

Victor BK4: Ch8

Book 4: Chapter 8: The Madness of Crowds

“Yeah,” Victor said with a grunt as he pulled on his boots. “She said to show that token at the arena, and they’d let you sit in her box.” He stood up from the little table in the central room of their suite and adjusted his belt, making sure he felt comfortable; it was time to get in some fights.

“And she’s going to help me somehow, hmm?” Valla asked, flicking the silver token into the air and deftly catching it with her other hand.

“Trust me, Valla; she’s the real deal. If anyone can help you prepare to beat that bruja, it’s her. I’m pretty sure there’s no one stronger than her in this whole city. Well, I might be wrong, but you’ll see what I mean when you spend some time with her. Ready to go?” He moved over to the door, feeling a bit antsy about getting to the arena. He wanted to warm up a little and get a feel for the place before his first fight.

“Yes.” Valla tucked the token into her belt and then led the way, opening the patio doors and stepping out into the courtyard. Victor followed, closing the door behind them. He had to hustle to catch up to her, and he sighed with irritation.

Valla had been less talkative than usual, even though she probably had a lot to say—what were the people like up at the high table? What did the blue jerk talk about all night? How was she feeling? What could Victor do to help? He’d tried all those questions and more, but Valla wasn’t talking. When they’d returned to the room, she’d said she was too tired, and that morning, she’d avoided him, staying in her room until right before it was time to leave.

“I wish you’d talk to me,” he said as they walked through the inn and stepped out into the arena square.

“I know.” She frowned but then surprised him by saying, “I’ll bare my soul if you win all of your fights today.”

“Oh, shit.” Victor sighed, shaking his head.

“What?”

“Well, if you’re promising something like that, you must think I’m going to lose. Damn, Valla, I thought you had more faith than that!”

She snorted and said, “Just don’t die, all right?”

“That’s the plan.” With that, he grabbed her wrist and darted across the road to the steps leading up to the expansive plaza in front of the arena. They barely cleared the road before an enormous, floating barge-like wagon loaded with soldiers in matching red armor whirred past. Its passage kicked up dust and sent a hot wave of steamy air chasing after them.

“They need crosswalks in this damn place,” Victor growled as he hopped up the steps three at a time. He walked to the main gate and stopped near the mass of people loosely queued up to get inside. “I guess I have to go in through that other gate around the side. Meet you at the inn afterward?”

“Yes, I think it would be hard to find each other in the crowds; the inn would be best.”

“Okay, well, get us a table in the common room; I’m sure I’ll be thirsty. Also, while you’re up there, see if any people are taking bets.” He pulled out a sack of beads, handed it to her, then another—probably close to ten thousand beads—and she took them with a nod.

Victor turned and started to walk away, but Valla reached out and grabbed his arm. “Wait, Victor. I’m . . . well, I’m sorry I’m not good at things like this; communication isn’t one of my talents.” Her face was open, devoid of the make-up she’d worn the night before, but still full of color. Her green eyes were, for the first time he could remember, a bit bloodshot as she narrowed them and searched for words.

“Relax,” Victor said with an easy smile. “I know you’ll be rooting for me.”

“I will. I’ll share some words Shield Sergeant Grev said during my first deployment with the legion: The enemy can see your swords, they can see your armor, but they can’t see your hearts. Show them what’s in there. Never quit, never waver, and when you stand over them victorious, they’ll know the metal in your blood.” Valla spoke from her gut, her voice coming out husky, clipping each word in a kind of mantra, and Victor felt his back straightening and little goosebumps popping up at the nape of his neck.

“Damn,” he said, lost for other words as his reticent, laconic friend spoke with such emotion. She offered him a brief smile, nodded, and then moved off to line up with the others waiting to gain entry. “No pressure,” he muttered, turning to work his way around the arena to the fighter’s gate.

The man at the gate acted like he’d been expecting him and motioned him through. Victor walked down the stone-walled breezeway until he saw some other fighters he recognized from the previous day lingering near a side passage, and he walked over. “Yo,” he said, “this where the fighters are supposed to go?”

