

Victor BK4: Ch10

Book 4: Chapter 10: The Monarch of Attributes

When Victor returned to his ready room, he saw another black, silver-ribboned box waiting for him atop the bench. Next to the box was a silver serving tray, and on the tray were several objects: a crystal pitcher filled with what looked like iced water, an empty crystal goblet, and a folded linen napkin on which rested a bisected sandwich that looked, for all the world, like it was stuffed with pastrami and cheese.

“Cool,” he said, setting Lifedrinker down and tugging at the bow on the box. As before, it fell away, dissolving into glittering, tinkling motes of dust. However, Victor’s eyes weren’t drawn to the little fireworks display; they’d settled on his bloody hand. His knuckles would have been one thing, but the backs of his hands, his nails, the space between his fingers—they were all coated in thick, dried blood.

He held his hands out in front of his face and squeezed them into fists. They weren’t sore at all, which surprised him. In his old life, if he’d beaten a man’s face until his skull began to crumble, his fists would have needed medical care. “I guess,” he amended, having never done anything remotely like that when he lived on Earth.

The whole fight seemed kind of hazy to him; he’d so vividly pictured himself fighting, so carefully visualized his actions, that when he performed them in reality, it felt almost like just another repetition of his strategizing. Still, he remembered the feel of Harf’s brow finally cracking under his onslaught and caving in with a wet crunch—that was what finally cooled Victor’s frenzied assault, brought him back to himself enough to stand up and absorb the Energy emanating out of the corpse he’d been pummeling.

He thought he should feel ashamed or guilty, but he didn’t. Harf had demonstrated his viciousness. Victor knew there was a killer inside him, that he wasn’t just the kid from Arizona anymore. He could spend his life hating himself, or he could accept the part of his spirit, the part that loved to fight, that enjoyed combat, and had no qualms about bashing in the skull of someone who had it coming.

“Did he have it coming?” Victor asked, flexing his blood-caked hands again. “Am I the judge?” He shook his head in resignation, picked up the pitcher, tilted it to his mouth, and drank half the water in several deep gulps. It was icy and clean and tasted better than anything he’d had in a long time. Stretching his neck until it popped, he sighed with pleasure. Then he tipped the pitcher over his cupped left palm, set it down, and briskly rubbed his hands together.

He yanked the linen napkin out from under the sandwich and scrubbed at his flesh, finally dropping the towel, now pink, on the bench. His hands weren’t clean, but they weren’t filthy anymore, and he felt like that was a good representation of himself and his actions. He wasn’t a shining knight of justice, but he wasn’t a bad guy, either. Shrugging, he picked up the sandwich and devoured it in several enormous bites.

It didn't taste exactly like pastrami and cheese, but it definitely had a smokey, cured-meat flavor, and the bread was amazing. The crust had just the right amount of hardness to it, and the middle was chewy with a distinctly grainy flavor. Whatever the sauce was, Victor wished he had the recipe—creamy with a hint of tanginess, it complimented the meat nicely and added just the right level of moisture to make the bite palatable.

Feeling pretty damn good, with a pleasantly satisfied stomach, Victor lifted off the lid of the box. Just as before, a notecard sat nestled in the black, velvet interior next to a gleaming platinum coin like the one he'd received before. This time, however, the coin wasn't alone. A jar the size of a soda can stoppered with a huge cork lay next to it, and when Victor read the notecard, he remembered the prize list he'd seen when he first signed up—it was the gall bladder of a crypt drake, whatever that was.

The notecard reminded him that it was meant to be mixed by an alchemist to “permanently enhance his strength and vitality.” Victor was fairly sure the jar was made of crystal, and when he lifted it to look at the withered, dried hunk of dark gray flesh, he wrinkled his nose and said, “Not very appealing. I hope I can find an alchemist that makes you into something tastier looking.” He put the jar back in the box, closed it up, and set it atop the chest next to his round one prize.

When Victor stepped out into the common ready room, he was greeted by a much different scene than the one after his first round; only Sanima and Ronno were present. Ronno was sitting on the central bench, and Sanima was leaning against the blank stone where the viewport had been. She looked up at him, opened her eyes wider as though surprised, and nodded, “Congratulations.”

Victor looked around the mostly empty room and then settled his gaze back on her, “What's the deal with the viewport?”

“They don't want us to know too much about each other before the final fights. We,” she gestured to Ronno, “didn't know you beat Harf until you came out of your ready room.”

“You didn't see anyone bring me my prize or my snack?” Victor gestured with his thumb back into his room.

“No; the fight steward and his employees have other means to enter the ready rooms.”

Victor nodded, then turned his gaze to Ronno. He wanted to tell him he was sorry about his sister, but he knew that would sound lame, and Victor couldn't imagine the big man would want any platitudes from a virtual stranger. Instead, he said, “Good luck with your fights.” Then, he turned and went back into his ready room, closing the door behind him.

