

Victor BK4: Ch4

Book 4: Chapter 4: Arena

Victor and Valla caught glimpses of the arena long before it came into direct view. It was an enormous building that loomed over the surrounding architecture, a dozen stories high and wide enough to require a square several times larger than the other markets they'd passed through on their way to it. When Victor stepped out of the flow of traffic, up the steps to the arena square, he paused to take it all in.

Just like the expansive cobbled area outside Hunter's Hall, the arena was surrounded by smooth, tan pavers, gardens, and little sectioned-off, L-shaped avenues where booths—currently closed—would presumably sell goods to arena patrons. The arena was made of pale stone, and great columns stretched from the ground all the way up to the highest tiers. Gargoyles, dragons, things that looked like birds and dinosaurs, and even people dressed like gladiators were carved into gigantic statues standing around the building, on shelves at various tiers, and all along the top edge, high in the sky.

“Pretty cool,” Victor said, pointing at a statue of a warrior wearing armor that looked distinctly Roman, holding two swords over his head and looming over the dark, barricaded entrance of the arena. “That statue must be thirty feet high.”

“The place looks deserted,” Valla said, pointing at the closed gates under the giant statue's swords.

“There's someone moving around in there; let's go ask.” Victor started walking, happy not to have to contend with a crowd. When he came to the closed, wrought-iron gate, he peered through into the wide, stone breezeway that led up to a row of ticket booths. A man with two short horns poking out of his white hair was on his knees, scrubbing the cobbles with a thick rag and a steaming bucket of soapy water. “Hello,” Victor called through the bars.

The man looked up, his blue eyes bright in the sunlight coming from behind Victor, and said, “Hello, yourself.”

“Where do you go to see who's fighting? Or, I guess, to sign up for fights?”

“Fighters' gate 'round the north end,” the man said, gesturing with his thumb to Victor's left.

“Right, thanks.” Victor turned to Valla, and she shrugged, walking in the indicated direction. Victor walked along with her and cleared his throat.

“So, when are you going to, you know, tell me I shouldn't fight in the arena?”

“Hmm?” Valla glanced at him and narrowed her eyes slightly. “Seems like your decision. Do you want my opinion?”

“I guess; I'm kinda used to Thayla telling me what I should and shouldn't do. Shit, that's not fair to Thayla; there's Lam and Edeya and Rellia and Oynalla—you get the idea.”

“I know how that feels. Let’s see what we can find out and if you want my opinion after that, simply ask.” Valla quickened her pace, and Victor whistled and grinned, matching her stride.

When they came around the curve of the monumental, oval-shaped building, they saw more activity near another, smaller gate. A few people, human-sized and giant, milled about, talking with each other, looking at bulletin boards, and standing in line at a walk-up window where an arena employee stood behind a counter.

As they approached, Valla slowed to look at the bulletin boards, so Victor joined her. There were boards plastered with advertisements for local businesses, boards promoting certain fighters, and boards promoting fights, upcoming and old—it didn’t look like the arena spent many resources clearing off old flyers. “I don’t recognize this date,” Valla said, pointing to a poster advertising an upcoming tournament. “I expected the System to translate the days and months into something I understood. It usually works that way, I think. Odd . . .”

“Why’s that odd? I thought it was damn weird that you all have a seven-day week with Fridays, Saturdays, and all the other days we have in my home world.”

“Yes, I suppose it’s all very ‘odd’ depending on how you look at it,” an old-looking, stooped, but still very tall Degh said, leaning close to Victor and Valla. “I’ve heard that most System worlds share similar measurements for time, from seconds to years and that it has something to do with Elder races and the marks of civilization they left on the worlds they visited. Of course, it could be the System manipulating things from the shadows . . .” He trailed off when he saw Victor’s wide eyes and how he and Valla turned to him with surprise.

“Excuse my interruption; I heard your conversation, and it’s a topic that’s always fascinated me.” He reached out a huge hand to Victor and added, “I’m Lorce; I was just here hoping to get an idea about the lineup for tomorrow’s matches. Nothing’s posted yet, though.”

