their thunderous noise was too much for his ears to filter. Still holding Lifedrinker high in his right hand, he stomped toward Kreecia and bared his teeth in a savage grin. He said, his voice heavy with subdued fury, held at bay by his iron will, "Don't worry." Then he casually lowered Lifedrinker and walked toward his tunnel, watching the portcullis, waiting for it to rise so he could get out of the focus of those mad people.

The crowd instantly turned on him. Roaring and cheering, screaming for blood one moment, then booing and hissing and stomping their feet the next. Despite their intent to shame or infuriate him, Victor almost sighed with relief; something in his Core, in his heart, in the very center of his being had been responding to those mad cheers, and it was easier to breathe and think with the crowd losing its enthusiasm.

**"Looks like the traveling warrior has decided to show mercy to our dear Kreecia! We all love a bloodbath, but let's rejoice! Kreecia lives to fight another day! Congratulations to Victor! He'll be back to fight in the next round."**

Victor scanned the arena while waiting for his tunnel to open and saw that Kreecia was sitting up and that a steel door in the opposite wall had opened. A man dressed like an honest-to-god jester, complete with a funny hat and white face paint, had come through the opening and was cartwheeling toward her.

As his portcullis started to clank open, Victor saw the clownish figure produce a small vial and hand it to the wounded fighter. She drank it, and Victor nodded, turning to walk down the tunnel to his ready room. He felt almost instant relief as he descended into that cool, stone tunnel, out of the glare of the sun and the crazy heat of the crowd's frenzy. Victor breathed more easily, the tension in his muscles relaxed, and his grip loosened on Lifedrinker's haft.

He didn't think there'd been any real risk of losing himself to that madness, that he'd execute Kreecia. No, he'd had complete control of himself the whole time, but what bothered him was how badly some part of himself had yearned for that release, yearned to be let loose from the cage where he held it, free to rampage, consequences be damned. "Is it the Quinametzin?" he asked Lifedrinker,

lifting her to rest on his shoulder. “Is it just me? Some wild part of me that loves having a crowd go nuts for my actions?”

When he re-entered his ready room, Victor was surprised to see a black lacquered box with a glimmering silver ribbon wrapped around it sitting on his bench. “Huh,” he said, stepping over to it, laying Lifedrinker to the side, and pulling one end of the silvery bow. The ribbon unraveled effortlessly, and as it fell away from the box, it shimmered into motes of silvery light that faded away with a faint tinkling sound. “Cool.” Victor picked up the box, about six inches square, and lifted the lid.

Inside, a gleaming platinum coin sat on a velvety, black cushion. A note card was nestled within, and Victor lifted it to read, “Congratulations on your first-round victory! You’ve earned a Coloss Prize Token, redeemable at the City Stone.” Victor grinned, set the box and its contents atop the locked stone chest that held his other belongings, then picked up Lifedrinker and went out the door to the larger, shared, ready room. He wanted to watch the next fight.

When he pushed open his door, several people sitting on the central row of benches and watching the colorful “viewport” turned their heads his way, and a few nodded respectfully. He smiled and walked over to sit down, several feet between him and the next gladiator. Victor wanted to be left alone, wanted just to watch his future competition, but he wasn’t surprised when Krista’s familiar voice said, “Lucky match-up on your first round, Deshi.”

He ignored her, eyes trained on the screen, watching two Vesh fighting furiously in the center of the arena. One combatant was a man with dark black fur and skin, spikes running down the middle of his skull and spine, and long, claw-tipped arms. The other was a woman that Victor would have sworn was half deer; she had antlers, soft, fuzzy fur on her cheeks, and a moist, black nose.

“Not going to talk to us about your victory? Did you bribe the Arena Master to put you up against that slow oaf?”

