

## Victor BK4: Ch45

Book 4: Chapter 45: Standoffs

Tes cloaked herself in lightning, streaking through the courtyard, intent on leaving her would-be ambushers far behind. She'd been quite well surrounded, and whatever direction she chose, she'd have to deal with at least one of the members of the warlord's Fist. With that in mind, she decided to fly toward Bambori, a squat little fellow who was exceedingly tough but sluggish in both action and wit. Just as she'd hoped, he was slow to intercept her, and she flew past, quicker than a thought—and slammed into a barrier that had no business being there.

“What have you done?” she cried at the terrible impact.

“Now! Hurry! Contain her!” the warlord cried, thrilled excitement lifting his voice into a near-shriek. While Tes reeled, stunned by the collision with the wall of force, for she'd been traveling at speeds too great to track with the naked eye, and her mass was prodigious, the warlord, his captains, and his Fist closed in, laying layer upon layer of binding Energies upon her. She felt the weight of those spells, those weavings designed with a singular purpose—containing Tes and her particular Energy signature.

“You've been planning this for some time, haven't you?” she asked, folding under the weight of the bindings. She didn't speak loudly, and though the air crackled with the hum of the spells and Vesh nobles cried and groaned, whimpering with pain as they tried to distance themselves from the battle, her voice still rang out through the courtyard.

“Oh indeed, dear Tes,” the warlord crowed, moving close as his ambush party pressed in, their eyes focused, their brows beading with sweat at the effort of the complex binding weave. “For years now, in fact. Fough, that clever bastard, had the idea; it took us all months to master this weave. He's not here to see our skillful implementation, but never worry; he's preparing your bath.”

Tes crouched in the grass, feeling out the net of Energies that the fifteen most powerful people in Coloss had woven around her. It was true; the web was well constructed, matching the signature of her Energy, absorbing and reflecting it back at her, squeezing the magical threads tighter and tighter the harder she struggled. “So . . . you used my charges as bait? My curiosity as the tripwire?” Rather than fight fruitlessly, she sat in the grass, smoothing her skirts against her thighs and looking up at the warlord as he stalked closer. His comrades had stopped some ten yards away from her, their faces strained with concentration, their mouths silently working as they toiled to maintain and reinforce the bindings.

“Yes. Why would I care for some blue flesh when I can delve into your blood, Tes? You flaunted your power one too many times, and I began to understand that you were so bold with your words because you held no fear or respect for me. That will change.”

“Ah,” Tes said, nodding along with his words as she looked around the circle of his lackeys. She began to worry he wasn’t present, but then, as she looked over her left shoulder, she locked eyes with him, War Captain Ardek—Black. His face was sweaty, his brow furrowed, but when he met her eyes, she saw what she’d been hoping for. Deep in the depths of those big gleaming orbs colored like red-tinted amber, she read what she’d hoped to find, a streak of rebellion. Tes lifted an eyebrow as if to ask, “Well?”

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Karnice’s voice rang out over the abandoned street, “You seem to have my spear. Mind if I take it back?”

Victor put one hand out onto the cobbles, pressing his knuckles into the hard surface as he leveraged himself to his knees, the great, silvery length of Karnice’s spear jutting out before and behind him. “This spear?” he asked. He felt Valla behind him, felt her press a hand to his shoulder in support, fear, or comfort. He didn’t know which and didn’t care; it was enough to know she was close. He reached down, grasped the blood-soaked metallic shaft of the spear, and began to pull it through, his fury climbing to new heights as the weapon kept his flesh apart, kept it from knitting, and the wound flared with new pain as each inch slid through his guts.

“Oh? You’ll hand it back to me? What a good lad,” Karnice said, continuing to stride down the cobbles, closing the distance from a hundred yards to seventy to fifty. By then, Victor had pulled the now-bloody length of silver from his guts, and he grinned as he felt his flesh knit. He lifted the spear, holding it aloft and admiring its long, gleaming blade as it winked in the sunlight.

“You want it back? I’ll leave it here for you,” he growled, and then, with every ounce of his mass, muscle, fury, and frustration, he grasped the spear with both hands and drove it down into the street. The blade slipped between two cobbles, and with a shriek of tearing, melting stone, the shaft sank into the street, all the way to where Victor grasped the shaft. When he straightened, only four feet of silvery metal stood out from the ground, and Karnice had stopped walking.

“Annoying, but not my only spear, boy.” He held out the two hands on his right side, and suddenly a thick, black, metallic spear appeared in them. To call that spear black was a gross understatement—it was a spear-shaped tear in reality, an absence of light. It confounded Victor’s attempts to gaze upon it, and he almost felt mesmerized by its strange, inky stain on the colors of bright daylight. “Do you like this little beauty? She’s going to leave more of a mark than that elegant lady you so callously drove into the ground.”