Victor reached out to accept the handshake, almost embarrassed by the way the other man’s palm engulfed his entire hand. Still, Lorce didn’t squeeze hard, and he had a very unassuming posture, leaning with one hand on a large, gnarled cane. “Good to meet you; I’m Victor, and this is Valla. We’re new around here, but what you were saying is interesting. How many days are in your week, if you don’t mind me asking?”

“Why, seven!” he responded enthusiastically, his deep, resonant voice tainted by a slight lisp as his tongue found a significant gap in his teeth. It looked like Lorce might have been a fighter once, judging by his scars, missing fingers, and absent teeth.

“Oh, there goes my theory,” Valla said. “I thought maybe the names were different because you had a different system. What day is today?”

“Sunday; no fights on Sunday or Thursday,” the old giant said, gesturing to the Arena.

“Wait,” Valla said and pointed to the poster she’d been reading, “This says the next fight is on Horc’s Day.”

“Ha! Now I see the confusion! That’s not a day of the week; that’s a holiday. Horc is one of the founders of Coloss.” The man seemed nice, and Victor appreciated the info, but as he spoke, the scent of something rotten wafted toward Victor on his breath, and he had to fight to keep his expression neutral as he battled down the urge to gag. He wondered if Lorce had a rotten tooth or something.

“Hey, um, nice to meet you, Lorce, right? I’m gonna go get in line,” he glanced at Valla and jerked his chin toward the line of people waiting to speak to the employee at the window.

“Oh, of course, youngster,” the old giant said, nodding his gray head and rubbing at his rough, stubbled chin. “Will you be fighting tomorrow? Prizes will be special on a holiday!”

“Um, maybe!” Victor replied, stepping away and waving. Valla hurried with him, but as they put a dozen feet or so between them and the older man, she frowned and spoke.

“Was something wrong?”

“Didn’t you smell that guy’s breath? I almost lost my breakfast,” Victor said, whispering hoarsely.

“No . . .” she frowned and shrugged. “Interesting about the days, though, isn’t it?”

“Yeah, and I’ve noticed a few things like that on Fanwath. You guys have some different month names, though,” he paused and added, “I mean different from my world, Earth. Like, what’s the date we’re supposed to meet Rellia?”

“The tenth of Tanewik.”

“See?” Victor grinned, stepping into line behind a man with red spines poking out through stitched holes in his armor, running up and down the center of his back, all the way to the top of his skull. “There’s no Tanewik on Earth, but we have other months I’ve heard mentioned on Fanwath, like December.”

“Strange . . . how many months are there in a year on Earth?”

“Twelve.”

“Same as Fanwath; maybe the different names for some of the months are due to tradition. They may have something to do with the names of historical events or people that the System doesn’t translate as easily as other terms.”

“Yeah,” Victor said with a shrug. “Makes sense, I guess.”

The line moved slowly, at first, with the people near the front apparently having a lot to say to the clerk working at the window. As they got closer and closer to the front of the line, Victor tried to eavesdrop on the conversations and found that most of the people were signing up to fight on one date or another. It became apparent that the person at the window had some means of evaluating people and verifying they were trying to compete in the correct tier. It was this evaluation process that slowed down the queue.

Valla stood beside him patiently, her eyes ever roving the shaded area they stood in near the gate, taking in the people, the signs, and the architecture in the distance. Occasionally, she’d remark about something that stood out to her—a tall clock tower, or a group of giant Degh tussling over a perceived insult by the nearby road, or a poster illustrating a monstrous-looking Vesh with a crown of horns and proclaiming him, “Karnice - Undefeated Champion of the Arena.”

They were next in line to step up to the window when a snarling voice said, from behind them, “Whelps signing up together? The crowd won’t like it if you go easy on each other.”

