

Victor BK4: Ch12

Book 4: Chapter 12: Intervention

When the portcullis clanked open, Victor was ready. He had his game face on, Lifedrinker in his hands, and he felt nearly a hundred percent, physically. He strode into the passage leading up to the arena floor with purpose and vigor, and then a shadow separated itself from the wall and said, “Hold, gladiator.”

“The fuck?” Victor growled, lifting his axe as though to strike the interloper.

“Hold!” the hooded figure urged, hands held up placatingly. It was a man, a Vesh, Victor was sure, some light revealing lean, muscular forearms and pointed, black nails. “I will be brief; I know your time is limited.”

“Speak.” Victor continued to walk, though slowly.

“Your opponent, Jast, is the son of a powerful man—War Captain Black. Jast will grant mercy if you yield, and Black will reward you.”

“Fuck that. I’m not throwing the fight.” Victor increased his pace.

“Wait! The war captain knows you wish to return to your world. He can make that happen.” Those words gave Victor pause, and he slowly turned to face the hooded messenger.

“He can open a portal?”

“No, but one in his employ can.”

“How can I believe you?”

“Jast always grants mercy if he doesn’t strike a fatal blow before his opponent can yield. You have my word and the assurance of War Captain Black that his prize is real. We take honor seriously here in Coloss.”

“Really? That’s why you’re trying to get me to throw the fight?”

“I . . .”

“I’m out of time. I’ll think about it.” Victor turned and stomped up the passage, his long legs moving him faster than most people would jog.

“See that you do!” the hooded man called after him, and Victor frowned.

“What an asshole,” he growled, gripping Lifedrinker’s haft. “Even if I didn’t take the deal, he’s fucking thrown my game off.” More than that, Victor was annoyed that he felt like he had to consider the man’s proposal. This was the only concrete offer he or Valla had been given to get home in a timely fashion. He’d

won some prize tokens, which might be enough, but he wasn't sure. Additionally, he had to consider the idea that Jast might win, even if Victor didn't take a dive.

Victor looked around the arena, blinking his eyes in the blazing sun and doing his best to ignore the announcer's hysterical adulations. He was frustrated—pissed. He strode through the sand and lifted Lifedrinker, screaming his frustrations back at the crowd. They responded in kind, and the announcer had to stop speaking for a minute due to the clamor.

Victor smiled at the crowd's response to his frustration and threw his shoulders back, screaming, "Fuck!" It didn't seem to matter to them what he said; they roared back. Victor kicked some sand and looked around, waiting for his big opponent to show up.

While he waited, he frowned and muttered curses. Why did everything have to be complicated? Why couldn't he just have a good clean fight and beat the shit out of this guy? What would happen if he didn't take the asshole's deal? Would War Captain Black smite him down the moment he stepped out of the arena? He could only imagine the dude was high-tier—more powerful than Victor could currently imagine.

"And here comes our champion!" the announcer said, finally getting Victor's attention. The crowd's hysteria rose to new heights as Jast, clad in armor similar to Victor's, strode out of his tunnel. He was enormous—something about his posture and how he held his massive, double-bladed great axe made him loom larger than when Victor had seen him in the common ready room. He stomped toward the center of the arena, stopping a half dozen paces from Victor and scowling down at him.

"Look at the fury on their faces, everyone! How will the mid-tier tournament match the excitement we've all experienced this morning? What a show! What a way to honor Horc! Your warlord and captains are on the edges of their seats, fighters! Don't disappoint!"

While the announcer continued to try to whip the crowd—and the fighters—into even more of a frenzy, Victor prepared himself. His armor was still enchanted with a shard of his spirit, and he knew he'd need to be strong and fast to face Jast, so he boosted his strength and agility with Sovereign Will. He cast Inspiring Presence, his grin widening as he started to notice how flimsy Jast's armor looked and how the giant seemed to favor his left side where he held the heavy end of his axe.

