

Victor BK4: Ch44

Book 4: Chapter 44: Best Laid Plans

“Get up, you wretch!” Blue shrieked at Reis, stepping forward onto the grass. His face was livid with fury, and spittle flecked his lips. Valla ignored him, as did the crowd of Vesh—most of them were applauding her by now, some even cheering in the face of Blue’s outrage. Valla whipped her sword with such snapping force that Reis’s blood splattered off the blade into the grass. She smoothly sheathed the dark, star-speckled blade and strode over the grass toward Tes and Victor, outwardly unbothered by the wounds she’d earlier suffered.

“Hell yes, Valla!” Victor cheered, reaching out to grasp her shoulder. “That was fast! I’ve never seen you move quite like that.”

“Rage is a good motivator,” Valla growled. “I learned from the best,” she added, giving him a wink.

“Good,” Tes chuckled, “but we should make haste from here. Too much heat is in the air.” Victor nodded and, still holding Valla’s shoulder, began to guide her back through the crowd, but the warlord’s voice cut through the noise, and the buzzing crowd grew still at his words.

“Captain Valla, hold, please!”

Tes stiffened but stopped moving and turned back to the grass circle. Victor noted how the crowd that had begun to fill in around them parted way, revealing the warlord standing over the still-sobbing Reis. He grinned when Valla turned his way and then gestured to Reis and her healed but still shortened wing. “I believe Lady Reis owes you something.”

“The captain can collect another time,” Tes said and started to move again.

“Tut, Lady Tes. Now’s the time, I think.” The warlord nudged Reis’s shoulder with the toe of his shiny black boot, “Come, Reis, pull forth your wager.”

“Yes, Warlord,” Reis said through swollen red lips. Victor hadn’t gotten a good look at her after Valla’s winning blow, but he could now see the woman hadn’t been ready to suffer such an injury; her eyes were bloodshot, and her face streaked with tears. Seeing her like that, he had to wonder if she’d ever been prepared to conduct a fair fight—had Blue set this whole thing in motion from the start?

Valla turned, brushed past him, and started back to the green. Meanwhile, Reis held out her palm, and a pile of silvery tokens appeared in it. “Good, a debt well settled,” the warlord said, his words laced with patronizing barbs. Valla walked forward, and Victor could see Blue at the far edge of the circle, red-faced, furious, hands clenching and unclenching. The warlord, meanwhile, looked amused, watching Valla approach with sharp eyes beneath white-feathered brows. Something

tickled in Victor's gut, warning him much like a hound might sense pending misconduct in a stranger. Something wasn't right.

He felt Tes pushing past him through the crowd, following after Valla. Victor, too, started forward, but the Vesh nobles seemed to contract in front of him, making progress difficult. Still, Victor was head and shoulders taller than most of them, and he could see Valla stoop to scoop the tokens from Reis's palm. As she straightened, though, the warlord rested a hand on her shoulder, his black-taloned, long fingers grasping the blood-stained fabric of her shirt.

"A moment, Captain Valla. I believe I'd enjoy it if you joined my captains and me for brunch. Surely that's not too much to ask? A meal with the champion? I'd love to hear more about your sword skills and where you learned such feats of martial prowess."

"Yes! A lovely idea!" Blue said, his glower suddenly replaced by cheerful enthusiasm. Victor wanted to push through the crowd and knock that stupid blue hat off his head. Instead, he let go of his aura, something he hadn't fully done since returning to Coloss. The people around him instantly began to press outward. Some of them probably realized what they were doing, but Victor could tell it was involuntary for many. These sycophantic noble Vesh were mostly mid-tier, and their wills, their own auras, were like tide pools to the ocean of Victor's rage.

As a wide passage through the crowd opened, and he started forward, he was surprised to see that Tes was already striding onto the grass. "I'm sorry, dear Warlord, but I've made plans with my young friend here. Perhaps she could join you later?"