Victor turned to see a Vesh woman with high, dog-like ears covered in short, velvety black fur. She was tall, wiry, and had deep-set, pale brown eyes. Her dark hair was wavy and hung to her coppery, tanned shoulders, and if it weren’t for the mean twist to her lips and the angry glint in her eyes, Victor might have called her pretty. She grinned when he looked her way, exposing enormous canines. As he opened his mouth to answer her question, Valla beat him to it.

“I’m not interested in the arena.”

“Oh? The pretty blue one isn’t interested, men, sorry,” she snarled, turning back toward a few other Vesh lined up behind her. Some of them chuckled, but most snorted or completely ignored her words. “What about you, big Deshi?”

Victor frowned, contemplating the value of debating his ancestral origins with this woman. He decided it didn’t matter; if it helped people to think of him as a Deshi, why did he care? Something stirred in his gut, though, and he felt the urge to straighten his back, and, almost unbidden, words came to his tongue.

He looked down his nose at the Vesh woman; she was nearly as tall as he, and he could feel her aura, dark and crushing; he had the impression she was quite a few levels above him. Still, he grinned, pushed some rage into his pathways, and said, “The blood of titans pumps through my veins; don’t call me Deshi.”

“Oh?” her voice rose in instant hysteria. “Did you hear that, lads? We’ve got a titan on our hands!” She laughed, and to Victor, it sounded like something that should be coming from a hyena’s throat. Her words had a greater effect on the Vesh lined up behind her this time—many of them broke into laughter, and one

of them walked forward and grabbed Victor's shoulder, pointing toward a Degh giant nearby.

"There's a titan, boy. If you get confused again, just go stand next to him or one of his kin; you're just a runt, Deshi."

Victor eyed the Vesh, a burly man with curly brown hair and the complexion and facial features of a pig—literally. He had bright pink flesh, soft fuzzy white and brown spotted facial hair, and a flat nose with long tusks protruding from his lower lip. Victor's eyes traveled from the man's face to his thickly muscled arm and the black nailed fingers that gripped his shoulder. An unreasonable surge of anger boiled in his gut, and he felt his Core flare to life and feed red-hot Energy into his pathways.

As his vision started to shade toward crimson and everything other than the man before him faded into blurry, inconsequential background noise, Victor reached up to the thick, hairy wrist and grabbed the meat of the man's thumb, just milliseconds away from twisting it into a vicious armlock. Before he acted, though, he felt Valla's cool hand on his other wrist, and some of the redness bled from his vision as he realized what he was doing; he didn't want to get into a fight right there in the middle of the arena square—who was to say what the guards might do, or if the other Vesh nearby would join in against him.

With an effort of will, he suppressed his rage and said, "Hey, please keep your hands to yourself." He carefully pulled the man's hand off his shoulder and then released it.

"Woah, watch out, Reege!" the woman said, "Did you see his eyes? The pup was angry enough to bite!" That got some laughter out of the surrounding crowd, and Victor was sorely tempted to say something snarky back or to cuss her out, but Valla tugged at his wrist again and spoke.

"It's our turn," she said, pointing to the window, and something in her tone indicated that this wasn't the first time she'd said as much.

"Right," Victor grunted, inhaling deeply and further cooling his rage. He turned away from the group of Vesh, but he couldn't tune out the woman's sharp voice chasing him to the window.

"Maybe we'll see you in the arena, whelp! You can show us what a titan you are!" Again, the woman's hyena-like laughter followed her words, and when he swallowed his reaction, it felt like a lump of hot magma sliding down his throat. Valla didn't react, didn't say anything, but she kept her grip on his wrist as they stepped up to the window.

"Yes?" the thin, nearly human-looking man asked. He wore a uniform of sorts—a black bowler-style hat and a striped black and white vest over a white collared shirt. He was pleasant looking and trim for a Vesh, and the only things that stood out, marking him as such, were the long, strange tufts of wiry whiskers that sprouted from the centers of his cheeks.

Victor cleared his throat, trying to push the mocking laughter from his mind. Though it echoed in his perceived reality, he knew it was all in his head at that point; the Vesh had quieted down as he and Valla stepped up to the window. “Hey, I need some info on the arena.”

