

Victor BK4: Ch39

Book 4: Chapter 39: Secrets and Oaths

Victor smashed into Karnice's spear over and over, batting the length of dense, heavy metal aside with Lifedrinker or his fist and lunging at the tall, four-armed warrior. Each time, Karnice danced away, his agility so far beyond Victor's that the enraged titan-blood had trouble focusing on his form as it blurred into motion. Still, no matter Karnice's speed and no matter how he tried to punish Victor with his stabs and sweeps, the berserking giant kept advancing, shrugging off the weeping cuts and instantly fading welts.

Karnice couldn't move him with that spear, not even an inch, so he was forced to leap and dash to keep himself out of Lifedrinker's cutting arc. It began to grow evident that Victor's rage would outlast the champion's endurance—ten minutes into the sparring session, Karnice was drenched in a sheen of sweat, his face was flushed, and his lungs heaved like bellows. On the other hand, Victor continued to jump and rush toward him, swinging his great, silvery axe in liquid cleaves that ripped the air and left trails of black smoke in her wake.

Karnice finally seemed to have had enough and gathered a great surge of Energy. His body blazed with roiling, red flames that rose up from his shoulders into a gigantic, fiery double that leaped away from his sweat-drenched body and fell upon Victor with not one but four fiery replicas of his spear. Victor screamed in rage and pain as the spears stabbed into his flesh, cutting far more deeply than the physical version and leaving painful scorches that lined the puncture wounds.

Still, Victor fought. He hacked Lifedrinker through the fiery doppelganger, slashing her through its midsection, and she drank great torrents of its Energy with each hack. Victor's prodigious vitality and Berserk healing closed the wounds almost as fast as the red nightmare could pull the spears out, leaving red welts where throbbing holes had been. His Flame-Touched feat was proving its worth; despite the burned flesh in the stab wounds, he healed cleanly.

The damage had been done, though; the pain and frustration of the clinging, fiery foe had driven Victor's fury to new heights, and he screamed and flailed, ripping it to shreds but, in the process, burning off the last of his hot, red Energy. Karnice watched from a dozen feet away, leaning on the haft of his spear as Victor vanquished his gigantic, burning mirror image. As it faded away in a black wisp of smoke, Victor fell to his knees, his rage and titanic aspect gone. He heaved for breath, frowned, and growled, "Not really pulling your punches, were you?"

"I had to get your measure, and now I know." Karnice shrugged. "The wounds healed."

"And if they hadn't?" Victor touched one of the nearly twenty circular red welts, this one on his chest—his shirt was nothing but tatters clinging to his shoulders.

"Then you'd require some extra healing." Karnice looked at Yabbo and said, "You two will spend the next few hours sparring with axe and hammer. I'll devise some training strategies for tomorrow." With that, he turned, walked up the stairs leading out of the practice arena, and was gone.

“I don’t think he expected you to press him so hard,” Yabbo said, walking over to Victor and holding out a hand. Victor took the offered hand and let Yabbo hoist him to his feet.

“Eh, most old masters get a little surprised by my Berserk state.”

“I can see why. You have a heavy aura for someone not yet tier five.”

“Thanks,” Victor shrugged, not interested in banter. He was frustrated, and the pain of those fiery spears was still fresh in his mind, regardless of whether he had healed. “Come on, let’s do some weapon work. I have some spells to help.” He concentrated and cast Inspiring Presence and Globe of Inspiration, setting the bright orb ten feet over their heads.

“Oh!” Yabbo said, a smile brightening his eyes and exposing his too-full mouth of fangs. “I knew you were a Spirit Caster, but I didn’t know you had more than one attunement! This is wonderful.” He reached a hand toward the glowing orb of inspiration-attuned Energy and held it there as though trying to shield his eyes while peering at the sun. “Yes! I feel it; let’s practice!”

“Right,” Victor nodded, also feeling better now that he’d bathed himself in inspiration. He was always happy to train with someone, and Yabbo seemed like a decent guy. Karnice, on the other hand, was a bit of an asshole, in Victor’s opinion. The four-armed champion was gone, though, so Victor decided to buckle down and get some real work in. He squared off with Yabbo and said, “Say seventy-five percent? Just spells that boost our weapon abilities? I mean, I want to get some good work in and not beat each other up.”