The two were both Vesh, a big, rhinoceros-looking man, and a lanky, long-limbed woman who had black feathers for hair and long, talon-like nails at the tips of her elongated fingers. The big guy, his thick lips curling into a smile beneath the stout horn protruding where his nose should be, said, “Aye. The fight steward is down there. He’ll show you to a ready room. Victor, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” Victor smiled and added, “I’m bad with names—don’t think I caught yours.”

“I’m Ronno, and this is Rekka; she’s my sister.”

“Hi,” the woman said, waving at Victor almost shyly, leaning back against the wall and self-consciously adjusting her well-worn yellow and green lacquered chainmail vest.

“Cool to meet you guys,” he said and started to step into the tunnel.

“Hold up, Victor,” Ronno said, his deep voice rumbling. “You’re new to Coloss, yes?”

“Yeah.” Victor turned back toward him, starting to frown as he wondered what this was going to be about.

“We’re trying to talk to all the participants in the tournament, trying to make a mercy pact.”

“Mercy pact?”

“No one has to die today,” Rekka said from behind Ronno’s shoulder. “We’re promising to grant mercy to anyone who yields in a fight. Will you do the same?”

Victor mulled it over for a moment, then said, “If I fight either of you, I’ll show mercy if you yield, sure.”

Ronno’s smile spread even further, displaying enormous flat teeth. “Good! Luck to you then, brother.” He reached out a stout, three-fingered hand, and Victor shook it, his grip awkward on the meaty appendage. Rekka smiled at him again, this time meeting his gaze with her dazzling yellow-flecked black eyes. Victor, ever at the mercy of his impulses, winked at her and then, grinning, turned to continue walking deeper into the bowels of the arena.

He felt good, happy that not everyone in Coloss, or more specifically, all the fighters in Coloss, weren’t jerks. He passed a few uniformed arena workers as he wound his way deeper into the facility, and soon he came to a large rectangular room with dozens of doors lining one side. Long benches filled the center of the room, sparsely populated by fighters and their friends, or perhaps teams was a better word. A man in an arena uniform, holding a softly glowing stone slate, stood near the entry hall, and Victor approached him.

“Ah, Victor, yes?”

“Right.” Victor watched as the man scribbled on his slate with a matching stone stylus.

“Ready room one.”

“One?” Victor wondered if the room assignment meant anything, but the man quickly dissuaded that notion.

“Yes, don’t worry, lad; the first-round bouts and room assignments were randomly selected. That said, your first opponent will be in ready room two, and I

have some rules to go over with you.” He stared at Victor until it became apparent he was waiting for a response.

“Okay.”

“Yes. Rule one: no fighting outside the arena. Rule two: all armor and magical items must be stowed in your ready room, save your primary weapon. A chest in your ready room will have a random set of armor for you to wear, though you can go without if you please.”

“What? Wait, so I can’t wear my own armor? What do you mean random?”

“A random selection will be available for you to wear, but you may wear your non-armored clothing if you’d prefer. None of the arena armors are enchanted other than for sizing.”

Victor felt like the man was being purposefully obtuse, and he had the urge to reach out and tweak one of his floppy, shaggy ears. “So, my helmet, my armor . . . what about my boots and my belt?”

“I’m happy you asked,” the man said, pulling out a smooth, black, pointy wand and waving it over Victor, from his toes and up to his head. “Your boots, belt, armor, rings, amulet, and helmet will not be permitted into the arena.”

“Fuck me,” Victor sighed.

“You should be happy about this rule,” the man tsked. “Some of the other participants have legendary artifacts that would make your trinkets pale in comparison.”

“Right.” Victor nodded, considering the words—he had no idea what kinds of things people might bring into the arena, and he supposed it was good there were limitations. “Right, but my axe is okay?”

“Yes, but, as I said, be aware that the combatants will employ many fine weapons today.” The man was polite, but he had an officious air about him that was starting to rub Victor the wrong way.

“Any other rules?”