"Oh?" the warlord said, though his voice was difficult for Victor to hear over the suddenly outraged, murmuring crowd goers that had grown aware of the source of their discomfort. A few insults were hurled his way, though no one came forward to impose on him physically, and soon Victor was on the grass, and he could hear the rest of the warlord's statement, "I'm sorry, Tes, but you'll need to reschedule. Yes, I think I'm quite in the mood for brunch, and my captains and I are eager to get better acquainted with this fierce young woman."

"Yes, we are, Warlord," Blue said, stepping forward.

"I don't even see your other captains, Warlord. I'm surprised they didn't attend the duel."

"Oh, they're about. Never fear." Victor's rage intensified at the smug words, and he began to let his fury seep out of his Core and into his pathways. It was all too easy as he watched Valla strain against the taloned grip of the tall, white-winged warlord.

"Well then, since I already had plans with Captain Valla, perhaps I'll join you," Tes pressed, now only five feet or so from the two. Victor noticed that Reis had

been scrabbling over the grass and was now near the edge of the crowd, clutching her dismembered wing in her lap.

“Tes, tut. How impolite, inviting yourself to a private affair.”

“I’ll have to insist; otherwise, Captain Valla and I will be departing.”

Suddenly the warlord’s demeanor changed; his faux humor melted away, and his eyes grew dark and charged with metallic, glimmering Energy. He seemed to grow in stature, though, physically, he remained the same size. Still, Victor suddenly felt as though the warlord towered over him, over everyone, and his authority came crashing down as he boomed, “You dare? You dare to think you can insist on anything? In my city? On my world? Begone, witch! I have matters to attend!” Suddenly Valla screamed as the warlord tightened his grip and cracked open his wings.

Victor knew what was coming—he’d seen how fast the warlord could fly. He was about to launch himself into the air with Valla in tow, and Victor would never see her again. He wanted to Berserk, wanted to leap at the warlord and break his arm, rip it off, even smash him to bits with the stump. He couldn’t, though. He could barely move under the weight of the warlord’s aura. He growled, and furiously tried to rally his will, lifting his head to watch, which was more than most of the Vesh could manage—they’d all fallen to their knees or onto their bellies, completely prostrate before the Warlord’s show of strength.

Not Tes, though. Tes stood before the warlord’s fury, her pale red skirts billowing behind her, her soft blond curls bouncing before his outburst, but her face serene and unbothered. As the warlord’s wings unfurled, but before he could snap them down and launch into the air, Tes twirled her fingers, and a coil of electricity, much like a crackling lasso, snapped through the air to wrap itself around Valla. With a flick of her wrist, Tes yanked Valla free of the warlord’s talon, but not without paying a toll of flesh and blood—the warlord’s grasping fingers left long, deep furrows in Valla’s skin, and she screamed as the rope of lightning pulled her away.

“You dare!” the warlord roared.

“I do,” Tes replied, still calm. She propelled Valla into Victor’s arms and said, “You know where to go.” Then she shifted to the left, like a flickering hologram, as the warlord cleaved a mighty silver blade into the grass where she’d been standing. He screamed his outrage, a look of disbelief on his face as the gleaming, straight-edged, seven-foot blade tore a smoldering trench into the grass. Again, his furious aura pulsed forth, and the Vesh, even Blue, were driven further into obeisance, faces pressed to the ground. Valla moaned and collapsed, but Victor struggled against the wave of force and held her up, stumbling backward toward Blue’s villa.

Tes was like a mighty oak standing tall in the face of hurricane-force winds, and she sidestepped to put herself between the warlord and Victor again. “Go,” she said, and though her voice was calm, Victor could feel the urgency in the command. Somehow she was absorbing the ferocity of the

warlord's aura, keeping most of it from Victor and, as if by instinct, he cast Berserk. When the rage filled his vision and flooded his mind and pathways, when the haughty fury of his ancestors sang in his blood, he straightened enough to lift Valla into his arms, then turned and stumbled away, propelled by a deep instinct to flee that terrible aura.

