

Victor BK4: Ch13

Book 4: Chapter 13: Bodyguard

“You actually said that? You threatened the safety of the city?” Valla sat back and blew out a breath in amazement, shaking her head and lifting her mug of ale to sip at it while Victor laughed.

“When I’m Berserk, it’s like a different side of me comes out. Well, maybe a part of me becomes more pronounced.” Victor shrugged and took a big pull of his own beer.

“At least the warlord seemed to have a sense of humor. Tes told me he’s nearly reached the eleventh tier.”

“Fuck . . . seriously?”

“Yes, truly.” Valla took another drink and said, “Well, you promised to tell me about the prizes you won, but I should tell you about our wagers first.”

“You found a place to make bets?” Victor set his big mug of foamy, warm beer on the table and reached for the plate of sliced, cured meats and cheese.

“I did, but the public bookmakers had limits on their bets for the first round, and after you crushed your first couple of opponents, your odds weren’t as favorable as you might hope. Still, I turned your nine thousand beads into sixty-two. I . . . well, I did similarly well.”

“Holy shit! Sixty-two thousand? I’d say we’re sitting pretty with cash, huh? I mean, we should do some serious shopping before we head back to Fanwath, assuming we can get back with the tokens I won or with the help of someone powerful who happens to owe me.” Victor grinned and winked, slightly buzzed from the beer. “You know, for interrupting my final match.”

“Yes, everyone knows.” Valla gestured to the crowded tavern, and Victor chuckled, remembering how people had crowded around when they’d first arrived, clapping him on the back, congratulating him, asking him questions about his fighting techniques, his giant form, and a million other things. Valla had finally grown tired of it and shouted them back, threatening to go elsewhere if they couldn’t drink in peace, which caused the barkeep to take up her cause, chasing people away from their table.

“Anyway, the prizes.” One by one, Victor pulled out his winnings to show Valla—the three prize tokens, the drake gall bladder, the magma horn, and finally, his grand prize, a glass jar containing a bloody heart about the size of one of Valla’s fists. The glass was warm to the touch, and Victor knew it was enchanted to keep the heart as fresh as the moment it was pulled from the body of a spine

fiend. He had no idea what a spine fiend was, but he was glad it sounded like a monster, not a person.

“If I remember correctly from the flyer you picked up at the arena, you need an alchemist for the horn and gall bladder, but you’re supposed to eat that heart raw?” The corner of Valla’s mouth twisted down in an involuntary grimace, and Victor nodded sympathetically.

“Yeah. Sounds gross, huh?”

“Well, yes, but it’s oddly fitting. It’s meant to improve your bloodline, and didn’t you have a bloodline vision involving the consumption of an enemy’s heart?”

“Yeah. Holy shit . . . maybe I should Berserk before I eat it!”

“Is that safe?” Valla’s eyes clouded, and her brows narrowed, and Victor knew she was remembering her encounter with his Aspect of Terror.

“I’ve got pretty good control of myself these days when I Berserk . . .” Victor drummed his fingers on the tabletop, thinking about it, and said, “When I first learned the spell, I had almost no self-control. I couldn’t stop fighting until the rage left me. These days I can think, speak, I bet I could even cast other spells, though I’ve never tried . . .” he trailed off, noting that Valla didn’t seem particularly put at ease.

He and Valla drank some more, and Victor ate more meat and cheese; then he shrugged and said, “I’ll do it somewhere safe—outside the walls, even. You don’t need to be anywhere near me, but I like the idea. I feel like I’ll gain more from my bloodline if I’m in touch with it when I eat this thing.”

“It makes sense,” Valla finally said with a resigned sigh. “Perhaps we could ask the warlord if he has a safe space for you to do it. What time are you supposed to go to his celebration?”

“Well, after the high-tier duels, I guess.” Victor looked around and caught the barkeep’s eye, waving him over. The big Vesh ambled through the crowd, his prodigious gut and hooved feet making his progress kind of comical, and by the time he arrived, Victor’s inebriated grin had grown very wide.

“What can I do for you, Champion?”

“I’m supposed to go to the warlord’s feast tonight. Any idea what time I should head to his, uh . . . where does he live? A palace?”

“Ah, the warlord lives in the citadel at the center of Coloss, atop King’s Hill. Just keep following the roads with upward slopes, and you’ll reach it. I bet the warlord will start his party after the high-tier duels, which will be after the mid-tier

tournament. A few hours after sunset, that's when I'd head up there." He looked at their table, the decimated meat and cheese platter, and their empty mugs and said, "Shall I send you some more food? Another round?"