“Victor, do we run?” Valla asked from behind him, and he knew she was standing there to keep out of Karnice’s line of sight. Was she planning a surprise attack, or was she simply afraid? Afraid . . . the word echoed strangely in Victor’s

mind. Was he fearful of Karnice? As the thought raced through his mind, he watched the tall, powerful, four-armed warrior approach and found he couldn't find a trace of fear for the man. Did that mean he could beat him? Victor chuckled, shaking his head ruefully, and the laugh only deepened as he saw Karnice's puzzled expression and hesitant step.

"Is your friend mad, Little Blue?" Karnice asked, apparently well aware that Valla was hunched behind him. Valla didn't answer him, but Victor wouldn't have noticed if she had; his mind was too busy analyzing the crack he'd found in Karnice's formidable strength; Victor knew he couldn't beat the warrior in a straight fight, but it didn't seem like Karnice felt so confident. Was that fear lurking behind those smug laugh lines? If Victor could give him pause with a chuckle, how would he fare against some true terror?

"Valla, I promise you," Victor said, his voice low, rumbling out of his enormous chest, "I won't harm you."

"What?" Valla asked, and he felt her touch on his back lighten as though she were preparing to pull back.

Victor's pathways were aflame, filled to the brim with fury, and if not for his Iron Berserk upgrade, he knew he'd be flinging himself at Karnice at that second. As his mind raced and he thought of the consequences of his arguably insane idea, Karnice shrugged at Valla's lack of response and continued his swaggering approach, twirling the void-black spear as he grinned, exposing his long canines.

Logically, Victor knew he'd changed a great deal since he'd last tried out his Aspect of Terror. He had more will, more Energy, and a stronger tie to his bloodline, but more important than all of that, he knew he could maintain his Iron Berserk while he did it; wouldn't his rage, his fury, help him cope with that overwhelming desire to feast on fear? While his mind raced, he felt another enormous surge of Energy across the city from where he and Valla had just fled. Back where Tes was dealing with far more dangerous foes than this spear-twirling pendejo. If now wasn't the time to pull out the stops, when would it be?

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Tes smiled as she felt a thread fray in the weave of the warlord's trap. Black was pulling back his Energy, but he was being sly about it; she knew he was risking a brutal death at the warlord's hands for this betrayal. Still, the fraying thread of Energy was all she needed. Tes reached out with a thought and a knife of primal wind Energy, and she pulled apart the weave, stretching a wide hole through it. As the warlord's Fist screamed in unison, their carefully woven trap snapping back, flaying their pathways, Tes reclaimed the enormous mountain of Energy she'd put into her current form, holding herself tightly bound to this diminutive, if pretty shape.

As her Core flared with power, and her body elongated, widened, and shimmered to life with blue metallic scales, Tes looked down at the warlord, who'd stumbled to a halt, glancing from left to

right at his fallen Fist. She growled, running a long, pink tongue over sword-like fangs, “I think you brought a net too small for this catch.”

“Kill it!” he screamed, then snapped his wings, lifting himself into the air. He held his blade before himself, and Tes was impressed; her dragon aura was no small burden to bear, but he was holding up well. Several of his Fist, too, were struggling to their feet around her, staggering backward, their shields and weapons clutched in white-knuckled fists. The courtyard had become a much smaller space than when she’d been a petite human-shaped woman.

“It?” she purred, her rich voice pouring like liquid silver from her throat. “How rude, Warlord. Desist now, before I have to alter the history of this world by slaying you and your cohort.”

“We can glean what we need from her blood and bones!” Suddenly the warlord surged with power, and great metallic echoes of his white, feathered wings stretched out behind him. He screeched as he exploded into flight, his enormous, silvery sword held down at a cutting angle as he tore through the air at Tes.

Tes was sure she could shrug off the warlord’s attack and knock him aside with one muscular foreleg and its scythe-like talons. In fact, she had half a mind to snap him out of the air with her jaw, swallowing the insufferable tyrant whole. Still, he moved quickly, and her first instinct was to dodge, so she did, rolling on waves of wind and electricity that coursed through her body, just as thick, just as much a part of her as the blood in her veins.

The maneuver was devastating to the members of the warlord’s Fist on her left side, along with War Captain Red. Her bulk alone was enough to cause terrible harm, but the surging electricity that allowed her to move faster than most eyes could track compounded the damage as she flattened those four powerful men, sending them scattering, tumbling through the courtyard to smash through trees, shrubs, and ornamental statues. Tes uprooted a tree, herself, and her great tail, whipped without a thought to aid her balance, smashed through the wall, blasting a twenty-foot hole in the stones.

