

## Victor BK4: Ch43

### Book 4: Chapter 43: Duel

Victor sat on the couch in the parlor where Blue's staff had directed him, and he watched Tes quietly as she helped Valla prepare for the duel that was due to start in the next few minutes. Valla stood, back straight, eyes closed, Midnight held before her with its—her—point resting on the carpet. She wore one of her legion uniform shirts, the ones she usually wore under her half-coat uniform blazers. The shirt was white, perfectly form-fitting, with a high collar and not a single wrinkle to be seen. Her black pants were trim, close-fitting, and tucked into knee-high black boots polished to a mirror sheen.

As always, Valla's hair was perfectly coiffed, held close to her scalp with silver barrettes. Victor thought she looked exceptionally pretty and vulnerable, and he began to worry in earnest for her safety. Objectively, he knew there was nothing new that should be making him worry more; he'd just seen her standing there, face serene, eyes closed, concentrating as she listened to Tes, and some instinct in him wanted to protect her. Still, he wished he were the one getting ready to fight; how hard it was to watch someone else do it for a change!

The announcement had gone out the day before that the duel would be one of weapon skill alone. Each combatant was allowed her chosen tool of battle but no armor. The rules were simple; the first to yield or be struck three blows that drew blood would lose. Should one of those blows prove fatal, that was the nature of combat—there was always some risk. Tes was confident in Valla, though, and she said she'd figure out what Blue was up to, why he was sure Reis would win. She hadn't gone into details, but she'd insisted to Victor and Valla the night before that she was sure she could counter anything they might do to interfere.

Victor had complained that a year of servitude was worth far more than five measly tokens. Tes had agreed but pointed out that Blue was acting as though Reis was giving Valla a gift by changing the terms of combat; without using Energy-based spells, much of her higher-level advantage went away. Victor had seen the wisdom in going along with the change, even with the disparity in wagers, especially when Valla insisted she wanted to fight.

“Do you see it? Can you picture how you're going to strike her? She'll be fast, and that sword of hers is meant for dueling, but she doesn't know you're a Sword Dancer. She doesn't know about Midnight and your epic-level skill. You'll have a counter for all her strikes; just believe in yourself.” Tes had her hands on Valla's shoulders, gently squeezing them and speaking softly into her ear, and Victor knew that if he hadn't been included in her privacy spell, he wouldn't be able to hear what she said.

“I'm ready, Tes,” Valla nodded.

“Good. I want you to take this now; I'm not sure how things will play out over the next few days, and I don't want to forget.” Tes reached over to her left hand and began to twist a tiny, silvery ring off her pinky. Victor could have sworn her fingers hadn't had any jewelry on them, but there it was. She handed Valla the ring and said, “The books, scrolls, and tomes I promised you. If you and Victor

are successful in your conquest back home, these will help you build a truly remarkable society.”

“Tes, I . . .” Valla took the ring, slipped it onto her own pinky, and then turned to hug Tes, putting her chin on her shoulder. “Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Now, focus. You’re going to be . . .”

“It’s time,” a blue-liveried servant announced, poking his head through the door. “They want her out front; everyone’s gathered on the carriage lane.”

“We’ll be right behind you, Valla,” Tes said.

“Kick her ass,” Victor added, standing up. He walked over to Valla and, because he’d always appreciated simple gestures before a fight, he held out his fist and grinned as Valla bumped his knuckles with hers.

“This way,” the servant badgered.

“Right. See you soon,” Valla said, offering Victor a bright smile. As he nodded his encouragement, she hefted Midnight Hope, resting the dark star-speckled blade on her shoulder, and followed the servant out the door.

“I have something for you as well, Victor,” Tes said.

“Huh? You already gave me my armor; it’s enough. C’mon, this day is about Valla.”

“There’s likely to be a bit of an upheaval around here when Valla wins, Victor. Let me give you this; I’ve been holding it for a while.” Tes held out her hand, and a gallon-sized jar appeared in it. It was dark, and Victor thought the glass was tinted, but then he realized the contents were black, and the jar was full to the brim, the contents held in place by a rune-etched, silvery lid.

“What is it?” he asked, reaching out to receive the gift. As Tes set the jar in his hands, he felt it—deep, powerful Energy and a taste of something familiar, a lick of Energy that sang to his fear attunement.