Victor looked at Valla, and she nodded, so he said, "Yeah, that'd be good." After the barkeep grunted and walked away, Victor said, "So? What did you think of Tes?"

"She's amazing, as you said." Valla smiled, her pale blue cheeks a little flushed from the alcohol, and continued. "She wants to come with us on that monster hunt. We're still doing that, right? Even if your tokens allow us to travel back to Fanwath, I'd like to learn a few more things here. We have months until Rellia starts to panic."

"Really? That's a surprise," Victor chuckled. "I thought you'd be pushing me to go check out the City Stone right now . . ." Victor stopped speaking as Valla's eyes widened, and she leaned forward.

"Can we? We should see what these tokens will allow. It will give us a good idea about our next move, and we have hours before the warlord's party starts."

"Well, we just ordered more food . . ."

"Put it in your ring; you can snack on the way," Valla laughed, tilting her mug to her face and downing the rest of her ale.

Victor laughed, too, and said, "Wow, you're in a very different mood than you were this morning."

"Tes made me feel a lot better about myself, about my chances in that duel, should we still be in this world when the time comes. Not to mention, I had a good time watching you beat up on the locals."

"All right, well, I'll go up to the bar, cancel our drinks, and grab my meat and cheese. Meet you outside." Victor stood up, his chair scraping noisily over the hard wooden planks of the floor, and pushed his way through the crowd up to the bar. People moved aside quickly, and a few clapped him on the shoulder. Victor smiled and burped, slapping peoples' backs in a comradely fashion as he edged around them, feeling quite good about his change in status with the locals.

He'd just stowed away his cheese tray and was edging his way through the crowd when he felt himself bump up against a man who might as well have been a pillar of iron, so little did he give. "Scuse me," Victor grunted, pushing his way past some more easily shifted clientele, but the man reached out a hand and grasped his shoulder, giving it a squeeze and stopping him dead.

"Hold up, runt," a gravelly voice said, and though the volume was low, the words cut through Victor's foggy mind like a knife. He turned to regard the speaker more carefully and saw a Vesh with black scaled skin and folded leathery wings

at his back. “You really caused some trouble for the war captain today. Had to beat his son that way, did you?”

“It was an arena fight,” Victor said, standing up straighter and turning to face the man. He could feel his aura pushing against him, like a palpable thickness in the air, and he knew this man was of a much higher tier than himself. He’d talked a big game when he was Berserking in the arena, but Victor didn’t think he should go around the city fighting people of unknown and likely prodigious power.

“You don’t seem so tough now.” The hand on his shoulder tightened, and Victor glanced at it, noting the black scales and thick, pointed, black nails.

“Are you part, uh, what are they called . . . Yazzian?”

“What the shit did you just say?” Suddenly the dark orbs beneath the man’s scaled brow began to glow with furious golden Energy, and he leaned closer to Victor, his lips pulling back from long, sharp teeth.

“Oh, sorry. Was that insulting? I really didn’t mean it that way . . .” Victor took a few steps back, slipping out of the man’s grasp and making his way toward the doorway. The darkly scaled man scowled and stalked toward him. The crowd surged away from them, clearing some space, and Victor noticed the friendly banter and laughter that had filled the air was gone.

“Leave off him, Haz,” a deep voice said from behind Victor, and he turned to see a Degh in a silvery helmet peering in through the too-small doorway.

“Gah, keep your nose out of this, Tronk,” Haz growled, reaching for Victor’s shoulder again.

“Don’t think I will. Warlord ‘imself sent me to look after the runt. Better get yourself back on a leash before you make more trouble for your master.” Suddenly Victor felt an enormous, powerful grip on his other shoulder, and he was pulled, stumbling back through the doorway and into the late afternoon sunlight. He almost stumbled, his arms cartwheeling to keep himself upright, but the hand stopped pulling and steadied him while he regained his balance.

“There we are,” the same deep voice rumbled, and Victor realized it had been the Degh—Tronk, he supposed—that pulled him out of the tavern. He jerked his head back toward the doorway and was relieved to see the scaly man hadn’t followed; the crowd had reformed inside, obscuring his view. “I’ll spend some time with you this evening, if you don’t mind, lad.”

“Uh, thanks. I wasn’t looking for another fight right now.”

“No, he wasn’t,” Valla said, and Victor realized she was standing behind the giant, frowning from just beneath his left elbow. “What did you say to that man, Victor? Couldn’t you tell he was higher tier?”

“I didn’t say anything . . .”