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Tes wasn't pleased. Everything had gone sideways, and now she was well and truly in over her head. This warlord, the leader of the greatest nation in this world, wanted to kill her. She'd utterly blown her cover, completely exposed herself, and for what? To save a diminutive woman from a backwater world? How many innocents had she seen slain during her travels around Zaafor? How many had she watched kill each other in their arena? Why was she ruining her reputation to help these two hopelessly trouble-prone strangers?

"Because they're not strangers," she muttered as she dodged the warlord's blade yet again. It was true; she had to admit, she'd grown fond of them both. Perhaps taking on a mentor's role with them had been a mistake; she felt responsible for them now. She laughed at the thought—would Yek'nakkara'ma'shohon believe it? His niece's maternal instincts had come to life at last! Yes, she certainly felt a bond with Valla, something she'd never managed with another pupil. Perhaps that was because Tes had refused to take on any of her younger cousins as apprentices. Perhaps that was because they were scheming, power-hungry little bitches.

The warlord was working himself into a frenzy, and Tes knew she'd need to try to defuse the situation before he began to call on his deeper powers. If she didn't, she might not be able to escape his fury without harming him. "Warlord, calm yourself," she said, Surge Stepping away from his blade again. "I can pay recompense for what you've lost today."

"What I've lost? You dare? I've lost nothing! Nothing other than my temper, but your blood will satisfy that!" Suddenly the warlord's aura flared again, and this time Tes could feel him touching the rather impressive pool of Energy at his Core. She pulled forth more of her own Energy as a tremendous wave of steel-laced force rolled out of the warlord, accompanied by a thunderous "Kiai!"

As he shouted, he'd swung his great, legendary sword, Scale Song, in an arc, and a wave of force, cutting just like the edge of his sword, poured forth. It would have bisected Tes if not for her shield of Energy. Still, the concussion of the blow, accompanied by the flare of lightning from her barrier, devastated many of the unwilling spectators lying prone in the nearby grass. Tes almost found humor in the thought that many openings in the Vesh noble lines of succession would need to be filled.

The warlord's cutting wave of force didn't discriminate—several Vesh were cleaved in two, their innards watering the green grass. Still more were burned and blasted by the shockwave of electricity that rolled away from Tes's shield. "Look what you've done!" Tes cried, her reputation as a member of the Celestial Envoys cratering with each death. Suddenly her reputation became a lesser concern

as she realized that War Captain Blue was no longer on his knees behind the Warlord. A tingle in her gut told her to move, and she did so, flickering through the air, fast as lightning, as the ground on which she'd been standing exploded with red magma.

“Now, Green!” the warlord yelled, and then, a geyser of caustic liquid exploded under her feet, bathing her in its terrible destructive acid-attuned Energy.

Tes screamed and launched into the air, riding a surge of Electricity out of the acid, but not before she felt its painful caress. So, Green and Red had joined the fray. She hissed in fury as her perfect, soft pale flesh peeled and warped, revealing red sinew and pulsing veins. With a surge of Energy, though, she mended her body, painting over the damage with new skin. Suddenly more angry than concerned about her reputation, Tes released some of the tight bindings that held her form in its minuscule prison.

She kept her human shape, but she allowed her mass to expand, and she crashed to the ground with an enormous concussion, suddenly a thousand times heavier than she should be. She had to spread the impact with a surge of elemental air-attuned Energy, or she might have sunk into the ground. Still, her landing rocked the courtyard, sending a ripple of earth out from the point of impact and flinging the nearby Vesh like ragdolls.

The warlord cracked his wings and took flight, hanging in the air nearby, and Tes could see his three war captains moving to surround her; they'd fared better than the sycophantic nobility, and it made sense—not one of them was beneath tier nine. “So,” the warlord called, “you begin to show your true colors. Is she not a better prize? Did I not tell you, men? Fist!”