“Thank you for asking! In the next fifteen minutes, the passage from this room will be locked, and you’ll need to spend your time between fights in your ready room or here. Remember rule number one, please. Should you win your first match, you’ll be afforded limited first aid; the chest containing your belongings will remain locked until you finish the tournament. Should you lose but survive, you will be given back your belongings and escorted from this section of the arena.”

“Are there any rules about that? I mean, letting people live during the fights?”

“It’s frowned upon to slay a combatant who has asked for mercy but not prohibited.” The man’s face remained impassive and his voice flat. Victor wouldn’t have been able to tell his opinion on the matter. “If you’ll excuse me, I see another fighter to whom I have yet to speak. Your ready room is there—the first door.”

“Wait,” Victor said, reaching toward the man but stopping short of grabbing him. When he turned back to Victor, he continued, “What about the other fights? I can’t watch?”

“Apologies. I should have mentioned,” the steward replied, pointing toward a large, blank stone rectangle lining one wall of the room. “That view portal will display each contest.”

“Oh, shit. Like an old-school TV . . .” Victor trailed off as the fight steward turned to speak to another fighter that had just walked into the room.

Victor walked over to the first iron-banded, wooden door, large enough for a Degh to walk through—enormous by human standards. Right away, he saw a figure he recognized leaning next to door number two—the giant Degh woman with curly blond hair. He tried to remember her name, but the only thing Victor could think of was that it started with a K and had a distinctly feminine quality. Awkwardly, he tried to act like he hadn’t noticed her and made to open his door, reaching up to twist the handle that was at his shoulder level.

“Victor,” she said, dashing his hopes of avoiding embarrassment and slipping inside his room.

“Hey . . .” he said, looking up at her and squinting, his shoulders lifting, unbidden, into a sheepish shrug.

“Kreecia,” she laughed. “Darn! I think we’ll have to fight first.” She hooked her thumbs in her belt, and Victor noticed her bone-plated armor from before was gone, and she just wore some supple-looking leather pants and a sleeveless vest.

“Is that how this works? Rooms one and two fight, then three and four, etcetera?”

“I’m afraid so. Tell you what, cutie, I’ll do my best not to kill you.” She smiled, revealing a large gap between her top front teeth, and then reached up to twirl one of her curls.

“I’ll, uh, appreciate that. I’ll try not to kill you, too. Please yield quickly, though—my axe is thirsty and not one to pull her punches.”

“Oho! Spunky! I like it,” she winked at him, and Victor couldn’t help laughing.

“You know,” he said, pulling his door open and stepping through, “I’m, like, half your size.”

“Nothing that ever stopped me before. See you out there, cutie!” Her voice chased him through the door as it swung shut.

“That . . . would be a handful,” he said, lifting Lifedrinker out of her loop. “Now I’m going to feel guilty if I chop off her leg or something, so let’s try to take it a little easy on her, eh?” Lifedrinker hummed in his hand, her dark, living-wood handle picking up the lights in the ready room, tiny stars blooming to life in the depths. “Damn, you’re pretty, you know that?” He set her down on the bench that lined one of the walls, then looked around as he unbuckled his belt.

Like the rest of the arena, the room was walled with pale stone blocks. The bench he’d set Lifedrinker on lined one of the longer walls while two chests sat against the other. An iron portcullis blocked a passage leading up from the far wall, and Victor figured it led into the arena proper.

He walked over to the chests, both made of dark stone and both as big as his old varsity locker. He lifted the lid of the one on the left, and it swung open noiselessly on recessed hinges. The interior was empty, and he figured that was where he was supposed to deposit his armor and magical belongings.

The other chest opened just as effortlessly, and within was a leather-lined bronze breastplate and, to his horror, a skirt made of layered leather and bronze strips. “The fuck is this?” he asked the empty room, lifting it out to find, beneath it, knee-high boots and bronze-plated gauntlets. He took out the boots and gauntlets but tossed the skirt back into the chest. “I don’t have any underwear that’ll look good in that thing, sorry.”