“Quiet, Krista,” a deep, menacing voice said, and Victor turned to see the speaker. Sitting on the floor in the corner, but still at eye level with most of the other combatants, was an enormous Degh giant. He had leathery, tanned skin, a shaven head, and glowering red eyes deeply set beneath a brooding brow. To Victor’s astonishment, Krista didn’t reply; she snarled and moved to sit on the bench a good dozen feet away. The huge Degh made eye contact with Victor, and though Victor nodded his appreciation, the giant looked away, almost dismissively.

Victor looked back to the viewport in time to see the deer-like woman, kneeling with a severed arm, being executed by the dark, spined Vesh. He’d cast some sort of spell, summoning ropy tendrils of shifting, razored sand that wrapped around her, and, as the crowd went wild, he held up a dark, taloned hand and made a fist. At the same time, his sandy bonds squeezed the woman, slicing her into several bloody segments.

“Damn him!” a familiar voice cursed, and Victor turned to see the rhino-nosed man, Ronno, standing to furiously smash a fist against the stone wall.

“Fair’s fair,” Krista said, though she didn’t look happy. She stood and quickly walked to her ready room. Before anyone could reply, she stepped inside and shut the door.

“She’s up now?” Victor asked, looking down the bench.

“Yeah,” another Vesh woman said. Victor looked around to see who else was leaving, but then he realized only seven or eight people were watching—most of the combatants must have been in their ready rooms. He turned back to the viewport to watch, wishing he could hear what was going on out there, what the announcer was saying as Krista and a lanky, gold-scaled snake man squared off. “No, not snake man,” he said softly to himself, “Yazzian.”

The fight was brutal and fast. Krista’s spear wasn’t just for show; she knew how to use it. The Yazzian didn’t wield a weapon, but he moved like liquid lightning, sliding around the arena in sparkling bursts, turning to throw balls of crackling Energy at Krista. The problem was, she wasn’t any slower than he, and her spear seemed to have a will of its own, darting out to bridge the space between them, punching through crackling Energy shields, and relentlessly poking holes in the Yazzian, each one leaving him weaker and slower.

After her first strike, it was only a matter of time; the Yazzian left trails of dark blood in the sand, and after her third strike, he never had a chance to attempt to yield; Krista jerked the spear free, winked out of existence and reappeared in a burst of red Energy behind the Yazzian, her spear firmly planted through his long, serpentine neck. His spine must have been severed because he fell, limp and lifeless, to the sand.

“Damn. She can teleport?”

“Aye, but it tires her,” said Ronno, still standing near the spot where his meaty rhino fist had cracked the stone wall.

“Fool to use it for no reason,” another Yazzian said. “Now we all know.”

“Most of us knew. Those of us that matter,” the lurking giant in the corner rumbled.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” the Yazzian asked, standing up, a gleaming, purple-limned rapier in its hand.

“Sit down, fool,” Ronno said. “You’ll be ejected for instigating violence out here. Not to mention, you don’t want to fight Jast if you don’t have to.”

In response, the copper-scaled Yazzian walked to the seventh ready room door and disappeared within. Victor shrugged, looking to see that Jast hadn’t reacted at all. He still sat in the corner, baleful red eyes trained on the viewport, completely ignoring everyone else. A few minutes later, Krista returned, flinging her ready room door open with a bang, laughing and bowing to the room. No one seemed impressed, and Victor studiously ignored her.

The next fight was between the rapier-wielding Yazzian and another giant Degh, and the Yazzian spent a good long while wearing him down with punctures and slashes, never suffering an injury to

the giant's ponderous axe cleaves. Victor wasn't impressed with the Degh's axe work; if he had to guess, he'd say the man hadn't gotten past the improved stage—he definitely was strong, but his Energy usage was minuscule, and he wasn't fast. He wanted to ask if all Degh were slow, but he knew it would cause him some trouble, especially from the lurking giant, so he just resolved to keep watching.

After the Yazzian won, Jast, the giant in the corner, stood up and moved toward his ready room. Ronno called after him, "Jast, remember our agreement."

