

## Victor BK9: Ch43

### Book 9: Chapter 43: A Simple Man

Victor sat on his couch, his balcony doors open, enjoying the morning breeze as he studied the book Azforath had given him. The spell patterns were complicated, even more so than the one Tes had given him. That said, Azforath's notations and footnotes were clear and helpful, and Victor knew he'd make great progress with his understanding of Elder magic by studying the pages.

It was more than a simple notebook, too; the blank pages never seemed to end as he flipped through them, and he realized he'd be able to write notes and design his own spells in the tome, keeping everything he knew concerning Elder magic in one place. In fact, he intended to copy down the information from the texts Dar had given him, knowing it would be an excellent way to refresh his understanding in light of what he learned from Azforath's notes.

For instance, studying the generic template, he could see mistakes he'd made with his Wild Totem spell. There were remnants of his original System-derived spell patterns that could be truncated and an entire section governing Energy input that he should add. He was eager to get to work refining the spell, but he was even more excited to learn the Glacial Wrath spell Azforath had written for him. Even better, he could almost see how to add in the modification that would allow him to "assert his will" while under the spell's influence. Would that make him less prone to losing his mind to the rage? He hoped so.

Sighing loudly, he closed the book. He had much that he wanted to accomplish, but everything on his plate—crafting new spells, eating the Lava King's heart, drinking the "distillate of a Qo'lorian Essence Drifter," feeding Lifedrinker the metal from the dungeon—would take time, and he had only two days before his next duel. He doubted the heart or the distillate would take him out of commission for that long, but he didn't want to risk it. It would be disastrous if he went into some sort of fever dream that took him days to wake from.

He had an hour or so before he was supposed to meet with Queen Kynna. According to Bryn, her new chamberlain had been thrilled to hear of Victor's return and put him into her schedule first thing after breakfast. "So," he mused aloud, "an hour to kill." He snapped his fingers and summoned Arona's phylactery from his storage ring. She immediately materialized out of cold, blue-tinted mist, her wispy, ethereal form hovering a few inches off the ground before him.

"Victor!" Her raspy voice echoed strangely, as though it had to fight its way through the veil that separated her from the world of the living. "Have you news?"

"Yeah, it's been a hell of a few weeks since we last spoke. I have news, and it's good."

“Truly?”

Victor nodded. “I think Trobban almost has everything he needs to begin constructing your new vessel.”

“A Core? A heart? A mind?”

“Yeah, and more.” Victor took a few minutes to elaborate, describing his run-in with the iron automaton near the amber-ore wall, then giving her a run-down of his time in the Crucible of Fire and all the loot he pulled out of it. As he spoke, he was perplexed to see her face growing more and more grave rather than excited or joyous, as he’d anticipated.

When he finished his tale, she looked down, slowly shaking her head. “Victor, it’s too much. I know we spoke about this and that you’d be working to find similar treasures for me, but I can’t even fathom the value of all these things taken together. We’re friends, true, and I know I asked you for help, but this is more than I bargained for. How will I repay you?”

“Look, Arona,” Victor sighed. “I’m pretty sure the Dungeon Core rigged the loot in my favor, likely because I was its first visitor in a few thousand years. Taken one by one, the silvanite, the azurite star, the, uh, egg of sentience—sure, they’re all worth a pretty penny. I’ve got plenty of money, though, especially considering the wealth of Iron Mountain. The real value of all those things is in how they synergize to bring together a very powerful vessel, something better than we’d hoped. What would be more valuable to me—selling off these treasures piecemeal or helping my friend recover? Would more beads in my storage containers serve me better than a powerful ally?”

Arona stared at him for a long moment, her eyes narrowed and contemplative. Finally, she said, “Have you grown more clever? I don’t recall you being so eloquent, and I can’t find fault with your logic.”

Victor grinned. “As a matter of fact, I have!” He laughed, shaking his head. “Don’t let me fool you, though. I’m still me.”

“Well, I appreciate your cleverness, Victor. I appreciate your generosity, and, as I’ve already sworn, I will recognize my debt to you. If it takes me a year or a thousand, I’ll repay you.”