He dug around in one of his rings until he came up with a pair of sturdy leather pants, then he started changing. In the end, when he’d put on the boots, breastplate, gauntlets, and his own pants, he felt pretty good—they’d all resized to feel perfectly suited to his physique, and with his upper arms clear, he felt like he did in the old days when he’d first found his old, badass vest in the dungeon near the mine.

He stowed all his valuables in the empty chest, then lifted Lifedrinker and began going through his axe forms, especially the combinations he’d learned with Polo Vosh and perfected while sparring with Valla.

He felt a little naked without the weight of his helmet, but he also felt light and fast, and a savage grin stretched his lips as Lifedrinker sang and snapped through the air. In the back of his mind, he’d been worried about who he might have to fight, but he began to hope his opponents, beyond the first match, would be assholes. He didn’t want to spend the whole day pulling his punches.

Victor was deep into his routine when someone pounded on the door leading to the outer ready room. He finished up his combo, bringing Lifedrinker around in a snapping, upward hook meant to shear through an opponent’s inner thigh; then, still holding her and sweating lightly, he turned to pull the door open. The fight steward stood there, rocking back and forth impatiently. He spoke

almost immediately, “You’re the first to fight today. When the portcullis opens, make your way up the ramp. You’ll have one minute before a forfeit is declared.”

“All right . . .” Victor started, but the man was already moving over to the next door. He was about to close the door when he saw a familiar face. Krista, the one name Victor could remember from the day before, stood smiling at him, her long canines glinting in the glow lamps.

“Hey, Deshi. I’m in room six—try to win your first two matches so we can dance, hmm?”

Victor eyed her up and down, noting that she wore armor much like his, though she hadn’t turned her nose up at the skirt, and it looked kinda cool if he were being honest. More than that, though, he took in her spear—easily eight feet long, with a twenty-inch, razor-edged blade that winked with pale yellow, crackling sparks. Not for the first time, Victor remembered his coach’s words of wisdom and clamped his mouth tight, refusing to talk shit before a fight. He stepped back and closed his door with a thud.

If he’d had enough time, he might have begun to get into his head, begun to second-guess his enthusiasm to fight, and plant some doubts about whether he’d made the right decision. Fortunately, though, just a few minutes after he’d closed his door, the portcullis noisily ratcheted into the ceiling of the tunnel. “Right. Here we go, beautiful,” he growled, hefting Lifedrinker and striding up the sloping stone passage toward the brightly lit opening fifty yards distant. He could already hear the noise of the crowd.

Victor’s impulses warred with each other when he stepped out into the sunlight. One part of him wanted to turn around and forfeit. The other part wanted to hold up his arms and strut further into the sandy arena, basking in the attention of tens of thousands of people, something he’d never dreamed of in his old life. He settled for a compromise, walking calmly forward a half dozen paces, still holding Lifedrinker crossways in front of his waist.

The crowd was enormous, and so was the din. Cheering, howling, stomping, people shouting conversations at each other because other people were shouting, and behind it all, some kind of weird music that was mostly drums and pipes. Still, the beat was undeniable, and Victor found himself swaying to it as he waited for something to happen. He squinted up into the sunlight, the fiery orange-yellow orb just poking above the high, curved wall of the stadium.

He’d just turned toward the next passageway, the only other one with an open portcullis, when a loud, enthusiastic voice rang through the arena—an announcer, “Great people of Coloss! Great Warlord and War Captains! Our first fight of the low-tier tournament is about to begin. Before you stands the first challenger, a stranger to our world, an unknown quantity! Victor! What a name, don’t you think? His very moniker proclaims his intention to win!”

The crowd erupted in louder cheers, and Victor couldn’t help himself; he held Lifedrinker up and turned in a slow circle. He tried to make out faces, tried to see the box where Valla might be sitting, and tried to pick out the guy who was speaking, but it was impossible; thousands of people mingled together in a tremendous churning mass, becoming faceless in their multitudes.

The announcer continued, “Stepping into the arena to meet the challenger is our hometown beauty, the Damsel of Destruction, Krecia!” Victor watched as Krecia, wielding a two-handed, sledge-

like hammer that had to weigh a thousand pounds, charged out of her tunnel, leaping a dozen feet into the air and landing with a tremendous crash, smashing her hammer into the sand. Victor felt the stone beneath the sand tremble at the concussion, and he took a step back to steady himself.