“Right, what kind of info, mate? I’m the only one here, and I haven’t got time to pull all your questions out of you, okay?”

“What sorts of prizes can a low-tier win? I’m trying to get access to the City Stone.”

“Well, first, I’d need to confirm you are low-tier. After that, I can sign you up to compete, and there are a few options as far as that’s concerned. For instance, if you’re interested in prizes, you should consider signing up for tomorrow’s festival matches. We have sixteen slots for low-tier fighters, and so far, we’ve had thirty signups, so there’s a good chance the arena master will choose you.”

“Festival matches?” Victor prompted.

“Yes, for Horc’s Day! We have an open bracket tournament for low-tiers in the morning and then seeded brackets for mid-tiers in the afternoon. We’ll wrap things up in the evening with two matches between high-tier champions!”

“And the prizes? For low-tiers, I mean,” Victor prompted, leaning forward, resting his elbows on the little counter outside the window.

“Well, there’s a prize for winning in each bracket. Eight fights, then four, then two, then the championship, all fought before midday. Here,” the clerk said, handing Victor a flyer. “The prizes are all listed here, but if you’re interested, you should sign up and wait around; the arena master will make his selections within the hour.”

“How does he decide who will fight?” Valla asked.

“That’s his secret; only arena masters know how the selections are made.”

While the clerk answered Valla’s question, Victor was perusing the list of prizes on the flyer, and his eyes bugged out as he read through them:

Low-Tier Prizes:

Round 1 - Coloss Prize Token Round 2 - Coloss Prize Token & Crypt Drake Gall Bladder*

Semifinal Match - Coloss Prize Token & Rock Wyrn Magma Horn** Championship - Coloss Prize Token, wildcard seed in Gazra’s Day Tournament, and Red Spinefiend Heart***

*Known to enhance (permanently) the strength and vitality of those who consume it in a properly prepared alchemical mixture.

**When ground and consumed in a distilled tincture, known to provide breakthroughs in Core development.

***Known to pull forth threads of the consumer's bloodline or racial ancestry when eaten whole and raw.

"So, if I win all four matches, I walk away with four prize tokens plus all the other prizes?" he asked, interrupting the clerk's response to something Valla had asked.

"Sure, but there will be some heavy competition . . ."

"And why would I need more than one? Don't they just allow access to the City Stone?"

"Uh, no," the clerk replied with a chuckle. "You need a token to get to the City Stone, sure, but once there, you can turn them in for, you know, prizes."

"Oh, what if we just want to use the Stone to teleport home?"

"Mmhhh, sure, that's one of the rewards in the Prize Store, but I think you need more than one token for that; I've never looked into it myself, so I'm not completely sure."

"Hey, are you shit stains about done?" the Vesh woman called out from behind Victor. He felt his shoulders tense, and he almost turned around, but he took a breath and ignored the insult.

"Sign me up; might as well see if the arena master chooses me."

"Fights are known to be quite vicious in holiday tournaments . . ." the clerk said, but trailed off as he saw the anger in Victor's eyes; he didn't know the fury wasn't directed his way. "I'm sure you'll be all right, though."

Victor glanced at Valla, but she had a vacant, distant look in her eyes and didn't offer him any objections. The clerk cleared his throat, and Victor looked back to see he was holding out a gray stone orb. "What's this?"

"It tests whether you're trying to fight in the correct tier. Hold it in your hand, and I'll do the rest. The orb is a non-invasive way for us to measure potential fighters that doesn't expose any of your exact abilities, affinities, or otherwise compromise any secrets you might have about your fighting prowess." He held it out a bit further, and Victor shrugged, taking the heavy, smooth, perfectly round rock. It was cool to the touch, and Victor struggled to hold it above the counter; it felt very much like the stone was trying to pull itself to the ground and him along with it.

The clerk reached out one finger to touch the stone, and then it began to grow warm. Victor watched, his forearm muscles straining to keep the orb aloft and his elbow painfully grinding into the wooden countertop. "You can rest your hand against the counter, sir," the clerk said as he studied the orb, waiting for something to happen.