He felt there was no point mingling with the other fighters if he couldn't watch them perform; Victor knew it was callous, but he didn't want to talk to them, didn't want to humanize them any further—they were his opponents, and he couldn't afford any more doubts. “Doubts lead to hesitation, and hesitation leads to getting myself fucking killed.” He looked at the bench, saw the silver tray and dirty napkin were gone, and walked over to it, stretching out on his back, folding his arms under his head for a pillow.

He'd leaned Lifedrinker against the bench, and her beautiful, dark wood haft jutted up next to his hip. As he looked at it, Victor saw the tiny motes of light, usually hidden in the depths of the wood, start to flicker and swirl, and he said, "Are you showing off, preciosa?" He picked up the axe and lifted it, constantly amazed at how the slightest twitch of his wrist or arm could move her, as though she waited for the indication from his flesh to show her what he wanted.

"You're looking good," he said, noting that the silvery veins of Heart Silver had thickened near her brilliant edge and that they stretched through the dark metal with more forks and branches than he remembered the last time he looked at her. "What's gonna happen when there's more Heart Silver than . . . cabron!" He said, thumping a fist against his forehead. "I can't remember what that guy said your other metal was."

The axe hummed, light as a piece of balsa wood in his hands, and he knew she didn't care. Smiling, he rested Lifedrinker on his chest and closed his eyes. If Victor couldn't watch the fights and he was stuck without any company other than his axe, he was determined to continue visualizing his victories. He knew one thing—if Krista won her fight that round, she'd be his next opponent, and he felt like she was the only fighter who definitely wanted to kill him. Knowing that, Victor decided he should start figuring out how to return the favor.

"So," he muttered to the ceiling, "she likes to use a spear, and she seems really fast. Coyotes? She might ignore them and stab me in the heart like that one guy . . ." He thought about it for a while, trying to think of the best skills and spells to use, and then he sat up with a start, "I leveled!" He pulled up his attribute points:

Strength:

135

Vitality:

150

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

333

"So, with Sovereign Will, I can pump my physical stats by over a hundred now." He acted like he was speaking to Lifedrinker, but he knew he was just talking aloud to help himself think. "My dexterity is getting too damn low. If I boost

agility, all my physical stats are up way over a hundred, except for dex. Didn't Gorz or Lam—someone—explain that my ability to make adjustments with my weapon would suffer if my dexterity was outweighed too much by my strength or agility?"

"But, on the other hand," he picked up Lifedrinker, gently rubbed his thumb along the cool, shiny metal of one of her veins, and continued, "Tes said to keep working on my will, and she's a pinche dragon." The truth was, Victor reasoned, he had eight points to spend, and with those eight points, he could raise his piddling dexterity to a slightly less piddling level, or he could bump up his epic will stat and make it even more epic. "Better to stand out for something awesome than try to be mediocre in everything," he said, applying his free points to will.

"Well, that's done. What's the deal with my new spell, though? I can 'grant some of my own power and will to the recipient.'" He thought about it a minute, looking at Lifedrinker and shaking his head. "Not going to experiment on you, beautiful. Let's see here." He looked down at his chest and the attractive but not very special bronze breastplate. It had spatters of blood on it, dry and rust-colored.

"What about this piece of shit?" Victor held his hand to the cool metal and concentrated, activating his new spell pattern. As it formed in his pathways, he channeled inspiration-attuned Energy into, and the spell completed, flashing through his pathways, out through his hand, and into the metal of his armor. As the spell passed out of him, he felt a coldness in his Core and general malaise that washed over him and then seemed to fade away.

The breastplate flashed with white-gold light, and Victor felt it grow heavier, more substantial, and it seemed to buzz with potential in such a way that he began to feel antsy, as though he wanted to leap into action. When he looked down at his armor, it seemed to gleam with an inner light.

"Huh," Victor said, wondering what the spell was doing for the breastplate. He tapped his knuckles against it, and they rebounded from the metal like he'd hit electrified plastic, not bronze. "Weird . . ." Victor called up his attributes, looking for differences:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

3062/3062 (3402)

Strength:

135

Vitality:

150

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

307 (341)

Looking at the numbers in parenthesis, Victor realized that he'd lost ten percent of his will and ten percent of his maximum Energy. "So . . . so, like, part of my spirit is in this breastplate now?" He looked into his Core and pathways, saw the tether that connected him to the armor, and realized he could end the spell with a thought. "At least it's not permanent. Would it be worth it, though?"

Victor stood up abruptly, set Lifedrinker down, and began loosening the straps holding the breastplate onto his body. After pulling it off and setting it on the bench, he picked up Lifedrinker and said, "Okay, beautiful, please don't drain this breastplate; just try to hurt it." The axe vibrated in his hands, and, with a grin, Victor lifted her high and brought her down on the breastplate, aiming for the center and only using a fraction of his strength.