As he screamed the final word, Tes felt the first hint of panic she'd experienced in a very long while, for suddenly, ten powerful auras bloomed into being, and she saw, evenly spread out around the walled enclosure of Blue's front courtyard, the warlord's most potent fighters shrugging out of dark, thick cloaks that had held them concealed, even from her. A trap? Could it be that she'd been so blind? While she'd worried about her two young charges and schemed to keep them safe, she'd been the target all along?

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Victor held Valla to his chest, and he ran. He didn't slow when he saw the gate to Blue's estate but rather bunched his thighs and jumped, flying through the air as he activated Titanic Leap. When he crashed down onto the cobbles of the street, he glanced over his shoulder, saw the blue-plated guards scrambling, and continued to run. They were Vesh, and he was bigger than most Degh—they couldn't keep up as he ran and jumped.

Valla squirmed in his grasp and said, “Victor, I'm okay now. I can run.”

In his red haze of fury and singular purpose, only one thing was on his mind: Tes's command to “go.” Victor grunted in response but kept Valla tight to his chest while he charged down the street, leaping wagons or crowds, smashing through gathered weaklings that didn't move quickly enough. He could feel something happening behind him, a distant surge of auras and great pulses of Energy—they sang to his blood, reminding him of battles he'd never seen but somehow remembered.

Visions of great winged serpents in the air, gigantic men and women in chariots driven on lightning-streaked clouds, and the tremendous concussions of elemental Energies exploding with the primal force of volcanoes or tidal waves ran through his mind as Victor raced through the streets of Coloss. Part of him wanted to stop, wanted to turn and watch whatever was happening. Part of him wanted to drop Valla and charge back toward Blue's estate—his friend might need his help. Still, a bigger part of him wanted to get Valla to safety and knew that Tes wanted him to do so; she'd told him. Her last word had been "go," and Victor had felt the force behind it. She'd be furious if he returned.

"Victor," Valla tried again, still held tightly to his enormous, heaving chest, "Tes might need us!"

"She said go!" Victor roared, and his words were thick and guttural, loudly echoing through the street. He'd been making good time, blasting through the light traffic, turning down long straight roads, and he knew he was nearing his destination. He could see the convergence of the great city walls, indicating he was coming up on the southwestern corner of Coloss.

"Victor! What if she dies? What if the warlord takes her?" Valla tried, but Victor had felt the command in Tes's voice, had felt the certainty and the need for him to obey. She wanted him and Valla to leave, and that was that.

"We can't help with that," Victor growled. His worry for Tes, his momentary doubt, and the sharp knife of cowardice in his heart dampened his rage, so he forced out a furious roar, stoking the flames of fury back up. He leaped an enormous flatbed wagon being pulled by two great, gray-skinned, double-humped animals—something like a cross between elephants and camels. He was at the apex of his leap, sailing for the cobbles of the street, when a lancing pain tore through his lower back, and he tumbled in the air, careening toward the street, head first.

Victor never forgot about his charge, though, and he tucked himself into a ball, holding Valla safe in his arms as his shoulders smashed into the roadway. He rolled three times and flopped onto his back before he let go of her. Something kept him from laying flat; an uncomfortable lance of pain from his stomach radiated with each move he made. Grumbling with fury, as Valla scurried out of his grasp and stood on the street beside him, he looked down and saw a long, silvery spear jutting out of his guts. The only thought that came to him when he saw it was one of surprise—it must be a good spear, indeed, to pierce the wonderful armor Tes had given him.

"Going somewhere, whelp?" The voice came from where he'd last jumped, and Victor, sitting in a growing pool of blood, watched as Karnice made his way around the big wagon. He gave a Degh, still holding the reins of a panicking mount, a shove, and the man abandoned the beast and ran off. Dimly, Victor saw that the street had cleared, though citizens peered out from doorways, windows, and around corners. Karnice smiled broadly, his body clad in thick bronze-colored, rune-etched plates. He held his four arms aloft and said, "You seem to have my spear. Mind if I take it back?"

