

Victor BK4: Ch11

Book 4: Chapter 11: Hollow Justice

If there was one thing Victor had always been good at, it was bursting into action at the signal to start. When he wrestled, there were times when he'd snap out of the down position at the ref's whistle before his opponent could even lock his hands tight. As the announcer shouted, "Let's fight," Victor channeled that former self, exploding into motion, charging over the ground, summoning his coyotes, and hacking his axe at Krista all in the blink of an eye.

It would have been beautiful if Lifedrinker's edge cleaved through the snarling woman, just as he'd planned, but it didn't go that way. Krista didn't stand still, and she proved just as fast or faster than Victor. When his axe cleaved only the air, he jumped and rolled, feeling in his gut like that spear was coming in hot toward his side. He'd been right, and the crackling, lightning-charged spear just whispered over his back, sliding against his armor, but not enough to even scratch it.

Victor rolled to his feet, holding Lifedrinker ready, and he heard a yelp and high-pitched growls. He saw his coyotes leaping at Krista, tumbling back as her spear lashed out, and he only counted four. Already, she'd slain one. Victor growled and charged in again, hoping his hounds' distraction would serve to give him a clear shot with Lifedrinker. Krista impaled another coyote as he drew near, and when Lifedrinker whistled through the air at her, she seemed to shift and shimmer, and then, again, he cut only the air.

Somehow she'd speared another of his coyotes as she fled Victor's assault, and Victor urged the last two to back off, to circle her and wait for the right moment. Krista made a mocking, pouty face, whistling to his pack and spitting into the sand. She jumped and slid toward one of his companions, and Victor leaped after her, but she shimmered, the sand shifted into the air, and suddenly she was behind him.

Rage began to pool in Victor's pathways, began to force its way into his heart and mind, and he desperately wanted to Berserk. As Krista's spear found his back, jamming toward his spine, his armor flared brilliantly, and a blazing, white-gold, ghostly fist reached out and smacked her spear aside. The crowd gasped in surprise, and Victor felt a surge of amusement that drowned out his rage as he whirled to face her.

"Enchanted your armor while you waited?" she snarled. "I'm fighting a gods-b-damned crafter?" She spat into the sand, and Victor ran toward her; he was here to fight, not banter. Once again, as he charged over the sand, she flickered and flashed, leaving nothing but a swirl of sand. Victor tried to anticipate the move, tried to adjust his momentum, priming his Project Spirit spell, hoping to catch her off guard with a blast of fear-attuned Energy.

Krista wasn't easily predicted, though; she attacked from directly behind him, and rather than go for a kill, stabbing at his torso—and its enchanted armor—to pierce his heart, she drove her long, wickedly sharp spear through the back of Victor's left thigh. He cried out as the razored blade slid through his thick, meaty leg, and jolts of powerful electricity coursed through his body. He convulsed and spasmed, but Victor did not let go of Lifedrinker. With his arms outstretched, his body jerking, and bloody saliva bubbling out of his clenched mouth, he clung to her haft while Krista twisted the spear.

When he realized he'd lost control of his body, fury filled Victor, and he was on the verge of Berserking when he felt Lifedrinker buzzing in his hand. Suddenly his mind fixated on her, and he thought if she could resist the electrical charge, then by God, so could he. With a herculean surge of will, Victor brought his convulsing muscles into line and took two shaky, stumbling steps forward off Krista's spear.

With his vitality bolstered, Victor's thigh stopped bleeding almost immediately, and his spasming muscles settled as he turned to frown at Krista. She backed up a step, lifted her spear, and ran her long, pink tongue along the bloody flat of its blade, clearly putting a show on for the crowd; they roared in approval, and she smiled and said, "I'll feast on your loved ones when I'm done killing you here. I'll start with that blue bitch you brought along."

The crowd was screaming; the stands were booming with the stomps of their feet, and still, Victor heard Krista clearly—a benefit of evolved ears, he supposed. He saw the hateful, baleful glare she directed his way, and he remembered how she'd been instantly hostile to him. She beckoned him forward, flashing her long, bloody canines, spear alight with a fresh burst of lightning, and the sand dancing around her feet. He knew she'd make a fool of him time and time again if he kept charging like a bull.

"What's your problem anyway, puta?" Victor asked, starting to circle her again.

"I devour weaklings and interlopers, worm," she said, and, rather than wait for Victor to charge, she flickered, faded from view, and he whirled, whipping Lifedrinker into a parrying downward, looping, cut. He felt his axe make contact with the spear, knocking it aside, and Lifedrinker bucked and pulled, desperately trying to sink herself into the haft of that hated weapon. Victor pulled her back, though, and lunged forward, driving her gleaming edge toward Krista's throat.

Krista was no novice with the spear, and she whipped her dark weapon up and around, knocking Lifedrinker aside and drawing the needle-like point downward, just catching the top edge of Victor's forehead and raking it toward his eye. Victor jerked his head aside and danced backward, a curtain of blood flowing into his eye, stinging and obscuring his vision.