“This is the night brute prince’s heart. Take it, Victor; hold onto it until you’ve gained more strength; eat your ancient wyrm heart before consuming this one.”

“Oh shit,” Victor said, hefting the jar, savoring the depth of its power. “I didn’t know you got this . . .”

“I wasn’t sure I’d give it to you back then. Now I am. Come, put that away, and let’s go watch our friend.” Tes turned and walked out the door, and Victor followed after her after tucking the heart away with his others. They’d only walked a few yards down the hallway when Tes paused, though, and Victor saw

her sniffing the air. She said, "I don't like the energy in the air, Victor. Something is afoot, perhaps more than I bargained for. Should we grow separated, do you know where to find Boaegh's tower?"

"No, you never told us . . ."

"Right," Tes sighed, shaking her head. "It's near the southwestern corner of the city. An open-air bazaar borders it on one side and a large abattoir on the other. It's squat, only three stories high, with yellow pennants hanging from the grasping claws of ugly, pot-bellied stone gargoyles. You'll find it easily. Should the time arise when you must flee this city, tell Geomancer Hark that his debt will be wiped clean if he opens the portal for you."

"Debt? I thought he was happy to help . . ."

"Not now, Victor. Do you understand my directions?"

"Yeah, I get it."

"Good, let's make haste now." Tes continued down the corridor, and Victor, somewhat at a loss, followed her.

Blue's place was a little different in the early morning hours than during a nighttime party. Still, everything was still blue, and Victor found himself starting to hate the color as he associated it with the smug war captain. "Nah, that's not right," he grunted, contemplating Valla and her pale blue skin. He liked the color just fine; it was the asshole that had to put so much of it everywhere that he didn't like.

When they stepped outside the front door, a crowd confronted them; hundreds of Vesh nobles were present to watch the spectacle, all gathered on the big, curving, cobbled drive that ran in a loop at the front of Blue's estate. In the center of the loop, as though built for just such an event, was a circular patch of grass about twenty yards in diameter. Valla stood to the right side of the circle of grass, and her opponent, Reis, stood on the other.

Reis was six inches or so taller than Valla, and she held her glittering, black-scaled wings partially open, making her seem like more than a match for Valla; her physical presence was formidable compared to the neat, lithe figure Valla cut, once again leaning on the pommel of Midnight, the glittering, dark blade's point in the grass. Reis, by comparison, whipped her long, flickering red rapier left and right, the weapon hissing through the air, leaving a trail of glittering sparks in its wake.

Valla's challenger wore a silky black jumper that clung to the pale flesh of her torso and legs while leaving her slender, muscular arms free. She'd painted her face with sharp, contrasting lines of black and white makeup that reminded Victor of images he'd seen of ancient Celtic warriors. Tes grasped his wrist and pulled him close to the circle, effortlessly pushing past much larger Vesh, who seemed suddenly eager to move out of her way as she lightly touched their shoulders. When they took a position at the edge of the circle of grass, Tes frowned and said, "Something feels off."

“What?” Victor asked, suddenly quite concerned. Tes held up her hand, though, frowning as she concentrated.

“Here we are!” Blue’s voice boomed out from the far side of the ring. He stepped forward onto the grass, and Victor saw that he’d dressed to impress in a fine blue suit, complete with an absurd-looking tophat designed to allow his black horns to poke through the brim. Still, Blue looked like he was rather impressed with himself and his style, and he turned and bowed at the waist so deeply that his fingers brushed the grass in a flourish. The object of his obeisance was the warlord who stood on the edge of the grass almost directly opposite Tes. “Thank you for attending this little affair, Warlord. You grace my estate with your presence.”

“By all means, War Captain Blue. How could I not attend when the Lady Tes foresaw such a thing?”

Tes’s gaze had gone distant, but she refocused on reality at the mention of her name. She nodded to the warlord coquettishly and performed a slight curtsy, lifting her pale red skirts. Blue chuckled and cleared his throat, “Wonderful. We have quite a spectacle in store today! For anyone who lives with their head in the sands of the waste and doesn’t know the stakes—Lady Reis has put up five Coloss Prize Tokens, and Captain Valla has agreed to indenture herself to me, Blue, for a year, should she lose.” Victor didn’t appreciate how Blue sneered when he said, “Captain.”