“Yes, sounds good to me. Do you mind putting on a helmet? This hammer is heavy . . .”

“Sure,” Victor said, then he set Lifedrinker down and produced his Kethian Juggernaut helm from his storage ring. Arms straining at the weight, he slipped it onto his head and grinned as he felt it distribute its weight through his frame. “Should be good now.” Victor picked up Lifedrinker and said, “Okay, chica, we’re just practicing; don’t murder him.”

Yabbo eyed him speculatively. “The axe understands? I don’t want to have to regrow any limbs . . .”

“I’ll be careful, and yeah, she understands.” Victor backed up a step and bowed to Yabbo, who grinned and bowed back, and then the two of them began to train. They fell into an easy rhythm and, as they grew increasingly comfortable with each other’s style, picked up the tempo until a casual observer might think they were fighting in earnest.

Neither of them sustained a serious injury, though Yabbo had to drink a healing draught twice to staunch badly bleeding gashes, one on his shoulder and one just under his ribs. Victor received many a bruising blow from Yabbo's shield or hammer, but his vitality and titanic heritage allowed him to heal such wounds within minutes. He didn't doubt that Yabbo was pulling his blows, but so was he.

One thing that he appreciated about Yabbo was his stamina; he kept up the intensity longer than things usually went with Valla. In fact, the sun was sinking toward the eastern horizon when they finally decided to call an end to their work. Neither of them had improved the ranks of any skills or spells, but Victor felt he was close to some breakthroughs. "A few more days of practice like that will do me well," he said, shaking Yabbo's thick, paw-like hand.

"Indeed! I hope Karnice doesn't simply torture us tomorrow; I'd like to make some gains." Yabbo rubbed at a new scar along his forearm, his breath still a bit ragged from the exertion.

"Yeah. Here's hoping . . ."

"Hello, gentlemen," a cheerful, feminine voice called from the covered benches at the side of the sand pit. Victor recognized Tes's voice instantly and turned to wave. He felt a strange sense of relief when he saw Valla sitting beside her.

"Hello," Yabbo said, ducking his head, touching his thickly furred head with his free hand—some sort of show of respect, Victor figured.

"Hey, Tes." Victor turned to Valla, caught her eye, and said, "Hey, Valla."

"Victor, I brought you a present," Tes said, holding up a rolled-up piece of parchment.

"I should get going," Yabbo said, clapping Victor's shoulder. "Ladies." He ducked his head again and then hurried up the steps.

"What time tomorrow?" Victor called after him.

Yabbo stopped, turned back, then shrugged and said, "I say we meet here at noon again. Karnice will let us know if he wants something different."

"Right," Victor nodded, and Yabbo turned and was gone, walking around the corner and up toward the citadel. Victor climbed the short steps out of the sand to sit on the bench beside Tes, looked at the parchment in her hand, and asked, "The rest of your spell pattern?"

"Just so! Take your time; you'll find that the entirety of the spell is a bit more perplexing than the section you've learned so far."

"Thanks, Tes." Victor took the parchment, surprised by its weight, and suddenly dreaded unrolling it—the pattern had to be pretty damn long. He tucked it safely into one of his storage rings and asked, "So, what've you ladies been up to today?"

“Cultivating and practicing my spells. I made a rank with my Core, but you look like you had a much harder day. What happened to your shirt?” Tes leaned back, allowing Victor to look at Valla while she spoke. She was clean, her hair neatly coiffed—more so than during the hunt, and she’d put on one of her signature uniform-style shirts with the high, buttoned collar.

“Karnice happened,” Victor shrugged.

“He was hard on you?” Tes raised an eyebrow.

“I think I pissed him off ‘cause I wouldn’t go down easy when he was ‘getting my measure.’”

“He’s a dangerous one—deep-fire attunement.”

“Deep-fire?”