Victor knew she'd press the attack, so he willed his last two coyotes to leap at her, buying himself a moment to clear the blood from his eye; the cut had already stopped bleeding. He rubbed furiously at it, watching his poor, dark, smoky coyotes fight valiantly to the last, each succumbing to a lightning stab of Krista's spear. When none remained, Krista turned to Victor, the crowd roaring its enthusiasm.

"Ready to die, runt?" she snarled, stalking toward him, and Victor could feel her gathering Energy, far more than she had thus far.

He grimaced and growled. Something was wrong about this woman, so filled with hate. She was like a mad dog, and he began to see the need to defeat her more and more clearly. This fight wasn't a contest, a spectacle for people to enjoy. This was his duty—Krista needed to be put down.

He reached inward and pulled thick, surging ropes of Energy from each of the affinities at his Core. When he had them all in the iron grip of his will, he cast Harsh Light of Justice, fueled with enough

Energy to cover every inch of the arena pit. Suddenly the pale yellow sun seemed to fade, and the sky washed out like an overexposed photo, more white than blue. The shadows along the arena wall disappeared, along with Victor's and Krista's, and as he looked around, Victor swore he could see every grain of sand, every drop of blood, every line of sweat running down Krista's face.

He saw her eyes narrow at first, then a pained look of panic filled them as she realized she was condemned; justice had come for her. On the other hand, Victor felt a fresh surge of vitality and a clear sense of purpose—it was time to bring this villain to heel. He stalked toward her, Lifedrinker light as a broomstick in his hands.

Even in her dismay, Krista rallied and completed her spell as he approached. A blazing, bright ball of Energy formed at the tip of her spear. She shifted oddly and streaked over the sand, moving to Victor's left and circling toward his back, and in the light of justice, it looked almost comical. She moved fast as an arrow, but obviously, and as he turned to track her with Lifedrinker, Victor realized she thought he couldn't see her.

She seemed surprised to see him staring at her as she leaped toward him with that blazing speartip. He stepped under it, a long, stretching lunge that lowered his center of gravity and allowed him to glide over the sand into her charge, his rear foot dragging like when he used to practice takedowns. Victor smiled as he watched her spear pass too high and too unwieldy to correct; he was inside her guard.

On the fly, Victor concentrated on his Sovereign Will spell and switched his boost to strength. He brought Lifedrinker across in a wide, sideways hack, using his forward momentum and prodigious might. The eager axe hit Krista full on, her gleaming Heart Silver edge ripping through the woman's abdomen. As Victor and Krista passed each other in that fraction of a second, she cried out; her spear flew through the air, and hot blood sprayed over Victor as her entrails fell, glistening like eels onto the sand.

When Krista's spear impacted the arena's sand, the lighting gathered at its tip exploded in a ball of writhing, flashing lighting bolts that erupted with explosions in the air and against the sand, making little puddles of glass. The percussion of the thunder and lighting was accompanied by Krista's screams and gasps as she fruitlessly scrabbled at the sand, trying to pull her guts back into herself.

Something about the spell Victor had cast, about the justice hanging heavy in the air, wouldn't let him turn away as he watched her movements grow more and more feeble, her gasps more and more frail, and then, when stillness took her, he looked at the crowd and frowned. So many people in those stands deserved to have justice dealt to them. So many cheering, howling fools deserved a fate ten times worse than Krista had just been given. His hands clenched and twisted on Lifedrinker's haft, and he began looking for a way out of the pit.

Just as he took his first step, a surge of Energy flew into him, dark, heavy purple-gold motes that lifted him from the sand, transfixing him and breaking his concentration on his spells. When he fell back to the sand, the world was once more lit normally by the sun, and he could hear the crowd's cries and the announcer's words, "Victor has stunned us again! What was that spell? That weird light? Will our local champion, Jast, be able to contend with this strange, otherworldly gladiator? Stick around, folks! The final battle will take place at noon!"

Victor glanced down at Krista's broken form, her life's blood and inside parts still glistening in the hot light, the scent of copper and shit heavy in the air, and he frowned. He couldn't find any joy in

her death, only pity. She looked small and broken, and her face, smooth and relaxed in death's grip, looked pretty without the nasty snarl she'd always worn. Victor stood tall and slowly turned, facing into the stands, wishing he could find a friendly face among all those cheering, jeering people.

“Gladiator! Victorious Victor! Take a well-deserved rest; your greatest challenge lies ahead of you.” The announcer's voice rang clear and loud over the noise of the crowd, and Victor turned to his tunnel, now open, and walked out of the arena, the crowd's hysteria fading behind him as he descended. He felt a little hollow, a little empty, and decided he didn't like being under the influence of justice-attuned Energy.