Victor didn’t want to diminish the gravity of her promise, but he couldn’t stop himself from saying, “Listen, Arona. I appreciate that. I appreciate how you feel. I’m the same way; I don’t like feeling like I owe people things. Even so, I don’t want you to feel like you have to, I don’t know, serve

me or something until you've paid me back some nebulous price for helping you with your vessel. I'm happy to have you as a friend and ally, but I also want you to feel free. Half the reason I'm helping you is because I hate how that prick, Vesavo, treated you. I want you to have agency. You get that?"

Arona drifted closer, and her wispy, ethereal hand stretched out, trailing cold, ghostly fingers against Victor's cheek. "Thank you, Victor."

Victor stared into her dark eyes for several seconds, something unspoken passing between them. She was acquiescing, agreeing simply to accept his generosity, but it didn't mean she didn't owe him. After a pregnant silence that stretched into near awkwardness, he shrugged and shook off the spell, blowing out a heavy sigh. "Anyway, Trobban is still gathering materials from the iron colossus. When he returns, I'll give him the more valuable treasures, and the two of you can get to work on the vessel."

"He's already created the skeleton, yes?"

"Yeah. Some kind of crystal lattice."

Arona's ghostly figure smiled, and she drifted back, turning toward the window. "Victor, I'm so excited to think that I might actually get a new affinity. I know we spoke of it, even planned for it, but a part of me didn't believe it would work out. To think that I'll soon be free of this deathly pall that's clung to my soul for my entire life! To think I'll be able to walk among those I admire without being shunned for the dark Energy in my Core!"

Victor smiled and nodded. "Do you think you'll be able to show your face around Sojourn when we're done? Will Vesavo have any claim to you?"

"He may seek to extract a price from me, some repayment for the years of so-called instruction he gave me. As I've already told you, though, the truth of the matter is that I've been little more than a slave to him; any learning I accomplished was thanks to my own perseverance. Of course, he'll argue otherwise, but that's a battle for another day. I won't dwell on it now."

Victor glanced at the clock sitting in the curio cabinet nearby and saw that his appointment with Kynna was fast approaching, so he stood and stretched, nodding toward the door. "I've got to go, Arona. I've got a meeting with the queen. I'll take you out when Trobban gets back, all right?"

“Of course. Thank you for giving me an update, Victor.” Without further ado, she broke apart into cold shreds of wispy fog and streamed into her bone phylactery.

Victor picked it up and sent it into storage, then left his quarters, surprised to find Feist outside his door, guarding the elevator. “Hey, Feist. I didn’t know Bryn posted you out here.”

“Ah yes, Your Grace, she’s attempting to catch up on some sleep. She deprived herself a bit while you were away.”

“Good. She deserves a break. I’ll be back soon.” He could see Feist was about to ask if he should accompany him, but Victor didn’t give him a chance, stepping into the elevator and closing the door. His mind turned toward Bryn and how he’d promised her rewards for her loyal service. She deserved a proper title, but he wasn’t sure what it would be. He figured he could ask Kynna about it. More than that, he wanted to share some of his treasure with her, and he wondered if one of the Energy Hearts he’d pulled would interest her. He snorted, shaking his head, realizing he didn’t even know what her primary affinity was.

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He made his way through the palace to the western wing where Queen Kynna had commandeered several parlors and galleries, setting up temporary offices for her staff as the repairs were being done to the royal palace in Gloria. The queen’s staff directed him through several hallways until he found her in a small study library with big, plate glass doors that opened onto a flower garden Victor wasn’t sure he’d seen before. When he entered the room, the queen and two men in scribes’ uniforms were huddled around a table, looking at stacks of documents.

She straightened, her face devoid of emotion, when she saw him and waved the two men away. “Leave us.” When they left, the Queensguard stationed in the hall shut the door. The queen walked around the table, her deep blue, sleeveless gown glittering with tiny sparkles like stars in a night sky, as she passed in front of the garden door. She looked beautiful and severe with her high crystal crown and perfect poise. “You had me quite worried, Victor. So long without any communication! I nearly gave up. I would have given up if not for the nature of the challenge we’re dealing with.”

“Given up?”

“On you, I mean. I almost drew a new champion from the coterie I’ve begun to grow thanks to your earlier victories. The only problem being that I doubted any of them would win.”