"If possible," the man rumbled, stepping through his door, making the enormous opening look almost small. Victor wondered what that had been about, but he soon learned. Watching the viewport, he saw Jast looming large, a great, double-bladed red-metal axe in his hands, staring at Ronno's sister, Rekka. Rekka looked like a child before him, her curved shortswords like toys.

"Shit," Victor breathed, glancing at Ronno. He saw how the big man sat—slumped on the bench, head in his hands, eyes down. He expected his sister to die. Victor felt for him and wondered how he'd handle such a situation. Would he stand by, or would he go fucking get her out? He figured he'd get her out—ciertamente! His earlier wondering about Deghs and whether they were all slow was answered while he watched Jast destroy Rekka. He moved with uncanny grace, easily staying on top of the much smaller, lithe, winged woman as she tried to circle and flank him.

Rekka managed to avoid his lashing axe cleaves for a few minutes. Inevitably, though, one of them struck home, and Rekka's legs fell away at the hips in a shower of blood that looked like someone had tossed out a bucket of rubies, the way it glittered in the sunlight before splashing into the sand. Rekka's top half tumbled to a skidding stop, a copious pool of blood quickly formed around it, and Victor knew no potion would fix her.

Ronno didn't scream, didn't smash the wall, didn't wait to attack Jast. He stood, stomped to his ready room, and went inside without a word. "Damn, that's rough," Victor said as the door slammed shut.

"Rough indeed. I'd never enter a tournament with someone I loved." Victor looked to the speaker, a short, fox-eared Vesh woman. She wore tight leather armor, accentuating her feminine form, and, surprising to Victor, she had a quiver filled with silvery arrows on her back. She met his gaze, her golden irises twinkling as she smiled and said, "I'm Sanima."

"Cool to meet you. Yeah, I'm with you on that one. What if the Arena Master had put Ronno and Rekka against each other?"

"Indeed. What's your name, though?" she asked, standing from the bench to move closer. Victor found himself studying her, trying to see if anything other

than her ears was fox-like, but she had normal, darkly-tanned skin, and though her teeth were bright and sharp, they didn't look exactly like a canine's.

"Sorry; I'm Victor."

"You had some skill with that axe, and you move quickly. Should we battle together, I'll offer to spare your life if you'll do the same." She held out a slender hand, her nails sharp and painted green to match the makeup around her eyes.

"Yeah, for sure. I had the same thing going with Ronno and Rekka." Victor shook her hand, careful not to hold onto it longer than was polite.

"As did I. Ronno will fight Yarge now and may win. If so, he'll face Jast, his sister's killer, and that will be a bloody brawl."

Victor nodded, watching the screen as they cleared poor Rekka from the arena. He turned back to Sanima and said, "I guess, since we might fight, I shouldn't ask you about your secrets, but I couldn't help noticing you have a quiver on your back. They allow people to use bows in here?"

"Naturally. It's a legitimate weapon, recognized by the martial masters of all the great cities."

"Cool . . ." Victor said, trying to keep his expression neutral. He wasn't sure how he'd deal with a powerful Energy user that could pepper him with arrows from range. He could move fast, but he didn't have a teleport or anything like that. He supposed he'd call up his coyotes and use their speed and numbers to harry an archer. With that in mind, he nodded and looked back at the viewport.

Ronno was facing off with a Degh, who didn't seem so giant next to the rhino-like Vesh. He was still larger, but Ronno looked like a ball of thick skin and muscle with a horn, and Victor didn't envy the guy who had to fight him, enraged as he must be about his sister. His prediction proved correct—Ronno didn't use a weapon, per se, but he had massive metal gauntlets that exploded with steam every time he punched his opponent.

The Degh wielded an enormous ball mace, but though he seemed to be striking hard enough to crack granite, Ronno shrugged off the blows, constantly pushing inside the Degh's guard to deliver bone-cracking, steam-exploding punches that sent the giant into a retreat. Victor didn't think the giant could continue to absorb those punishing blows, and he was right again—not five minutes into the match, the giant took a knee, and Ronno backed off, granting mercy.