The warlord’s streaking attack was fruitless, his blade carving a deep furrow in the cobbles of Blue’s drive, and when he flew in an arc to turn and try to assess how he’d missed, his eyes were troubled. Tes snarled and glanced around, choosing an example. Her gaze settled on Green, and she remembered the brief pain of his acidic deluge. She inhaled and coughed out a fork of lightning, thick, blue, and so bright that anyone, even the nigh-immortal warlord, who witnessed it would struggle to see anything but its afterimage for many minutes.

The streak of lightning entered Green at the chest. His body and even his armor turned black and then burst, with a clap of thunder, into a cloud of charred ash. The warlord cried out; the surviving members of his Fist, Blue, and Black fell back, their hands instinctively going to their eyes or ears as they struggled to recover from the concussive blast of light and thunder.

Tes hadn't held back; the Energy for that attack had come from her Breath Core, nurtured there for many long months. It felt good to release it, like letting go of a sneeze held too long. Still, she couldn't muster such a burst of electricity again, not anytime soon, but the warlord didn't know that. She'd meant to give him pause, and it worked. He flapped his wings, rising higher into the air, and she saw him trying to peer around his fingers, looking for an avenue of escape.

"I can fly faster than thee, Warlord," Tes rumbled, her words and the cadence of her speech slipping back into the rhythm of her homeland. "Lower yourself before me. I'll have words with you and yours. Move with alacrity, and I'll consider mercy."

The warlord, still blind and dumbstruck by her show of power, seemed to resign himself, awkwardly descending, clearly unsure how far away the ground was. Tes watched him and stretched out her senses, feeling for Victor, wondering if he'd managed to find Boaegh's tower. She'd barely begun to explore the city with her prodigious perception when she felt something startling—a surge of Energy with a familiar taste, but one she'd only seen hints of before; Victor had unleashed his fear affinity.

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Karnice was a tall Vesh, but he still had to look up as he approached Victor. He slowed when he grew near, confirming Victor's suspicion—the warlord wanted him alive. He knew how fast Karnice was, knew he could have been upon him in seconds from the instant he'd crashed into the cobbles with that spear in his guts. Two things were holding Karnice back: his desire to get Victor back to the warlord in one piece and something else, something Victor had seen lurking behind those gleaming red eyes—he was struggling with fear.

"So? You don't pick up your axe, and you don't flee. Are you coming with me back to the citadel?"

Victor felt Valla stir behind him and knew she was wondering why he wasn't doing anything. She didn't speak, though, and he admired her willingness to steadfastly delve into depths of danger with him rather than run for her life. Perhaps she simply knew Karnice could catch them again if he'd done so once. "I don't think so, Karnice. I'm curious—what makes you fear me? Is it that I shrugged off your attacks the other day? Is it my aura?"

"Hah!" Karnice growled, hefting his spear, this time with one left and one right arm, leveling the point so that it was trained on Victor's chest, just three or four short feet away. "I don't fear you, boy."

"Oh?" Victor growled, and though his voice was deep and rumbling as it came out of his great chest, something shrill chased the word, something that sent a shiver down the spines of anyone who'd been listening. Valla inhaled with a trembling lip and stepped back as she heard that note. Karnice frowned, and his nervous tongue flicked out, licking at his lips as he braced himself.

For a moment, it seemed like the sun was going behind a cloud, but then the new shadows shifted and began to writhe as they wrapped themselves around Victor. They multiplied, building on each other until he was dressed in a cocoon of clinging, sliding, snakelike shadows. Cracks, grunts, and deep, hoarse gasps escaped the shadows, and Karnice yelled, "What are you doing! Lay down, fool! Let me take you back to the citadel!" Panic tinged his words, and as he cried the last word, he desperately drove his spear into the darkness cloaking Victor's enormous form.

Victor felt the spear as it bit into his shoulder, felt it slide off the bones, and slash away some of the shadow flesh cloaking them. He chuckled—not a bit of pain had accompanied the blow. What did hurt was the way his body was stretching, cracking, and bursting apart. It wasn't as bad as the first time; he was still Berserk, and his body was far more durable than before. More than that, he knew what was happening—the fear-attuned Energy was coursing through his pathways, sharing the wide channels with hot rage.

As he shifted and stretched, his flesh fell away to be replaced with shadows, and his fingers elongated into bony talons. He screeched, roared, and bellowed, the noises echoing off the stone-faced buildings nearby. Karnice stabbed him repeatedly, then he began to launch Energy attacks, trying to stun or disable him, trying to interrupt whatever process Victor was going through.

Victor's belt did its work, though, absorbing those red spears of Energy, those grasping claws of fiery magma that rose from the ground. His armor deflected blow after glancing blow from that spear. Valla, pale and sweaty with fear of her own, also did her part to buy him time. She danced around from behind his huge, shadowy cocoon and lashed out with Midnight, trying to distract Karnice.