Jast's frown deepened, and Victor felt him gathering Energy of his own. Not for the first time, he wished he could tell more about what kind of spell an opponent was preparing, but he supposed it didn't matter; he had his strategy set. He built the pattern for Manifest Spirit, crafting it from pure, deep, rage-attuned Energy. On a whim, he channeled Inspiration attuned Energy into his axe and arms, hoping to outclass Jast before he had to play his aces.

"If I even play them," Victor grunted, still conflicted about the bullshit offer the hooded guy had made him.

“Say something, Deshi? Just yield quickly; my axe doesn’t make small wounds.” Jast grunted, squaring himself off and lowering his center of gravity.

As if on cue, the announcer howled, “Fight!”

Jast burst into motion, charging over the sand like an angry hippo, and Victor danced to the side, pushing the giant’s enormous axe aside with Lifedrinker. He’d cast Manifest Spirit as soon as he saw Jast take a step, and Victor danced back, trying to keep Jast facing him, while a great, crimson shape began to coalesce out of a glowering red mist behind the giant fighter.

Jast grunted angrily as he recovered his axe’s momentum and leaped at Victor, faster by ten times than the Degh Victor had earlier fought, but still slow enough for Victor to counter, carefully avoiding a direct test of his strength, using the giant’s momentum to parry and block. As Jast’s frustration mounted, Victor felt him gathering Energy to do something big, but then a titanic roar filled the arena, and Jast had his hands full.

Victor’s gigantic, red-furred, fury-eyed cave bear leaped at the giant’s back, and Jast barely whirled in time to get his axe between him and the great animal’s claws and fangs. To his credit, Jast didn’t fall or crumple under the onslaught; he screamed, and Victor felt his pent-up Energy release.

With a ringing clang, huge metallic blades materialized out of the air, like haftless axe heads. They hung in the air around Jast, ten or more of them, and began to spin like a steel cyclone—a ring of razor-sharp blades that hacked and cut at the great bear as it furiously swiped and bit at Jast. Watching the bear’s fur and shimmering spirit blood splash away, dissipating into red mist, Victor charged Jast’s flank.

The ring of blades hung a foot or two away from the giant, and Victor slid in the sand, hacking Lifedrinker sideways toward the Degh’s knee. He’d hoped to avoid the blades by going under them, but they seemed to have a mind of their own, and two corrected their trajectories to spin through the air in a collision course with Victor.

Victor doubled down, swinging Lifedrinker as hard as he could, her gleaming silvery edge limned with red fury, and, as she made contact, he ducked his head low, trying to dodge one of the blades, and trusting in his enchanted armor to save him from the other one. Lifedrinker bit deeply into Jast’s flesh, sinking into the gap between his knee bones, and the giant screamed and stumbled.

Victor dodged the blade coming at his head. The other one he’d seen was knocked aside by his enchanted armor, but a third he hadn’t noticed cleaved into his right side, parting his bronze plate as though it was paper and wedging between his ribs, cracking and separating them as it dug into his flesh. Victor moaned, his wind suddenly too feeble to scream, and rolled to the side, scrabbling away in agony.

As Victor pushed away through the sand, Lifedrinker still clutched grimly in one hand, he twisted to his uninjured side and watched as his great bear fought valiantly with the giant warrior. The bear had capitalized on Jast’s stumble, ripping long, razored claws down the giant’s chest, shredding his armor even worse than Victor’s. Jast had almost fallen from the hack to the knee and the bear’s swipe, and as he struggled to regain his balance, the bear charged.

Victor could see the bear had had enough—its eyes were red orbs of fury and frustration. It reared up on its hind legs, caution no longer a consideration, allowing the remaining blades to sink into its furry side as it brought its two enormous, clawed paws down to rake the giant, clearly intent on shredding him to ribbons. Jast wasn't out of tricks, though, and he rolled back over one shoulder, leaving a great metal shield hanging in the air where, a second ago, he'd been standing.