“Nar, there’s nothin’ he coulda done different. Haz is one of Black’s lieutenants, and he holds a grudge for his master. Don’t worry, though, folks. Our benevolent leader saw this comin’ and sent me to keep ya company. I’m Tronk.”

Victor regarded the huge man; he wore a silvery breastplate inlaid with golden sigils, had an enormous sword strapped to his back, and a thick helmet that would give Victor’s gift from Polo a run for its money when it came to angry-looking visages. More than that, like the Vesh inside the tavern, Tronk gave off a dense, dangerous aura—a kind of weight in the air that made it feel like you were walking in water, each breath a bit of a struggle in his presence. Victor smiled and held out a hand, “Thanks, Tronk. I’m Victor, and my small, blue friend is Valla.”

“Right.” Tronk nodded, squeezing Victor’s hand between a few of his fingers. “The warlord was a bit worried some o’ Black’s loyalists might try to earn some points by makin’ you pay in the streets for what ya done in the arena. Nobody’ll cross you with me around; I’m one of the warlord’s fists.”

“Fists?” Valla asked, moving next to Victor so she could look more directly at Tronk.

“Aye; there’s ten o’ us—we keep the peace and do some o’ the warlord’s lighter work, get our hands dirty when he’s busy with bigger messes.”

“So, you’re like our bodyguard tonight?”

“Tonight, tomorrow, maybe longer—depends ‘ow long Black’s feeling raw ‘bout ‘ow you embarrassed ‘is son.”

“Well, thanks. Uh, we were just going to try to get to the City Stone to see what I could do with the prize tokens I won. That all right?”

“Sure. Ya know the way?” Tronk hooked his thumbs in the oversized leather and metal-plated girdle he wore and looked up the street to his right.

“We figured it would be up in the warlord’s citadel,” Valla said before Victor could respond.

“Aye, that’s right. Follow me.” Tronk started stomping up the sidewalk, and people scurried to clear the way for him. Victor and Valla hurried after, walking in his wake. Victor grinned and nudged Valla.

“Kinda cool not to have to worry about walking in the slow lane for a change.” He nodded toward the Vesh and other human-sized people walking on the left side of the sidewalk.

“Aye,” Valla nodded. “We’re lucky he showed up. Maybe that man would have shown mercy on us because we’re low-tier, but he could have given us a very bad time.”

“Us?” Victor frowned at Valla. “He was after me.”

“How would I ever show my face to Rellia if I stood by and watched you slaughtered?” Valla scoffed and shook her head as though Victor had said something even dumber than usual.

“You don’t need to get killed because of a vendetta some guy has against me. That wouldn’t make life any easier for Rellia.”

“No,” Valla frowned and continued, “I suppose not. Still, I wouldn’t be able to live with myself if I stood by and watched a comrade die.”

“Maybe it wouldn’t have been so bad, anyway. He might have just wanted to give me a good beating.”

“Might be,” Tronk rumbled over his shoulder. “Haz knows there’d be trouble wi’ the warlord if he killed ya.” His boulder-like shoulders lifted, and Victor realized he was shrugging as he continued, “Though Haz mightn’t care too much.”

The walk to the citadel took a good half hour or more, even moving at the giant’s pace as he cleared the way. The final street leading up to the citadel was steeply inclined, switching back east to west as it climbed the final stretch of “King’s Hill.” At certain points, between gaps in the buildings, Victor and Valla paused to see the expanse of Coloss falling away below them. With the sky lit orange and crimson by the setting sun, Victor was reminded of just how far from home he really was.

The buildings were tightly packed together, and their rooftops, tiled in orange, green, copper, and bronze, created a magical tapestry of color that reflected the garish colors in the sky. All of this fell away toward a wall that seemed impossibly tall and wide—something that must have taken either enormous magic or a thousand years to build. When they finally rounded the last wide turn in the winding road and could see straight ahead to the warlord’s citadel, all the previous wonders fell away from Victor’s mind.

Much like the great city wall, the citadel was constructed of gigantic rectangular stone blocks. It was square and rose in seven distinct tiers, each with crenelated ramparts built from the same great stones. Atop the ramparts, soldiers patrolled, tiny figures far from the ground, giving a sense of scale to the massive structure. Each side of the base had to be more than a mile long, and though it didn’t seem so tall due to its tiered nature, Victor would have bet the central spire was higher than any of the skyscrapers in Tucson’s downtown.

“Big,” he said, words failing him.

“Aye. Luck is wi’ us, though,” Tronk grunted, still walking steadily toward the one and only monumental gate in the wall of the great building. “The City Stone’s

right in the middle on the ground floor.” He trudged down the wide, stone-paved roadway, and Victor followed, glancing at Valla and shrugging with a crooked grin.