Ronno didn't return to the shared ready room, and the subsequent fight went nearly as quickly as Victor's had. Another spear-wielding Vesh killed a giant Degh with a lightning thrust that put the spear through his massive chest, right into his heart. The arena-issued breastplate didn't seem to slow the spear, and Victor wasn't surprised because it had glowed with brilliant silver Energy as it streaked forward. Sanima tsked as she stood up from the bench.

"My turn. I suppose I'll face him in round two. He won't find me so easy to impale, though," she chuckled, sauntering through her ready room door. Victor

looked around the nearly empty shared room and debated watching the next fight. If he'd counted correctly, it was the last one of the first round.

“One more, right?” he asked Krista, who'd been silently watching, completely ignoring him since her earlier victory.

“Right. Are you growing nervous, Deshi? Seen some displays of violence that give you pause?”

Victor contemplated ignoring her again, but he was slightly intrigued by her silence since her first match. “Looks like you have to fight that purple rapier dude next. You nervous?”

“Garl is dangerous, and I'm going to have to concentrate, but he'll fall to my spear. You're the one who should be nervous—Harf is a vicious man. You saw how he cut Necla into pieces, and that was with an Energy attack. He's just as deadly with those claws.”

“That so?” Victor couldn't help the smirk that turned his lips.

“Aye, Deshi. Run out now if you're smart. You've never faced such as us.” She stood, leaning on her enormous spear, and Victor felt a chuckle fighting to escape his throat.

“Lady, I've seen shit that would make you piss yourself where you stand. I've been through worse than what that asshole did to that antlered lady. And I lived. Worry about your own shit.”

“Antlered lady? Do you mean Necla? She was a friend, you scum.” Krista bristled and bared her sharp canines, a low growl in her throat.

“Chill out. I'm not the guy who fucked her up.” Victor stood up, hefting Lifedrinker, and turned his back to her, walking to his ready room. “I guess I'll see you in round three if you win again.” Her growl chased him through the doorway and cut off abruptly as he let the door slam. “Fucking pendeja.” He sighed and sat on his bench, trying to get his head back in the game—he was pretty sure his next fight would be more demanding than the first.

His mind kept returning to how his next opponent, apparently named Harf, had killed his opponent. He'd manipulated the sand into bladed, ropy tendrils, then sliced the woman he fought into pieces. How could Victor counter that? He could only hope he'd get a chance to employ his will attribute to shrug off the spell. Was it even real? Could sand have blades? Was it a mental attack? Victor began to realize he didn't know enough.

The problem Victor kept coming back to was that he was sure he could win if he went Berserk or summoned his bear totem, but he was trying to save those cards for the third and fourth matches. “I'll use my coyotes to keep him off balance, I'll discourage him with fear, and I'll fucking cut him to shreds,” Victor growled, repeatedly visualizing the combination.

He held Lifedrinker to his forehead, and he ran through it again and again in his mind. He imagined he was in the arena, preparing himself with a few spells, then he imagined the announcer starting the fight. In his visualization, he summoned his coyotes, dashed forward, projected his fear-attuned Energy, and, as the dark, spined Vesh faltered, he laid into him with Lifedrinker.

“Easy as one two three, right, beautiful?”

“Yes, Victor! We’ll drive your enemy before us, water the soil with his blood, and bask in the adulation of the crowd!” Lifedrinker’s voice was clearer than ever, ringing in his mind as the axe vibrated against his forehead, and Victor’s heart thumped in response. His lips peeled back in a savage grin, and he gripped her haft with tremendous force, resulting in even more vibrations; the axe was eager.

“God damn right, we will.” The portcullis clanked as it lifted into the ceiling, and Victor stood up, still baring his teeth. “Perfect fucking timing.” He stalked up the hallway, his face a mask of determination and bloodlust. He wasn’t worried about pulling his punches with this asshole, and for the first time in a while, he was looking forward to hurting someone.