“A kind of elemental affinity, but it has a different Energy signature than fire; you can find it naturally in the deeper parts of worlds like this. A few people in such worlds are born with an affinity for it. It’s hotter and more volatile than typical fire-attuned Energy.”

“Yeah, I felt it.” Victor pointed to some of the pink circles on his chest and arms, though they’d already faded noticeably.

“Reckless of him. He didn’t know you’d heal so easily.” Tes frowned and held one of her long, slender fingers over a mark on Victor’s nearest shoulder. She let it hang there as if debating whether she should touch him, but she ended up curling it into her fist and shaking her head. “Be careful of Karnice and accept his aid with a guarded mind.”

“Speaking of being guarded when accepting aid,” Victor said, glancing over his shoulder toward the hulking, colossal edifice of the citadel. Tes shook her head and held up a finger.

A moment later, Victor’s ears popped, and Tes said, “I can shield our discussion out here, but within the citadel, the warlord’s seat of power, even I must be wary of his prying ears.”

“Well,” Victor said, considering his words, “He kind of gave me the creeps earlier. He was waiting for me when I came out of the cultivation chamber and seemed to be fishing for information about my bloodline, specifically my ability to improve my Core by eating hearts.”

“That man should, indeed, worry you,” Tes nodded. “You know how the Vesh came to be, yes?”

Victor looked past Tes to Valla, and she shrugged, clearly as clueless as he was. “No.”

“Oh, goodness. Well, the Vesh, a few millennia ago, were actually a clan of Degh.”

“What the hell? Seriously?”

“Oh yes. They were always the smallest of their kind, though they were once quite a lot larger than they are now. There used to be many other peoples here on Zaafor. You should know it took me some time to uncover this history,” Tes paused and stared into the sky, clearly savoring some memory or another. “I spent years poring through texts in libraries—many of the old histories were destroyed, but I found enough. I even found some of the old cities of the dead races.”

“Dead races?” Valla asked, clearly engulfed by her words as Tes laid bare the mystery.

“Yes, the Vesh, once a rather weak clan of Degh, learned that they could steal the bloodlines from other peoples. You might guess the people subjected to their method didn’t survive the process. As the Vesh gained new powers and became greedy for more, they slaughtered, wholesale, some of the less populous races on Zaafor, doing enough damage to wipe many of them out.”

“Holy shit! Is that why Khul Bach called them mutants?”

“Oh yes. The Vesh you see in Coloss are largely in the early or, in a few cases, middling stages of digging out the many stolen bloodlines buried in their people’s dark history. You’ll note the higher-tier individuals, such as the warlord and Karnice, are a bit more refined, less animalistic; they’ve unlocked a complementary set of bloodlines that give them true advantages in this violent world.”

“He wants Victor’s bloodline,” Valla said, echoing a fear that had begun to form in Victor’s mind.

“Undoubtedly. The lazy, fearful tyrant has been looking for a way to improve his Core without traveling abroad for centuries.”

“How does he,” Victor thought about his question, then continued, “How does he keep his power? I mean, how has no one from a stronger world come and kicked his ass?”

“He controls the City Stones—refuses connections from other stones. It keeps this world obscure—one of the reasons I was here, studying its history. I’ve learned much, but I’ll be moving on soon.”

“But powerful people can open portals, right?”

“A portal for an army? It could be done, though the effort would be great. Why though? I’m here to study, but others like me would find this world a dead end. They’ve stagnated.”

“So, um, you knew the warlord was going to try to get my bloodline?”

“I know he wants to. I don’t know that he’ll try anytime soon. I imagine he’ll need to study you for a while. I think, though, that it might be wise to seek an alternate route back to your world—I wouldn’t be surprised if you tried to purchase teleportation from his City Stone, and it didn’t work.”

“Do other Vesh know how to steal bloodlines?” Valla asked, her light blue skin suddenly paler than usual.

“Oh, many. The powerful, older ones.”

“Tes, how are we going to get out of here?” Victor asked.

“Don’t fret, Victor. Keep learning while you can. I’ve a lead on someone that may be able to help you. Didn’t you tell me the wizard whose portal you used was named Boaegh?”

