

Victor BK4: Ch38

Book 4: Chapter 38: Hints and Lessons

Victor opened his eyes and grinned hugely—his Core had just advanced to improved six, and he'd only spent a few hours in the warlord's cultivation chamber. He pulled his little, magical pocket watch out of his storage container and looked at it, noting the time was 11:34; Tes had helped him to get it set properly to Coloss time.

When he'd woken up and met with the servant outside his room, the young man had informed him that Yabbo and Karnice wouldn't be able to spar until "after lunch." Victor figured that was sometime around noon, so he'd spent the morning cultivating. He stood, stretched, popped his back a few times, and then walked toward the chamber door, reseating Lifedrinker in the harness under his arm. He pressed his hand to the plate on the door and, when it clicked, pushed it open.

"Well," a richly deep, friendly voice said from the left-hand bench when Victor stepped out. He turned to the sound and saw, for only the third time, the warlord. He sat leaning back, his wings furled, his legs crossed, and a sly smile exposing sharp, white teeth.

"Oh," Victor said, stopping short and sketching an awkward half-bow. "Warlord."

"Indeed! I see you've made some good use of my chamber." The smile didn't falter, and the astute, dark eyes beneath the weird feathery white brows reminded Victor of a hawk's.

"Yes! Thank you again for letting me, us, use it."

"Surely. You're doing me a favor, are you not? And your pretty blue friend is a welcome distraction around this place."

Victor didn't know how to take those words, but he knew he didn't like the sound of them. He frowned and straightened up, suddenly worried about Valla. Tes wouldn't let something happen to her, would she? Before he could voice a concern or another banality, the Warlord shifted and spoke again.

"I don't use the chamber much these days. My Core advances so slowly that I begin to wonder if there's a stage beyond the one I've reached. Rumor mongers tell me I should travel to older worlds, face ancient challenges, and learn from the great wizards and warriors in those places. I'm not convinced they exist. Zaafor is old enough, is it not? I rule enough people, do I not? Why should I give up all that I've gained and earned for the pursuit of tiny, nebulous improvements?"

"Well, I don't know. I mean, I thought Fanwath was full of powerful people until I visited this world . . ."

"And I might find the same should I travel far enough abroad? Is that the line of your thinking?"

“I suppose.” Victor frowned, then shrugged and asked what was on his mind, “What rank is your Core, or is that too personal a ques . . .”

“I’ve attained the last tier of Epic, and I’ve ground away at it for nearly three hundred years.”

“The chamber doesn’t help?”

“Hardly. I heard an interesting rumor, Victor.”

“Oh?”

“Is it true you were able to improve your Core by eating the heart of a vanquished foe?”

Victor’s mouth fell open, and he stared blankly at the warlord for a moment, his mind spasmodically traveling down multiple trains of thought—who had told him? Could he have heard him speaking to Valla or something? Was it a problem if the warlord knew? Should he lie? Would he know it if he did?

“Are you dumbstruck?”

“Un, no, Warlord, simply surprised. I wasn’t aware anyone else knew of that. You see, that aspect of my bloodline is new to me, and I’ve only done it a couple of times. It doesn’t always improve my Core, though. I think it depends upon the heart.” Victor had decided that lying to this man about something he seemed to know already would be a mistake.

“Intriguing, Victor. Well, don’t let me keep you any longer. I believe Karnice has a lesson for you. I’ll be around, watching; I find you quite interesting.”

“Well, thanks.” Victor shrugged, uncomfortable with the strange praise. “Um, I was on my way to see Karnice, but I’m not sure how to get there. I was told to meet him in the “practice yard” outside the citadel—is that the big open space by the gate?”

“No, but close. Just walk around the citadel to the western side, and you’ll see the practice yard; it’s surrounded by a short wall and has a sand floor, perfect for soaking up blood.” The warlord laughed, then stood and motioned for the stairs leading down. “After you, young titan.”