He stalked into the arena, hardly noticing the crowd’s noise this time, so intent was he on his visualizations for the upcoming battle. As soon as his feet touched the sand, he cast Sovereign Will to boost his agility; he had to strike fast. He cast Inspiring Presence, careful to consider everyone around him an enemy so they wouldn’t benefit from the spell. As he stopped in the center of the arena and the announcer babbled about who he was, Victor stared at the other open tunnel, waiting for his opponent.

Harf loped out of the dark opening on his long, lean legs, his claws nearly dragging in the sand as he pulled his midnight flesh from his snout in a snarl, revealing enormous canines; the man looked like he was half black-furred wolf and half man. If Victor saw him on Earth, before he’d ever met any of the peoples of Fanwath or this world, he’d think him a werewolf from a horror movie. The guy looked tough as hell, and for some reason, that only pissed Victor off more. He cast Channel Energy, flooding his pathways and Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy, and a growl rumbled in his chest as he began to glow with a dancing, baleful red aura.

The announcer’s words were noise in his ears, his brain listening for one thing—the command to begin. Victor’s muscles were flexed, ready to explode into action, and Lifedrinker hummed in his hands, lighter than air, eager to fly into battle. Victor could feel Harf gathering Energy of his own, getting prepared to attack him, but it felt like a trickle compared to the flood Victor had gathered.

Not only were his pathways humming with rage, his eyes bleeding the crimson fury of it, but Victor had gathered a thick band of fear-attuned Energy, and he’d primed his Project Spirit spell. When his brain registered the word “Fight!” he unleashed his attack, sending a cone of dark, twisted, writhing Energy right into Harf’s face.

Victor could tell Harf had been releasing a spell as well; the sand around him had begun to shift, granules lifting into the air, but as soon as his wave of fear hit the Vesh caster, the man’s will crumpled before his. Harf’s eyes widened; he howled in dismay and fell to the sand, scrabbling backward in a panic. Victor didn’t let up; he cast Manifest Spirit, summoning five dark, evil-looking companions that instantly began to howl and yip, charging at Harf.

Victor launched forward like a sprinter who'd heard the start tone, and, just as he'd visualized, he went to work with Lifedrinker, employing her own brand of dark, bloody magic on his panicked, broken enemy. Harf never recovered his senses. He tried to hold out a hand to stop Victor, but Lifedrinker took it off at the elbow. On the backswing, Victor planted her firmly between two of Harf's ribs and left her there to siphon his Energy.

Victor's companions bit and pulled at Harf, yanking off hunks of bloody flesh and fur, shredding his leather armor. At the same time, Victor fell upon him, knees to his chest, and massive, furious, glowing-red fists smashing his toothy, snarling face into a dark, bloody pulp. All the while, Lifedrinker feasted, severing the flow of the Vesh's Energy, pulling it from his Core, and keeping him helpless and weak before the awful onslaught.

Victor never went berserk, never lost himself entirely to his rage, but he compartmentalized most of his mind, focusing only on delivering his plan of action, on destroying this enemy who had so callously done the same in his previous match. When Harf's body was still, Victor stood, and his coyotes stepped away to circle him, yipping and licking at their blood-stained muzzles and the thick, dripping strands hanging from his knuckles and fingers. He turned in a slow circle, chest heaving, eyes still mad with the thrill of battle as motes of Energy rose around him.

The motes were thick, more purple than gold, and when they flooded his body, Victor stood, grabbing Lifedrinker and holding her to the sky, absorbing the Energy and roaring back at the screaming, wildly cheering crowd.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 36 Spirit Carver, gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 8 attribute points to allocate.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Imbue Spirit - Basic.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Imbue Spirit - Basic: You are able to imbue an object or individual with a shard of your own spirit, granting some of your own power and will to the recipient. This effect will last until you recall your spirit shard. Energy Cost: Variable. Cooldown: Long\*\*\*