“Pretty awesome building, if you ask me.”

“Awful in its majesty,” Valla nodded, suddenly quite sober.

“How many people live in there?” Victor asked, trying to hurry his steps to walk beside the giant.

“Dunno. Warlord has his troops, o’ course—ten thousand strong. Then there’s his children and their families and us Fists, and the servants and . . . argh, it’s too much to think about.”

“Tronk, are all the Fists high-tier? What about the warlord’s troops?” Valla, too, hurried her pace to walk beside Victor.

“The Fists, aye. His troops?” Tronk snorted, gesturing toward the gates and the dozen soldiers standing to either side with long, ornamental spears. “Most are like these—mid-tier.”

“Do the war captains have Fists or their equivalent?” Valla asked.

“Nar. Only the warlord.”

“So he maintains his power, his rule, through might.” Valla nodded as though it was all making perfect sense.

“Yar. If a war captain gets too uppity, we’re sent to crack some ‘eads.”

“That how it is in the empire?” Victor asked Valla as they began to pass in front of the soldiers. The troops neither moved nor spoke while they walked by, and Victor wondered if it would’ve been the same if Tronk weren’t leading them.

“Certainly. The strongest families always work to maintain that strength, consolidating power through alliances and quelling any uprisings, even the hint of an uprising, before they can take root.”

“Hope they don’t know about Rellia’s long-term plans.” Victor winked at Valla, and her eyes widened in shock. He wondered if she was surprised that he knew Rellia was conspiring against the Old Powers in the empire or if she simply didn’t know what he was talking about. How much had Rellia shared with her?

“Rellia’s not a fool,” she said, pressing her lips together in a frown.

They passed under the gateway, wide enough to drive four busses through side by side and tall enough that Tronk could have stacked ten of his giant Degh friends on his shoulders before they touched the immense stone lintel. The gates, also made of carved or molded stone, hung on tremendous brass-colored hinges and had been pulled wide to allow clear passage. Beyond them,

the entrance tunnel yawned like a man-made canyon leading to a brightly lit open area that looked, for all the world, like a park.

“City Stone’s in the center o’ the garden,” Tronk rumbled, his pace unwavering as he continued trudging into the great structure. Even at the giant’s pace, it took them a solid five or ten minutes to walk toward that brightly lit interior. Along the way, they passed many Vesh and a few Degh, but none of the other peoples of Coloss. They passed dozens of wide corridors leading off the main thoroughfare and half as many stairways leading up to tunnels and passages on different levels that led away from the great tunnel.

When they stepped into the manicured garden, the stone tunnel floor became more like a meandering cobbled path and, hanging above them, was an artificial sun, or so it seemed to Victor. It blazed in yellow-gold splendor, giving off light and warmth. It was clearly not the real sun, though; Victor could shade his eyes and look at it, and he thought he saw crystalline tines poking out of a grand glass ball, swirling with Energy.

“That’s awesome,” he said, and Valla breathed deeply, looking around the park, nodding her agreement.

Grass grew on manicured lawns, trees rose up in cultivated groves, and hedgerows, fountains, and flowerbeds completed the picture. Though the trees made it difficult, Victor could shade his eyes and look beyond them to see that the citadel’s walls encompassed the park, maybe a quarter mile long on each side.

“Is it always sunny?” Valla asked, following Tronk along the central, cobbled pathway.

“Nar. When the real sun goes down, the caretakers will make it look like moonlight.”

They walked in silence for a few minutes, Victor and Valla looking left and right, taking in the park’s beauty, but soon they approached a dark, stone monolith, thirty feet high and covered with silver and gold runes that seemed to shift and float just beneath the surface. An iron fence, fifteen feet tall and tipped with spikes, surrounded the stone, a single gateway opening onto the path on which Victor and the others approached.

Two soldiers, as big as Tronk and decked head to toe in gleaming plate mail, stood on either side of the gate. A woman wearing a rainbow-colored robe was between them atop a velvet-cushioned stool. She was petite, easily the smallest adult Victor had seen in Coloss; she had silver hair and brilliant blue eyes, and her skin looked, for all the world, like delicate, pale white porcelain. She even had seams at her neck, wrist, and finger joints, as though each part of her had been cast from a mold.

She looked at Tronk and his two charges and smiled, her thin, painted lips lifting in a strangely unnatural manner, and said, “Welcome. Please present your Coloss Prize Token in order to proceed.”