Victor switched his Sovereign Will boost to strength and vitality and continued to inch backward in the sand, hoping his bear would distract Jast just a bit longer until the gaping wound in his side stitched itself together, at least partially—the magical blade had dissipated into metallic dust that, in turn, had shimmered away into mist. He'd only started to get his breath back when the bear came down on the shield Jast had created out of thin air, and with a tremendous clang, it stopped it short.

Victor's companion grunted, the Energy that animated it leaking in great gouts from the wounds left by the axe barrier and drizzling from its mouth. It looked toward Victor, pain and frustration in its eyes, and Victor knew it wanted to try again, wanted to keep fighting, but it was struggling to stand tall, and Victor couldn't take it. "Go on," he said. "You did your best; I got this." With that, the mighty crimson giant shimmered into fog that fell to the sand and faded away.

"Yield," a deep voice rumbled beside him, and Victor turned to regard Jast. The giant loomed over him, his enormous axe held high, ready to strike. Victor was still sitting in the sand, his left palm holding him up while his right hand clutched Lifedrinker. His side was still a mess, but he was already breathing better and could see the puddle of blood next to him had stopped growing.

At the giant's command, a million things ran through his mind—thoughts about Rellia and how she'd tried to get him to yield in a similar fight, thoughts about people he'd killed in arenas, thoughts about how he couldn't imagine living with himself if he caved now, even if it meant he was going to have a new, powerful enemy. More than anything, he wanted to kick this big bastard's ass and wipe that fucking superior, unsmiling glower off his face.

He opened his pathways and let rage flood them, and, as he began to flicker with the power of it, a smoldering, red aura outlining his form, and deep, baleful red torches igniting in his eyes, he said, "I don't think I will."

"Fool," Jast said, his gigantic axe whistling through the air, aiming for the crook of Victor's neck and shoulder. Before the blade, falling like a guillotine, could sink into Victor's flesh, though, it stopped, frozen in place like it had hit a block of granite. Jast looked confused for a moment, and then his eyes widened as it registered; Victor had grabbed hold of his axe, just below the blade, and he was standing, lifting the great axe in his left hand and holding Lifedrinker high in the air with the other.

Jast struggled, unable to comprehend what was happening; things weren't making sense; Victor was a tiny Deshi—how was he lifting his axe into an uncomfortable angle as he stood. How was he standing at all? As Jast let his eyes travel from the fist gripping his axe to Victor's face, he blanched; why was he looking up to see that glowering visage of fury? He opened his mouth, but no words would form on his tongue. What was happening?

Victor grunted, hacking Lifedrinker down into the iron-like haft of Jast's axe, and she ripped through the air like a crack of lightning, parting the wood with a concussion like thunder. Victor roared and flung the shortened great axe into the air, heedless of its trajectory; what cared he for the toys of a weakling? Jast stumbled back, released physically and mentally as he finally came to grips with his reality, but Victor wasn't ready to let him go.

Jast looked from the piece of wood in his hands to Victor, stomping toward him, and he dug deep into his Energy reserves to create his barrier of axe blades again. Victor roared—a sound that shook Jast to the bones, rattling his teeth and loosening something in his bowels—and charged through the spinning axe blades.

They slammed into him, biting his shoulder, side, leg, and arms, but the titan didn't seem to care; he kept coming and grabbed Jast by the throat, actually lifting him slightly into the air. Jast struggled against the enormous, red-faced warrior's grip—tried with all his might to knock his hand away, but it only tightened, and things began to grow dark as he saw Victor lift his axe high, preparing a killing blow.

“STOP,” a thunderous roar rang through the arena, but to Victor, it was a dim annoyance. Whoever thought they should intervene with his carnage would soon learn to think differently. This fool had dared to lift his hands against him; how could this weakling think to stand against the Quinametzin? He brought his axe down, aiming to split the giant's skull like a melon, but suddenly he was knocked, tumbling head over heels through the sand to crash into the wall of the arena.