“Right, thanks again, Warlord.” Victor nodded and hurried down the steps, and as he gained some distance from the powerful ruler, who’d stopped at the top of the steps and seemed to be watching him leave, he cast Titanic Aspect so he could move to the Degh side of the steps and double his pace. Something about the warlord, though he was overtly polite and pleasant, bothered Victor.

He’d felt like a mouse being toyed with by an eagle, and he wasn’t really surprised—the man had destroyed the Degh in a war thousands of years before Victor was born. The question about his

heart eating had bothered him, not really because he was embarrassed about it, which he was, but because it had come so quickly after the warlord admitted having been stuck with his own Core advancement. “He sure seemed pretty free with that tidbit of information, hmm, chica?”

“Ware the old wolf, Victor, for he’d do much to cling to his power.” Lifedrinker’s sharp soprano edged with a constant note of violence, surprised him; he spoke to her so often with no response that he’d grown accustomed to having a one-sided discussion.

“He makes you nervous, too?”

“Oh yes! I yearn to taste his flesh, but we aren’t ready yet. Can you not feel his strength? Be cautious, for his words are soaked in blood.”

“I’ll be cautious. Don’t worry.” Victor rubbed a thumb along the back of her metal head as he walked, and she hummed softly, apparently placated. The heat pulsing beneath her silvery surface gave him comfort, too, and when he stepped out of the citadel into the bright sunlight, he was in a better mood. He turned to the right, walking along the cobbled paths around the enormous edifice, passing by servants carrying baskets and buckets, pushing carts of linens and kitchen supplies.

Victor stepped to the side, making room for the servants, and that’s when he realized there was another pathway on the other side of the row of planters, this one lined with sculptures of animals and birds, flowering plants, and succulent cacti. Well-dressed Vesh passed him occasionally on this path, and he reasoned that this was meant for the non-serving class that dwelled in the citadel.

Before he could spend much time speculating on the various types of people living in Coloss and their stations relative to each other, he came to a path to the left that opened into a large, depressed square. Victor walked that way and stood at the top of the steps, looking down on a “practice field” that would put many full-blown colosseums to shame. It might not have the stands of a colosseum, but rows of shady stone benches under pergolas lined the marble-block pit approximately the size of a football field. As the warlord had said, the bottom of the pit was covered in fine, white sand.

Victor could imagine hundreds of people practicing maneuvers out in that sand, but at that hour, only a few were scattered around the space, sparring with weapons and Energy. He watched a woman erupt with white, frosty Energy and perform a double backflip to avoid the fire-limned war hammer of her opponent as it smashed into the sand. As she leaped back into the fray, swinging her frosty bo-staff, Victor started down the steps, looking around for a sign of his supposed trainer.

He was still wearing his Titanic Aspect, and so, when he reached the edge of the practice field, the first words he heard from Karnice were, “Gods! He’s bigger than you said!”

“Are you Berserk?” another voice asked, and Victor turned to see two Vesh eyeing him from a stone bench in the shade of the nearby clay-tiled pergola.

The one who’d spoken was shorter but broader than the other, with barrel-like shoulders covered in the same brown fur as his head and face—he looked more bear than man. He gazed at Victor through dark golden eyes and grinned, exposing canines too large for his mouth. He wore leather

straps in lieu of a shirt and leather shorts that exposed the bottoms of his furry legs all the way down to the sharp black claws at the ends of his toes.

The Vesh sitting next to him was more akin to the warlord than the beastlike man beside him. He was tall, bronze-skinned, and his red, gleaming eyes glowered from beneath dark brows, a heavy weight of power emanating from them. He was a handsome man, and if it weren't for the double set of shoulders and four arms protruding from his green-scaled vest, Victor might have thought he was human. He'd combed back his black hair neatly and wore his beard in a sharp, well-oiled goatee.

After momentarily staring at the two Vesh, Victor replied, "No."

"Huh. I thought you were smaller when you weren't Berserk. It seemed that way in the arena . . ." the bear-like man said.

"He's under the influence of a spell," the taller, four-armed man replied.