Victor's eyes almost bugged out of his head when a ghostly fist, flashing with brilliant white Energy, reached out of the breastplate and tried to bat Lifedrinker aside. She wasn't any old axe, though, and she struggled against the burst of spirit Energy. Still, the momentum of Victor's swing was ruined, and the axe glanced off the metal, leaving only a shiny, jagged scratch as she slid to the side. "Now that's pretty fuckin' badass!"

Victor quickly strapped the breastplate back in place, and then he contemplated trying to cast the spell on more parts of his armor. He decided against it, though—at ten percent of his will and Energy per cast, he'd find himself running low pretty quickly if he did that.

He looked at Lifedrinker and, again, considered trying it out on her but shook his head; something in his gut warned him off of it, at least until he could ask someone what might happen. She had a spirit of her own; what would happen if he put his in there with her, even just a part of it? "It might be fine; the spell says it works on people, too . . ." He vacillated for a long while, and eventually, his decision was made for him when the portcullis started to lift.

"Maybe next time," Victor said, hefting Lifedrinker and walking up the tunnel, his breastplate shimmering softly in the shadowy lighting. When he stepped out into the noise of the crowd and the glaring sun, now more than halfway toward its zenith, he was surprised to see Krista already waiting for him. The crowd's cheering intensified as she strode onto the sand, and the announcer howled his welcoming preamble with—what had to be—forced jubilation.

“It’s Victor! The mad smasher of Harf the Terrible! Will Krista, the Spear Mistress, be able to put this savage down? What a battle awaits! I hope none of you are too squeamish because these two have already displayed their willingness to part their foes from their most vital fluids!”

Victor continued to walk toward Krista. As he drew near the center of the arena, he cast Sovereign Will to boost his agility, and a System message flashed in his view, accompanied by a smattering of small, golden Energy motes that quickly flooded into him.

“Oh! Bad luck for Krista! It looks like the otherworlder just improved one of his skills!”

Congratulations! You’ve learned the spell: Sovereign Will - Advanced.

Sovereign Will - Advanced: As an act of concentration, you can apply up to 33% of your total Will to any two of your physical attributes.

“Fucking-A,” Victor said, grinning, as he wiped away the notification. Just like that, he’d gained more than a hundred points to one of his physical stats. As the announcer continued to babble, he recast the spell, focusing on enhancing his agility and vitality, and he felt his body respond. He was more nimble, more sturdy, and he felt like a million damn bucks. Lighly, he began to circle Krista, a slight bend in his knees, Lifedrinker held before him, and a madman’s grin on his face.

Krista, for her part, didn’t look happy. She held her spear, point forward, four or five feet of the shaft between her and Victor, the rest jutting out behind her. Her long, furry ears were pulled back, flat to her skull, and she frowned in concentration, eyes narrowed as she countered his movement, circling in the opposite direction.

“Look at these two!” the announcer roared, “So eager to get at each other! Who will win? Does anyone know? Even the Warlord is leaning forward on his throne! Has anyone seen such an exciting low-tier tournament? Could anyone believe so many great talents would participate? Just think! Neither of these two gladiators is even favored to win! Place your bets and get set for an epic bout! More excitement awaits as Jast and Sanima are set to battle after these two dogs! Make sure you stick around after the dust settles!”

“Ready yourselves, fighters!” the announcer roared, and Victor took the words to heart, finishing his preparatory spells. He boosted his acuity and readiness with Inspiring Presence, then cast Channel Spirit, causing himself and Lifedrinker to flare with red, rage-attuned Energy. Finally, he built his spell pattern for Manifest Spirit, readying his fear-based coyotes to spring forth.

All the while, Victor kept his eyes on Krista, and he knew she was also preparing herself. Dust began to swirl around her boots, and as she sidestepped, moving in a circle facing Victor, she seemed to move in jittery, phantom steps, trailing clouds of sand. Victor had to rotate faster and

faster to match her. Then he felt a surge of hot Energy as her spear began to spark with electricity, and her eyes flashed like twin thunderstorms.

Victor began to feel the sun on the back of his neck, began to notice the smell of copper in the air, and the way the sand, though raked smooth, was darkly stained here and there. Was he really fighting in an arena? Was he really about to go toe to toe with that woman and her magical spear? What would his abuela think?

“Enough,” he growled, shoving that part of himself down and letting his other half take the reins. His smile spread wider, his eyes narrowed, and Victor began to laugh, reveling in the things that had disturbed him before.

He breathed deeply through his nostrils, savoring the odor of blood and guts. He jerked his axe up to his chest, pumping it up and out to get a reaction from the crowd. When they howled and cheered, Victor howled back, and he saw Krista’s face change—some of the confidence had bled away, and though her twisted snarl remained, Victor thought it looked hollow.

After an eon of babbling and haranguing, the announcer grew tired of ginning up the crowd or stalling—Victor had no idea which it was, but he’d certainly drug out his intro longer than before. The shout to begin came at last as the announcer ramped up his voice, dragging out the words like a siren going off, “Let’s fight!”