Victor leaped to his feet, roaring in defiance and fury, looking around in his red-tinged vision to see what had happened. Jast lay crumpled in the sand, and standing above him was another giant, this one wearing heavy black armor and wielding a massive black metal shield, rectangular and thick. Had the fool dared to strike him with that? Victor roared again, and the crowd, hitherto ignored by him, shouted back. Victor lifted his arms, high over his head, wide, and Lifedrinker glinted, a brilliant, deadly hatchet in his mighty hand.

He basked in the adulation and screamed again, stalking toward the man in the black armor. Who was this challenger? The man hunkered down, standing over the fallen weakling, directing the flat, black metal of his shield toward Victor. “Stop!” he shouted again. “You are victorious!” Was that a note of pleading in his voice? Was this man here to give his respect? To beg for the weakling's life?

“You dare to strike me and then cower behind that metal?” Victor asked, though even in a question, his voice roared. He continued to stalk forward, his muscles bunched like enormous cables, the sand crunching under his steps and the crowd going wild. In some distant, removed part of his awareness, Victor knew the announcer was going into hysterics—the real kind, not the way he spoke to whip up the crowd.

Suddenly the ground shook, and another figure stood in the sand between Victor and the black, armor-clad giant. He was a puny thing, wearing silvery armor and adorned with pretty white-feathered wings. Victor liked the looks of those feathers and began to imagine them adorning his armor and the haft of his mighty axe.

“Black, what are you doing?” the newcomer asked, and Victor paused his advance—there was power in that voice.

“My heir must live. I will pay reparations,” the black-clad giant said, still crouching over his pathetic offspring.

“What say you, gladiator?” the powerful little man asked, turning to regard Victor’s hulking form. “This sets a bad precedent; I’ll make him pay you dearly for this transgression of the games.”

Victor’s rage had cooled significantly at the touch of the silvery little man’s aura; he knew strength when he felt it, and something inside him was appeased by the potent being’s attempts to be polite—at his show of respect. Victor began to assert himself in his own mind, pushing his Quinametzin alter ego to the side, and, with an effort of will, he said, “I will respect your decision.”

“Excellent.” The silver-clad man snapped his beautiful wings wide and turned to face the area of the stands where box seats were set up. His voice carried over the noise, and as he spoke, people quieted, “Jast has yielded and, due to his father’s intervention, is banned from the arena for one hundred years. The stranger is victorious!”

“Warlord!” the man in black said, straightening up.

“You’ve trespassed upon the sanctity of these games, Ardek. On Horc’s Day, no less! We’ll speak later, but for now, be grateful and show gratitude to this stranger to our city; he’s within his rights to demand blood.”

Victor felt his rage continuing to cool and knew he’d start to shift back to his usual self soon. He didn’t want to appear small before these two men, not then. With that thought, he grunted and, Lifedrinker swinging loosely in his grip, started walking toward the portcullis that barred his tunnel.

“Gladiator . . . Deshi, I’m sorry I forgot your name . . .” the silver-clad man called after him.

“Victor.” He stopped and paused, turning to face the man fully, his voice rumbling out of his enormous chest, “I’m no Deshi. I’m a true titan, and should that man in black or his son seek another fight, I won’t guarantee the safety of your city.”

“Ho! Hear that, Black? This youngster has spirit! Victor, I’ll see you at my Horc’s Day feast tonight. There, Black will present you with his reparations.” He didn’t wait for Victor to answer; it was clear he considered it a settled matter. He snapped his wings with a *crack* and streaked into the air faster than mere feathers could have propelled him.

Victor entered his tunnel, leaving the howling crowd behind, his mind so busy he couldn’t register the meaning of the announcer’s words that chased after him. He felt his rage seeping away as he walked, felt Lifedrinker grow slightly heavier, bigger in his hand, and sighed. “It’ll be good to get

out of this cheap armor and get something to eat and maybe a couple beers. I wonder if Valla enjoyed the show.”