"Hey," Victor said. "Karnice and Yabbo?" Victor let his spell fade as he spoke and winced as the weird sensation of shrinking came over him. Even without his spell's boost, though, he was a good deal larger than the two Vesh, and if it weren't for the hints of Karnice's aura bleeding through his efforts to restrain it, he might not have been intimidated by them. As it was, when Karnice stood and approached him, Victor could feel the threat of his power, lurking like a viper in a decorative basket.

"Well met," Karnice said, holding out his top right hand, and Victor clasped it. "I'm Karnice, and I'll be helping you two to improve for the next couple of weeks. We want Coloss to win the tourney, yes?"

"Yes!" Yabbo said, bouncing to his hairy feet and rushing over to clap Victor on the shoulder. His hand was heavy and hard, like a frozen ham.

Victor grunted and said, "Sure we do."

"Let's get down there, then." Karnice released Victor's hand and then moved around the side of the practice arena until he came to a set of stone steps that led down to the sand. "Come, hurry. My time is valuable, whelps."

Victor hustled down, shoulder to shoulder with Yabbo, and when they stood on the sand, Karnice turned to face them, folding all four of his arms over his chest. "Well, I won't have you two playing flower flutters! Get your weapons out!"

Victor unsnapped Lifedrinker's sling and lifted her free, holding her crossways before him. Yabbo summoned a shield and a heavy-looking black hammer in his other hand. Karnice nodded and backed up, and suddenly an enormous silvery spear was in his hands, all four of them. "Good. I'll take your measure one at a time, weapon skills only. Give me everything you have—try to get past my spear and leave a mark on my flesh. No Energy abilities!"

Yabbo stepped forward, so Victor backed to the arena's edge to watch. While he stood there, he contemplated his Sovereign Will ability—at the moment, he was boosting his agility and vitality, and he changed it to agility and strength. The ability didn't cost him any Energy, so it was fair to use

as far as he was concerned. As his muscles swelled and hardened, he watched Yabbo struggle to get close to Karnice.

It was evident that Yabbo was a powerful, fierce fighter. His shield was the size of a sled, round and brassy, with colorful red, black, and yellow runes flickering and glowing in the metal. He swung it like it weighed nothing, but Victor could feel the air being displaced, could hear the way it crashed against Karnice's spear, and he didn't think it would feel good to be bashed by it. The bear-like man growled and charged, never seeming to tire as he swung that heavy hammer at Karnice, only to have the taller, lankier man dance out of reach.

Every so often, Karnice would go on the offensive, using his spear to feint, then smashing the shining, silvery haft into Yabbo's shoulder or shield, or thigh, always with the result of Yabbo roaring in pain or frustration and flopping down into the sand, unable to withstand the force of the blow. The assessment bout went on like that for a long while—ten or fifteen minutes, which Victor knew all too well was a long time to be fighting all out.

When Karnice called a halt, he seemed perfectly at ease, not even breathing heavily, and Yabbo was heaving for breath with sand and sweat thick in his fur. "Not bad, Yabbo. Advanced skill with the hammer? Near epic with the shield?"

"Yeh . . ." Yabbo grunted between pants. "Not used to fighting without my skills," he added, still leaning with his thick, clawed hands on his furry knees.

"Well, let's have the offworlder give it a go. You can get your wind back while you watch."

"Right," Victor said, stepping forward, Lifedrinker loose and ready in his grip.

"Come on, then!" Karnice growled, leveling the spear, apparently out of patience. Victor frowned at his change of demeanor; he could see he wasn't the favored student. With the thought, his Core surged, and red heat started to spill into his pathways, but Victor held it back, flexing his already taxed will—he'd been fighting his aura down all day. Still, he contained his fury and charged at Karnice, using the moves he'd learned from Polo Vosh and perfected through hours and hours of practice with Valla and alone, dancing with his shadow.