“Really? Isn’t the next duel against Lovania? They’re just a minor kingdom between us and Bandia, right? Is their champion so strong?”

“No, he wasn’t. Grenald Boranny was a man of middling ability—even my dear Foster Green could have backed him off. In fact, I was having difficulty getting Queen Fabaj to accept the duel, but two weeks ago, our negotiations took a turn; she became rather eager, pressing for a duel sooner rather than later. Of course, my spies have been hard at work to find the reason for her change of heart, and I’m afraid it’s become apparent that we’ve garnered the attention of the great houses. Through some political scheming, a new champion has found her way to Lovania.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Oh yes. Boranny has retired, and Trinnie Ro stands in his place. She’s one of the youngest duelists in recent generations to attain the rank of steel seeker. She’s already built quite a reputation among the great houses, and it makes no sense whatsoever for her to represent such a minor kingdom.”

Victor nodded, frowning. “She was sent to put a stop to us.”

“Precisely. So tell me, Victor, are you up to the task? Can you face a steel seeker, or were your earlier assurances bravado? Please tell me now because there’s a chance I can negotiate peace if I give up some territory; we’ve gained much from Xan and Frostmarch, enough to bargain with.”

Victor folded his arms over his chest, turning to regard the garden outside the little study. The flowers were drinking up the sunlight, and fat, slow-moving bees were lazily sipping their nectar. He could smell their aroma, even a dozen yards away. It was no wonder Kynna had chosen this study as her office. If he were to remain living at Iron Mountain, he might spend some time there, himself. He shook his head, turning his eyes back to Kynna. “When we talked about going all the way—even up against the great houses, did you think I didn’t know there were steel seeker champions out there? Did you think I assumed there wouldn’t be tougher champions than Obert and Qi Pot?”

“I don’t know what I thought. I think, perhaps, I feared you assumed it would be months or years before you had to face a champion of this caliber. I feared you might have had designs on departing before we got that far.”

Victor sighed and ran a hand through his hair, idly noting that it was getting a little long for his tastes. “I guess I’d begun to think we were past all that. Maybe I was naïve, but I thought we’d established some trust.”

Kynna turned and paced toward the garden, pausing in the light with her back to him. “I don’t like being fearful. I didn’t used to be. I used to be confident and sure, but I’ve changed. I’ve had my confidence eroded by inches. My father died, and my neighbors, nations who were once friendly trade partners, besieged Gloria and tried to force a duel everyone knew Foster would lose. You mention naïveté—I was truly sheltered, Victor.”

She turned to face him, and when she spoke, she sort of folded in on herself, gripping her left arm and rubbing her pale flesh. Victor thought he saw goosebumps on her arm, and he wondered if she’d caught a draft or if her emotions were giving her chills. “I wouldn’t admit that to anyone I didn’t trust. Despite my bravado, Thorn’s betrayal left me reeling. I’ve banked everything on you, Victor, and when you disappeared, when my only word from you was second-hand from that pugnacious guardswoman you’ve stolen away from me, I was beginning to think I’d been a fool.”

“All right, well, I’m here.” Victor stepped closer to her. “I’m here, and I’m ready to fight whatever champion they send my way. I don’t care if this ‘Trinnie Ro’ is a steel seeker. She won’t be the first one I’ve killed.”

“Truly?”

Victor nodded, reaching out to grasp her bare shoulders. Her flesh was cool and smooth as a satin sheet under his rough, hot hands. She didn’t pull away or recoil or act insulted by his brazen touch. Emboldened, he gently ran his palms over her upper arms, brushing away her goosebumps with the heat of his flesh. “Stop worrying, okay? I’ve barely begun to show these pendejos what I can do in those duels. If those old houses—”

“Great houses.”

“If those ‘great houses’ want to send one of their better champions to try to take me out early, then all they’re doing is saving me the trouble of fighting her later on down the road. So? When’s the fight?”

Kynna closed her eyes, her body visibly relaxing as she leaned into his touch. Her voice thick with exhaustion, she murmured, “The day after tomorrow at dawn.”

“When’s the last time you had a good night’s sleep?”