Even when Victor lost himself to rage, he at least felt alive; he felt that emotional release that washed over him as he came back to himself. Sometimes he felt guilt later, but it was better than this hollow, empty sensation like he'd made himself a tool for a force greater than himself. Was it all in his head? His justice Energy came from within him, just as his rage; even the spell description said the light would “take on the morality of the caster.” Still, he felt spent and used; he wondered if it was because the spell reflected a part of himself that was abstract and distant from his conscious mind.

“Maybe I'm just a lot closer to my rage, hmm?” he asked Lifedrinker, lifting her to rest on his shoulder as he made his way back into his ready room. Another prize box and tray of refreshments awaited him, and he ate his sandwich—identical to the one he'd already eaten—drank his water and then pulled on the ribbon, opening the top of the box. Another Coloss prize token lay within, alongside a golden foil-wrapped package about the size of his thumb.

Victor picked up the notecard and read about the prize, “Rock Wyrm Magma Horn - useful for making a breakthrough in Core development when properly prepared in an alchemical tincture.” Victor shrugged and closed up the box, setting it next to the other two atop his chest. He'd have plenty of time to think about prizes when the fighting was done. He stretched out on the bench, Lifedrinker beside him, and rested his eyes.

He tried not to dwell on his earlier fights, successful as they'd been. Victor wondered at that—the success he'd already had. The fights had been quick, for the most part, and he'd hardly been injured. His battle with Rellia had been a hell of a lot harder. Even the boss in the undead dungeon had been more of a struggle. He supposed much of it was that he'd improved; his Core was stronger, his axe skills were greater, and he'd gained experience and improved his attributes. “Still,” he muttered, “everyone acted like I was a runt, a weakling in this world.”

“Ahh, but you are only facing people still in the low-tier,” a man's voice said, and Victor nearly jumped out of his skin, flailing to catch Lifedrinker as he jerked up into a sitting position. “My apologies, sir; I merely came to collect your refreshment tray and to ask if you needed any first aid.”

“Uh,” Victor said, looking at the black-robed, green, insect guy. “Tong-pan,” he corrected himself.

“Why, yes, sir. I’m a member of the Tong-pan people. May I?” the man asked, walking around Victor to pick up the silver tray from the far end of the bench. “Will you need any medical care? The fight steward noted you suffered injuries in your last match.”

“Nah,” Victor said, rubbing at the scabbed-over cut on his forehead and looking down at his blood-stained pant leg. “I heal fast.” The puncture wound was still sore, but he knew it wouldn’t start bleeding again, nor would it hinder his movement, especially if he kept his vitality boosted while waiting for his next match.

“I’m sorry I intruded upon your self-reflection, sir. I didn’t mean to respond, but my mandibles are faster than my better judgment sometimes.” He bowed several times quickly, his bright green carapace flashing as it reflected the glow lamp hanging above.

“No worries. It’s a good reminder. I might be kicking ass so far, but I’m just fighting the weakest people in your city.”

“No, no, sir! I beg to correct you; the people who fight in the arena are among our strongest; the vast majority of the populace is considered low-tier, even if there are thousands in the mid and high-tiers.”

“Right. Makes sense, I guess. Seems that way in the world I came from, too. Ordinary people don’t tend to have the freedom to build their strength; they’re too worried about getting to work and feeding their families.”

“Just so, sir. I’m afraid I must take my leave now before the fight steward thinks I’m giving you unfair attention.” With that, the man turned and walked directly into the stone wall next to the chest containing Victor’s belongings, disappearing through the blocks.

“The fuck?” Victor said, standing up and walking over to the wall. He pressed a hand against it and felt only cool, solid stone. Seeing how easily the man had come and gone from his room, Victor wondered who else could do such things. Was it an ability granted only to those who worked in the arena, or was it some magical ability that any person might learn? He knew if he cast Inevitable Huntsman, he could move through solid barriers, but that was something a lot more complicated than whatever the Tong-pan had just done.

Frowning, he sat down, suddenly glad that he’d held back from displaying all his cards during his fight with Krista. He’d been tempted to Berserk, considering Jast couldn’t watch his fight on the viewport. Now that he’d seen how easily some people could move in and out of the ready rooms, though, he felt vindicated in his decision to hold back. If Jast was the current arena champion, a hometown hero, there was a good chance he had a lot of powerful friends around. Someone might tell him about Victor’s ace cards if they saw them in action.

“But they didn’t,” Victor said, lifting Lifedrinker and grinning. “Did they, beautiful?”

He lay back on the bench again and started to think about Jast. He’d only seen the guy in action once, and he’d been like a force of nature. Twelve feet tall, probably six hundred pounds, and fast as a damn striking cobra. “And he has a big fucking axe,” Victor said, squeezing Lifedrinker’s haft.

“I don’t give a shit about that, though, lady. Polo had a big axe, and it didn’t bother you. On the bright side, I don’t need to hold back. We’re going to go in there and show these fuckers what a real giant is—what someone with real Quinametzin blood can accomplish. We’re going to show them how we fight when we let go, and when we’re done, the crowd might be cheering, but they’ll be fucking scared. They’ll understand that being big doesn’t make you a goddamn titan.”