“Thanks,” Victor said, happily letting his knuckles rest against the counter as the orb continued to grow warmer. As he watched, the gray surface started to lighten and glow with a steady orange-yellow luminescence. Eventually, the stone resembled a lightbulb, and Victor had to squint to look directly at it. The clerk nodded, but that wasn’t the end; the orb began to pulse, slowly at first, but then more rapidly, and it looked to Victor like the clerk was timing the pulses.

After a minute or two, the clerk reached out and took the orb, and as he touched it, it seemed like someone had taken a hundred pounds off Victor’s hand. “Very good. You’re definitely in the low-tier, but your potency is nearly off the chart. The arena master will be happy with your ticket, I think.” With that, the clerk scribbled some notes on an official, gold-leaf piece of decorative cardstock and handed it to Victor. “Present this to the arena master when they open the gates.”

“Thanks,” Victor said, taking the ticket and moving to the side, consciously refusing to glance at the line behind him.

“That was interesting,” Valla said, reaching out a hand. “Could I see the ticket?”

“Sure,” Victor handed it to her, and she read the notes the clerk had written aloud, “T-3, ****, 54 ppm.” She shrugged and handed it back. “So?” he asked, watching her face closely, “Any objections?”

“I’ll admit to some stress,” Valla replied, leaning a shoulder against the stone of the arena. Her back was to the clerk’s window, and the people lined up, waiting to speak to him, making it easy for Victor to see what the hostile Vesh woman was doing, but he ignored her and her friends and focused on Valla.

“Stress about me dying in an arena on some distant planet before I can return to Fanwath and perform my duties for Rellia?” Victor grinned sardonically, trying to lighten the tone of his words.

“Well, sure. I’m not going to berate you with things you already know—Rellia’s campaign, the thousands of people dependent on it being successful, what might happen to me in this strange world if you were to die . . . shall I go on?”

Victor opened his mouth to reply, scrambling for a response, but she held up a hand, “I also know that we’ll never get back to Fanwath without some risk. It sounds like we’ll need more than one Prize Token to teleport, so we should explore many avenues. There are also the mitigating factors—it doesn’t sound like the arena fights have to be to the death, and I know you’re strong for your level, freakishly so. Even that little clerk seemed impressed by his test.”

“Speaking of teleporting, I had a thought earlier,” Victor said. “What are the odds we could find a wizard or something who can open a portal for us? Do we really need to go through the City Stone?”

“I don’t know, Victor. Nobody I know on Fanwath has the ability to do what Boaegh did; I’m not sure he made that portal, but I know such things are possible. I just don’t know how it works or who to speak to about it. I suppose

that's another avenue we should pursue, though! Perhaps at our dinner party tonight, we could ask around."

"Shit, I almost forgot about that . . ." Victor started to say, but then he heard the sound of metal clanking and a shout from the small gate near the clerk's booth.

"Anyone with a fight ticket, get in here!"

Victor glanced at Valla, and she nodded to him. "I'll watch from here; it doesn't look like he's taking you anywhere, just in that hallway."

"Right," Victor nodded and walked toward the little gate where an enormous, heavily muscled Degh stood. He wore very fine-looking clothing—shiny polished boots, silky black slacks, and a perfectly pressed, fitted white, buttoned shirt with a richly embroidered silver and black cape hanging from his shoulders. He had neatly trimmed red hair and a matching beard, and if it weren't for his size, Victor would have thought he was just a very handsome, very fit human.

"Line up along the passage wall there! I've got sixteen slots and, according to my list, thirty-seven fighters. Have your fight ticket ready when I get to you!" He strode away from the gate and into the long, arched corridor that presumably led into the arena's sections where fighters were meant to prepare for their bouts.