The crowd went absolutely insane, cheering and roaring so loudly that Victor almost lifted his hands to his ears. He stopped the impulse, though, hefting Lifedrinker and snarling. He cast Inspiring Presence, and though Kreecia was still intimidating with that gigantic hammer, he felt better about his odds. Watching her straighten up and ponderously swing the hammer, its head the size of a wheelbarrow, Victor used Sovereign Will to boost his agility and squared off with her.

“Are you ready?” the announcer shouted, and Victor realized the question wasn’t directed at him or Kreecia when the crowd’s roaring went up another octave. “Fight!”

The announcer had barely finished his shouted command when Kreecia squatted and launched herself into the air, lifting that ridiculous hammer high as though she meant to smash Victor, like a disobedient nail, into the ground. Victor channeled rage-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, darted forward under the arc of her jump, and, moving far faster than she, he leaped, hacking at her dangling left foot.

Kreecia’s eyes widened, and she tried to pull her feet up, but so much of her brute strength was focused on managing her enormous maul, and Victor was moving so fast that despite her efforts, Lifedrinker cut a deep groove through her thick leather boot. Her edge, ever thirsty for flesh, tore into the top of Kreecia’s foot, and even though it felt like he’d struck an anvil, he felt confident he’d cracked some of those tiny bones.

Kreecia cried out and landed awkwardly, her hammer smashing into the sand with forward momentum rather than downward. The arena didn’t shudder, but a spray of sand flew out like a meteor had landed, leaving a trench six inches deep as Kreecia stumbled forward after her massive weapon. Inspired as he was, Victor knew better than to let up the pressure.

He charged after the giant woman. As she gained control of her hammer, clearly favoring her left foot, Victor was already on her, running past, hacking Lifedrinker sideways into the back of her knee with all his strength and momentum. It felt like he’d taken an iron axe and smashed it into a massive knot in the trunk of a mesquite tree.

Lifedrinker bit, severing flesh, but when her gleaming Heart Silver edge struck the bones of Kreecia’s leg, she was stopped short. The axe’s handle vibrated with the impact, and Victor’s eyes bulged at the concussive impact. Still, he didn’t let go; it would take much more than that to pull Lifedrinker from his grasp. “Mierda!” he grunted, yanking Lifedrinker back and sideways, grinding through more of Kreecia’s meaty leg but sliding along her adamant bone.

Kreecia howled in pain and fury, and if Victor hadn’t been inspired or had his agility boosted, he might have died at that moment. She seemed to explode with bright orange Energy, and her hammer whistled through the air as she spun, sacrificing her balance to bring the hammer around sideways, directly at Victor. Still, he saw it coming just in time and dropped to roll through the sand. Howling like a freight train, the tremendous weapon destroyed nothing but air. Worse, for Kreecia, she couldn’t keep her grip as she fell to her back, and the hammer sailed toward the high stone wall of the arena.

Momentarily stunned by his close call, Victor watched the hammer smash into the arena wall with a resounding crash. Tiny fractures spread in the stone around the impact, and the hammer fell to the ground with a thud that he felt through his hands and knees as he clambered to his feet. He kept Kreecia in front of him as he stood, Lifedrinker ready, and approached the wounded woman, struggling to stand with a knee that wasn't working.

"I yield," she coughed, eyes bloodshot with tears of pain as she looked up from the sand. She'd given up trying to stand. Victor opened his mouth, but then he was cut off by the announcer's voice filling the air.

"Oh no! Our local heroine has fallen, and just like that, she's asking for mercy! Will the challenger grant it? Should the challenger grant it? Scream if you want to see more blood!"

The crowd's bloodthirsty howls rose to new heights, and Victor felt his blood stirring in response, felt his heart begin to thump with a different, heavy beat. The furious Energy at his Core started to seep into his pathways. His lips pulled back into a menacing, maniacal grin, and he lifted Lifedrinker high over his head.