“Three blood strikes or a yield is what we’re looking for. No armor or magical devices are allowed. Healing potions will signal your intent to yield. No one outside the match may interfere. Does anyone have a question or objection?” Blue spoke in a booming voice and looked around the circle, and when his eyes fell on Victor, he tilted his long, black horns toward him and grinned, exposing bright, white canines. Victor felt the heat in his Core begin to fan to life as that taunting expression stirred his rage. He frowned, though, crossing his arms over his chest, and simply stared. It was Blue who looked away first.

“I’ll take this silence as a sign that we’re all ready for things to begin!” Blue howled, and it was true; the crowd was so quiet that Victor could hear their hushed breaths of anticipation. At Blue’s declaration, though, some scattered applause and a few hoots broke out, and the war captain’s smile widened. He stepped back to the edge of the circle of grass and said, “Ladies, you may commence.”

Valla glided onto the grass, Midnight held in a high, aggressive guard, and Reis stepped forward lightly, circling Valla, exceptionally light on her feet. Victor nodded, confident as he watched Valla move; she was a dancer, a gymnast, a woman of exceptional skill with that sword, and it showed—

anyone who'd done any fighting or made a practice of watching others do so would know that she outclassed Reis.

As they circled each other, though, Victor was surprised not to see confident determination on Valla's face. She didn't have that ready, severe expression she always wore when they sparred. Her eyes were wide, and lines of stress were evident on her brow. "Something's wrong," he growled.

"Yes," Tes said, but she reached out a hand to grasp his wrist, and it felt like a band of iron, reminding him of the time she'd restrained him at Blue's dinner. Victor didn't have time to object before the first explosive interchange between the two duelists rang through the yard. Reis darted forward, lifting slightly off the ground as she clapped her wings, and she feinted and jabbed with her rapier in a series of rapid blows. Valla batted them aside, dodging like a feather before a breeze, sliding over the grass, and when they parted, not one of Reis's blows had landed.

Reis frowned, growling and circling, and Valla did the same. Victor knew Valla, knew she'd be taking Reis's measure, deciding how best to slip her guard and land a blow, but when he looked at her, his heart began to hammer in his chest. Valla's pale skin had lost a shade of blue, and a sheen of sweat stood out on her forehead and cheeks; her breaths looked ragged and forced. Again Victor growled, "Something's fucking wrong, Tes."

In response, Tes squeezed his wrist, but he saw that her eyes were closed and her brow was drawn sharply down; she was concentrating on something. At the sound of another clash of metal on metal, Victor jerked his gaze back to the duel and saw the two women exchange a flurry of blows and parries, and to his eye, one well-experienced watching Valla, she looked sluggish. When the two women parted, this time, a red bloom of blood was spreading on Valla's white shirt, just above her left breast.

"One for the Lady Reis!" Blue crowed.

Valla, no longer a picture of perfect grace, tried to circle Reis, but her legs looked leaden, and her breaths were coming in ragged gasps, her face sheeting with sweat. Victor took in a breath, ready to roar a protest, but again, Tes squeezed his wrist, and this time she muttered, "One moment, Victor. I almost have it."

Victor jerked his gaze back to the fight in time to see Reis dart forward, quick and nimble, and then Valla gasped in pain as that bright, sparking rapier tore through the air and pierced the top of her thigh. Reis barked a savage, short laugh and backpedaled long before Valla could sluggishly cleave downward with Midnight.

"Two for Reis!" Blue announced, lifting his arms, signaling the crowd to cheer. Most of them did, but Victor wasn't the only one who could see something was wrong. Some muttering sounded among the observers, and Blue frowned. Victor could see he was debating whether he should exhort them to silence after he'd just encouraged them to cheer.

Suddenly Tes released Victor's wrist, and she strode into the circle. Her voice rang out, "A moment, dear War Captain Blue. I fear there's been a mistake." Valla stood to Tes's left and leaned forward, resting her hands on her legs—the front of her white shirt was entirely red now, and Victor knew her leg was bleeding just as severely.