He immediately saw that he was faster than Yabbo, faster and stronger. Lifedrinker clanged against Karnice's spear, and sometimes clouds of black smoke and a splash of hot, orange Energy would accompany her impact. The first time it happened, Karnice frowned but held his tongue. Victor could see he'd been about to yell at him for using Energy but realized it was Lifedrinker's doing.

The spear weathered Lifedrinker's blows, clearly a powerful weapon in its own right, though it lacked a mind. The first time Karnice went on the offensive and worked past Victor's guard, smashing the haft of his spear into Victor's hip, he looked a bit surprised when Victor hardly shifted. He nodded, though, and ramped up the offensive, twirling his spear like a staff, whipping the ends around, knocking Lifedrinker aside, and raking the razor-sharp edge over Victor's left pectoral, leaving a long, bloody rip in one of his better shirts.

Victor growled and pressed his offensive, trying to see the pattern in Karnice's evasions but never quite sussing them out—as soon as he thought he had an opening figured out, Karnice would

surprise him with a new side step or feinting parry. The battle went on and on, and Victor ended up switching his Sovereign Will boost to vitality and agility. Once he'd done that, Victor never tired—he felt like he could spar all day. By the time Karnice called a halt, Victor's shirt was ruined, and he had a dozen shallow gashes over his chest, stomach, shoulders, and back.

He stood beside Yabbo, his breath unlabored, and waited to hear Karnice's assessment. Yabbo, for his part, threw Victor sidelong glances, clearly surprised by how well he'd held up. While Karnice gathered his thoughts, he muttered into Victor's shoulder, behind one hairy fist, "I thought you were low-tier."

"Well, close enough to mid." Victor shrugged.

"Well, offworlder," Karnice said, leaning on his spear, the tip in the air, glinting red with Victor's blood. "If your axe mastery isn't epic, I'd say it's close, hmm?"

"Really? It's advanced, but I thought I had a long way to go before epic."

"Regardless, I can see you've lived the life of a warrior. You don't tire easily and are sturdy for a man of your rank. I'll wager your racial advancements and bloodline have helped you there, hmm?"

"I guess." Victor didn't feel like expounding—why did it feel like everyone was pumping him for information about his bloodline today? The question wasn't really out of the blue; it was a natural thing to wonder about, but following his chat with the warlord, it triggered a little warning in his gut.

"Well, if I'm to teach you, I'll need to know more about you both. Choose one of your strongest abilities, and using only that ability, we'll repeat the assessment."

"Yes!" Yabbo said, stepping onto the sand. Victor watched as he held the metal disc of his shield up, gathering hot, acrid Energy. Victor could feel the caustic attunement, whatever it was, in his sinuses. Yabbo roared as his spell completed, and then his shield expanded, glowing green and dripping drops of acidic, green liquid into the sand that crackled and sizzled.

The shield was large enough to cover most of Yabbo's body now, and Karnice had to work a little to get his blows past it. He didn't risk the health of his spear by striking it nakedly against that biting surface. Rather, he channeled his own red, scorching Energy along the length of the silvery shaft, coating it with a crackling aura that sizzled against Yabbo's shield, leaving charred lines on the metallic surface that only slowly faded and filled back in with Yabbo's green Energy.

Victor tried to pay attention to the "assessment," but he grew bored—it was much like the first time, and the two hardly did anything other than dance back and forth, circling each other. Karnice still managed to send Yabbo sprawling a few times, and after another ten minutes or so, he finally called a halt to the exercise. Yabbo let his spell drop, clearly exhausted, and walked back over to Victor.

"Well? Berserker? Will you show me your might?" Karnice asked, twirling his red-limned spear. Something about the question bothered Victor. Why did Karnice want him to cast Berserk? Was it truly to assess his strength? Victor

almost refused, almost chose a different spell, like Inspiring Presence, but then he wondered if Karnice was just fishing, trying to see what else Victor could bring to the table. Everyone in Coloss knew he could Berserk; what was the harm in using it now?

“I’m supposed to be practicing it anyway,” he said, then, grinning like a madman, he formed the pattern for the spell and relaxed his will, letting his rage flood his pathways.