Victor stood against the stone block wall next to the Vesh he'd seen earlier, the one with the red spines poking out of his armor. He thought he'd claimed an end spot, but a Degh woman wearing bone-plated leather armor and smelling like she'd been sweating for a few days without a bath stood on his other side. "Hey," she said, surprising him with a friendly smile. She had long, curly blond hair, and her face, though crisscrossed with faint white scars, was young and open. Still, she made Victor feel like a runt as she glanced down at him and said, "I'm Krecia—hope I don't have to fight you."

"Uh, Victor. Same here," Victor replied, wondering if that was a standard way to greet other contenders. The Vesh next to him completely ignored him, so he doubted it.

"All right! Keep quiet! I have a hard enough time making these decisions without any laughing and bickering." The arena master started at the other end of the line, pausing by each fighter, looking at their ticket and, seemingly, staring into their eyes before moving on. He spoke softly to each fighter, but it wasn't until he was talking to the Vesh next to Victor that he heard some of the questions.

"Been in the arena before?"

"Nar," said the Vesh.

"Scared of dying?"

"Er, nah," the Vesh said, but even Victor could hear the hesitation. The arena master just grunted, then stared for a long minute at the Vesh, his gaze

wandering from his feet to his eyes and lingering there for a long while. Then he stepped over in front of Victor.

“Ticket,” he said, and Victor held it out. He looked at it for a couple of seconds, then said, “Name?”

“Victor.”

“Deshi?”

“No, I’m from another world.” Victor shrugged at the man’s upraised eyebrow.

“Ever fought in the arena before?”

“Not this one.”

“Fought in others?”

“Lots of ‘em.”

“Scared of dying?”

“More scared of dying alone,” Victor replied, having thought about the question when he heard it asked of his neighbor.

“Interesting,” the man said, leaning down to look closely into Victor’s eyes. It was hard for Victor to maintain that gaze; the arena master exuded a powerful aura, and though Victor could feel him restraining it, it weighed on him, pressing him back toward the stone wall. His instinct was to look down, to avoid the stare of this powerful being. With an effort of will, he stiffened his spine and looked into the man’s deep, pale blue eyes.

It felt like hours that he fought to hold that gaze, but he knew it was only seconds before the arena master nodded and stepped away, moving in front of Krecia to evaluate her. While he waited for the arena master to finish and make his decisions, Victor was struck with an urge to look at his status sheet, so he pulled it up:

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Improved 4

Class:

Spirit Carver - Epic

Level:

35

Core:

Spirit Class - Improved 1

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

3236/3236

Strength:

135

Vitality:

140

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

315

Points Available:

8

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Flame-Touched

As usual, he was struggling with what to do with his free points. His will had grown monstrous in comparison to his other attributes, and he wondered if he should be building up something else. He knew Oynalla would tell him to keep working on his will, but wouldn't it be wise to get a second opinion? Maybe from a master from another world, someone impossibly powerful by Fanwath's standards? He decided to hold onto those points and see what he could learn, starting with Valla's dinner party.

"Listen for your names!" the arena master hollered. "The fighters for tomorrow's low-tier tournament are Kreecia, Victor, Harf, Necla, Krafe, Ronno, Porist of Coloss," he paused and looked at a Degh that had started to pump his fist in the air and shouted, "not Porist of Domrak!" the huge Degh lowered his fist and, with a crestfallen slump of his huge shoulders started to walk away. "Garl, Rekka, Jast of Thubia, Yarge, Krista, Jojar, Durg, Leena, and Sanima."

Lots of cheering, back thumping, and exclamations of rage and frustration echoed around the tunnel. The arena master held up his clipboard and shouted, “Don’t try to change any of this or bargain with me! It’s set in the master book! If your name wasn’t called, clear out and don’t start trouble, or I’ll settle you myself!” With that, he unleashed his aura, and the crushing weight of it silenced the rabble.

After most of the people had cleared out, and Victor turned to make his way back toward Valla, a familiar, sharp, sneering voice caught Victor’s attention, “Congratulations. I hope we’re matched up tomorrow. Know my name—Krista.” The woman with the German shepherd ears was standing next to him and grinning, exposing those sharp canines.

“Here’s hoping,” Victor replied, matching her grin.