Her eyes snapped open, and she shook her head, chuckling ruefully. “Too long.”

“So, here’s the deal: I’m not leaving my tower until you come and get me for the duel. You don’t have to worry about me disappearing or running away. I’ll be there waiting. Will that help you to relax a little?”

“I…” She started to speak but stopped several times until, finally, she blew out a pent-up breath and nodded. “Yes, Victor. That gives me great comfort. Is there anything I can do to help you prepare? Do you need a sparring partner?”

“Not this time. The only thing I want is someone to tell me about this champion.” He grinned and shrugged. “I’m curious if I’ll need to wear armor or not and, I guess, if I’ll need to use my best weapon.”

Kynna snorted, clearly far more relaxed than when they’d first begun speaking. “You’re so perplexing! Why not simply be as prepared as possible?”

“Well, as your many-times-great grandfather explained it to me, the less I reveal in a battle, the less my enemies can prepare for what I can bring to a fight. Unfortunately, I’ve given away quite a lot already—people know I can berserk, they know I can heal rapidly, and if they were watching closely, they know I’m stronger than I look. I didn’t mean to stand up to the veil walker in that last duel, but my rage got the better of me.”

“So, your armor is a big secret?”

“Not necessarily, but if I eschew it, that forces my enemies to wonder why—can I not wear armor? Does one of my abilities prohibit it? You know, that kind of thing.”

Kynna nodded, sighing softly as Victor kneaded her shoulders and triceps. “That makes sense. I’ll have a dossier on Trinnie Ro compiled and brought to your chambers.”

Victor gave her shoulders a final squeeze, then let go, smiling broadly. “Perfect. Now, why don’t you get some rest? Let the pencil pushers handle all this shit for a while.” He waved a hand at the table covered with ledgers and charts. To his surprise, Kynna didn’t argue. She nodded and smiled at him with weary eyes.

“I’ll do that. I feel a weight’s been lifted from me, Victor. To rule is to be alone. Have you ever heard that? It’s very isolating. Even when I thought I could trust Thorn, he didn’t help me carry the weight—everything was always my decision, the consequences mine to bear. Foster, brave and solid though he is, could only carry so much. You’re different. I feel I could pile all my troubles on your shoulders, and you’d simply shrug to adjust the weight. Do you not feel fear? Do you not feel doubt?”

“Sure I do, but not about this. When it comes to fighting, there’s never any doubt in my mind.”

“You’re always sure you’ll win?”

Victor shook his head, smiling wryly. “I didn’t say that. I said there’s no doubt in my mind. Live or die, I’ll fight my hardest, and I’ll make my ancestors proud.” He saw some fear creep back into Kynna’s eyes, so Victor playfully reached out to tilt her chin up. Her fiery eyes smoldered as they locked onto his, and he couldn’t help noticing how her lips parted slightly as her breaths quickened. “Relax. I’m going to win.”

“You...” She paused, reaching up to grasp his wrist, pulling his fingers away from her chin. She cupped his hand in hers. “You seem different, Victor. What happened to you in that mountain?”

“That’s a long story, My Queen. I’ll admit that I might be a little changed, though—for the better, I hope.”

“It seems so to me, yes.” Her voice was husky, almost breathless, and Victor felt like he better get going before he pushed things past flirtatious into more serious territory. He pulled his hand back and stepped away, turning halfway to the door.

“So, you’ll get some rest, and I’ll go to my quarters to prepare, right?”

“Yes.” He could tell she wanted to say more. He could see she didn’t want him to leave, but Victor wasn’t sure he was ready for anything like that. Of course, that made him wonder why the hell he’d been so handsy and bold with his words, but he chalked it up to having a fiery personality.

When he reached the door, he paused and turned to face her again. She looked lonely standing there, lonely and beautiful, like a sculpture made of pale, gray-blue ice. “You’re a good ruler, Kynna. When we’re done, all of Ruhn will know it. When we’re done, they’ll say your name with the same breathless excitement as Ranish Dar’s.”



She smiled and nodded, perhaps a little patronizingly, “And you, Victor? Is that what you desire? To have the people utter your name with awe in their voices?”

Victor smiled and pulled the door open. “I’m a simple man, Your Majesty. I just want to fight.”