Reis danced from side to side on the other side of Tes and shrieked with blood lust, "What's this? Forfeit!"

"What is this, indeed, Lady Tes? Do you seek to intervene for your young companion?" Blue asked, stepping into the circle. "Warlord, don't you think this is grounds for forfeiture?"

"Perhaps so. What's the matter, Lady Tes?" The warlord kept his position on the edge of the circle, a look of slight amusement in his eyes.

"Oh, I think when you see the issue, you might agree to allow Captain Valla to continue with the duel. Here, observe, Warlord and War Captain." This time it was Tes's turn to sneer as she spat the honorific. She held her hand out over the center of the grassy circle, and, with a slight rumble and the squelch of damp soil and grass, a long, rune-carved, circular rod of stone lifted from the ground.

"Isn't this strange?" she asked, a savage grin on her face. She lifted the yard-long stone rod and held it over her head. "Can you feel it now?" She strode forward, closer to the warlord and war captain, holding the stone rod over her head as though it were a broomstick. "How odd to find a siphoning stone here, one meant to drain way air and earth attuned Energies. Why, what a strange coincidence—the very affinities within Captain Valla's Core."

"What's this?" the Warlord asked, staring pointedly at Blue.

"I have no idea! A scandal! Lady Tes, did you place that there to discredit me?"

Tes snorted, and suddenly the rod winked out of existence, presumably sent into one of Tes's storage devices. Valla immediately sighed with relief and began to breathe more regularly. "Oh no, War Captain. I wouldn't do such a thing, and the Warlord knows it. It's no matter, though. I'm sure Captain Valla will understand that this must be a mistake or an act of sabotage by some disgruntled lackey of yours. Give her a moment to catch her wind, and she'll continue the duel."

"Nonsense," the warlord said, "Surely we should reschedule; the captain has two wounds already."

"I'll be fine," Valla said, taking a slow, steady breath through her nose and out through her mouth and then spitting a wad of bloody saliva into the grass.

The crowd had gone quiet at first when Tes pulled the rod from the damp soil, but now people were muttering and cursing, and the loud buzz of conversations began to make it difficult to hear everyone speaking other than Tes. A tall, lanky woman with golden scales on her arms and forehead shouted, "She should get a healing draught!"

“What?” Reis howled. “I didn’t know about that rod! I scored my blows with fair skill!”

Tes held up her hand and turned in a slow circle, making eye contact with many people in the crowd. Slowly the buzz of outrage diminished, and when things were quiet again, she looked to Valla and said, “Well, Captain? Do you require healing?”

“No.” Valla stood and whipped Midnight in a complicated pattern, and her blade sang in the air. “Let’s finish this.”

“I’m of the opinion that Reis should have to forfeit,” the warlord said. He looked long and hard at Blue, and Victor saw something pass between them as though Blue were outraged. Had the warlord been in on this scam of a fight? Was he throwing Blue under the bus, so to speak? Perhaps even the warlord was worried about public perception. He turned away from Blue to Valla and said, “Are you certain you wish to continue? I will award you the prize right now if you wish.”

“I’m sure,” Valla growled, her eyes locked on Reis’s face. The crowd cheered, and Victor felt a hot lance of pride in his chest. In his mind, at that moment, Valla was truly amazing—beautiful and brave with an undauntable spirit.

Tes backed out of the circle and said, “You heard her. Restart the fight at your discretion, dear Blue.”

As Valla and Reis squared off again, Blue bellowed, “Begin!” The crowd fell silent again, and then Valla charged. Reis tried to meet her head-on, but Valla was back to her usual, graceful, brilliant self. She slapped Reis’s rapier aside, and in a combination that was difficult to track, Victor saw her work Midnight in a series of feints, slashes, and thrusts. Reis valiantly whipped her blade in response, trying to parry, dodge and duck Valla’s quick blows.

As Victor struggled to track the sword strokes, a scream cut through the clash of metal, and Valla backed away from Reis, a grim smile spreading her lips. The tall, black-clad woman fell to the grass, writhing in agony, one of her glittering, scaled wings twitching in the grass, severed from her body. “I yield!” Reis moaned, desperately scrabbling at the grass where she fumbled a healing draught she’d summoned from a storage container.