“That’s right,” Valla quickly answered.

“He had students; did you know that?” Tes grinned and added, “I’m going to visit one of them tonight.”

“Seriously?”

“Oh, very seriously. In the meantime, keep your guard up, as you have been, and I’ll also be watching. We must time your exit well.”

“Were you always going to help us with this?” Valla asked.

“I,” Tes paused and pursed her lips, clearly trying to decide how to answer. Finally, she said, “I think I must be honest with you. How strange!” She turned to include Victor in her words and then continued, “I was sure I wanted to help you, but I was also curious about the Warlord and what he might do.”

She turned back to Valla and reached out to clasp her hand in hers, then holding it tight, their fingers intertwined, she said, “I thought, at first, to help you prepare for the duel and to help Victor prepare for the arena. What a spectacle, I thought! I was curious how the warlord and Blue would respond to your successes.”

Valla’s eyes had grown dark, and as she listened to Tes, Victor saw her growing tense, perhaps pulling on her hand, still in Tes’s grasp. Victor, for his part, wasn’t surprised at all. He could feel it early on when he’d met with Tes; she’d seemed almost to be toying with him. She continued, “As I grew to know you both, though, I grew fond of you. I do want you both to succeed, and I’ve surprised myself by realizing that I can’t stomach the idea of the warlord and his minions defiling either of you, stealing your bloodlines, or worse.”

“So the idea was to fatten us up, let us entertain these savages, and then observe the warlord’s methodology as he killed us for our bloodlines?”

“Well, Victor’s bloodline for certain, though Blue has been quite interested in trying to attain your natural coloring . . .” Tes knew she’d gone too far with that; she clamped her mouth shut and, as Valla jerked her hand, she relaxed her grip, letting her pull it away.

“That’s pretty fucked up, Tes,” Victor said.

“I’m a scholar, and I was trying to respect the culture of these people.” Tes sighed, clearly upset, worried that she’d alienated Valla, who was leaning forward on her knees, head cradled in her hands. “Valla, for what it’s worth, I’d decided by the second day I knew you, the day we watched Victor in the arena, that I wouldn’t let the warlord harm you.” She turned to Victor, adding, “The same for you, Victor. I knew, speaking with you during Blue’s dinner, that I was probably going to violate my oath and help you.”

That got Valla’s attention, and she lifted her head, eyeing Tes with moist eyes, “Oath?”

“Oh yes!” Tes nodded with a chagrined look that clearly indicated she’d forgotten to mention something important. “I’m a member of a league of scholars from a world much closer to my home—an ancient world with people who have ten times, nay a hundred times, more power and influence than I. I’m not supposed to interfere with the people in the worlds we study. I’m supposed to observe and report; sometimes, our order will vote to interfere with the progress in a stagnant world like this, and sometimes they’ll choose to leave it for a while.

“I’m violating my oath by even telling you this, but I see a loophole; you didn’t intend to travel here. My oath wasn’t sworn with your world, Fanwath, in mind; I don’t think that world has more than a single summary sentence in our index; it’s too young. I think my advocate will help me avoid repudiation if I explain your situation.”

“You’re breaking your oath for us?” Valla asked, the tears now freely flowing down her cheeks.

“I am! I promise, Valla, I do care about you both!” Tes softly chuckled as Valla pulled her into an embrace, burying her face in Tes’s blouse, just under her chin. Tes tucked her chin against Valla’s head, pulling her tight, and smiled at Victor. He looked at her, wondering if he should feel tricked or betrayed, but he was unable to find any hurt feelings. He knew Valla had grown close to Tes, fond of her, in the way Victor might have followed around a pro baseball player who’d decided to hang out with him one summer and teach him how to pitch.

Victor also liked Tes and had decided she was a good person; in his opinion, her explanation and confession had only solidified that assessment. She'd been honest with them, almost to a fault. Would she really get in trouble for helping them? He met Tes's eyes and smiled, and he was infinitely relieved when he saw moisture gather in those deep, honey-green orbs—a genuine display of emotion that made it easy to forget he was dealing with a dragon.