The Vesh champion was initially annoyed, allowing himself to be distracted by her attacks. She scored several blows, hacking a deep cut in his leg, and stabbing Midnight into his ribs, only to have her sword caught short by his thick, metallic armor.

"I don't need you alive, bitch," Karnice growled, and then he turned from his assault on Victor to launch an all-out attack on Valla, his spear dancing and weaving, stabbing and slashing. She put up her barrier of wind and electricity, the one Tes had taught her, and she backpedaled, parrying with a skill beyond her tier. Karnice pursued her, his fury redirected, momentarily forgetting Victor.

All of this, Victor was aware of. While he lurked in his cloak of shadows, painfully changing as he underwent the transformation of his Aspect of Terror, he kept himself cognizant of his inner self with the fury of his rage-attuned Energy. Each time he started to slip into fantasies of feasting on the bright spirits around him, he refocused himself with the rage he felt at Karnice. He watched as the Coloss champion blasted him with spells; he watched as Karnice bullied Valla, and he worked to force his heart to share the dual facets of the Energy coursing through him; his fury toward Karnice allowed for only one target for his hunger for terror.

In the gray, colorless expanse of Coloss, where countless bright spirits lingered behind stones and watched from a distance, he observed the nearby blazing spirit as it battered and bullied the smaller, bright, silvery spirit. He knew that spirit. He'd tasted it before, and while he'd love to taste it again, he knew he couldn't. No, his fury would allow only one feast today. He refocused on the more formidable target and saw the dark terror-attuned spear that it swung about, trying to tear the Energy out of the small one.

Time to put a stop to this, Victor decided. He stretched out of his cocoon of shadows, allowing them to ripple and flow along his lengthy limbs and terrible, lupine form. He was huge, bigger than when he'd transformed before, bigger than when he'd simply taken on the aspect of a Quinametzin.

Victor was a nightmare made of shadow and bone, and strangely, the shadows that once clung to him like black, flowing fur now coated his great body like dark feathers. His snout was long and ended in a hooked beak. The blazing red, rage-filled eyes in his terrible skull glowered like menacing lanterns as he lifted his head and howled such an awful sound that Karnice fell to one knee and ducked his head before he mustered the strength of will to turn toward the sound.

Victor felt nothing but hunger and fury, and when he saw his target fall to the ground, he leaped upon him, grasping him by the shoulders with razored talons and bearing him down to the cobbles with the weight of his massive form. The spirit was bright, full of vibrant Energy, and as the terror bloomed within it, Victor feasted, pulling it in, growing stronger, despite its thrashing, despite its desperate attempts to harm him. With each heaving pull, Victor grew more potent, and the spirit grew weaker, more feeble.

More than that, Victor could feel the waves of fear from those lurking nearby. He could feel them making him stronger, feeding his hunger, and he began to contemplate feasting upon more than just the spirit beneath him. As it grew weaker and his desire never diminished, Victor felt his rage fading; why had he even been enraged? What was the point of anger when he was so hungry? He glanced up from his feeble, twitching prey and saw the bright, silvery spirit still lurking nearby, still exuding soft waves of fear. It watched him, and he felt his hunger intensify. "No," he grunted, "She. Not it. Valla."

With a roar and a gasp, Victor pushed more of his rage into his pathways. Then he started to clamp down on the fear-attuned Energy that had surged so powerfully into him, flooding his pathways and Core, driving the dark, purple-black orb to new surging heights, nearly overshadowing his other affinities. He pulled it back, pushed it down, and as the fear left his pathways, his rage surged hot, and he regained himself.

The shadows fell away from Victor's body, and the strange fear-monster aspect with them. He hunched over Karnice, the man's face ghost-white, his spear rolling over the cobbles, fallen from his listless, twitching fingers. Victor looked up at Valla, crouched behind a nearby overturned wagon, and felt an uncomfortable surge of guilt; he hated that he'd made her afraid again.

He lurched to his feet, still struggling with the duality of his mind, then lifted Lifedrinker from her harness and, not trusting Karnice to stay down, he stepped to the side and brought her down with a terrible wet crunch onto the brassy, rune-etched plate on Karnice's chest.

Lifedrinker's edge bit into the metal but didn't penetrate it. Still, with Victor's enormous strength and her sturdy, heavy axehead, he'd bent the metal into a concave shape. Karnice gasped and sputtered a bloody cough, and Victor lifted Lifedrinker again, smashing the dense metal further into the man's chest. Again, crunching, wet sounds erupted from the blow, and Karnice, already nearly drained into a coma, stopped coughing, and his eyes grew glassy.

"Let's go," Victor growled, motioning for Valla to follow him.