

Victor BK9: Ch44

Book 9: Chapter 44: Correspondence

The night before his duel, Victor's sleep was restless. He'd spent the day studying Elder magic, and when Bryn brought him a dossier on Trinnie Ro, the champion he'd be fighting, he spent the evening reading all about her. As he tossed under his sheets, frustrated by the elusiveness of sleep, he regretted doing so. The dossier had been thorough, far more so than he'd expected, and he'd learned not just about Trinnie's fighting style but also about her life, and that was what was ruining his sleep.

If someone asked Victor to write a sympathetic story about a young fighter that would make people want to root for her, he couldn't have done better than that dossier. Trinnie had been an orphan. Her father had been a champion for the kingdom of Voth, one of the great houses on the eastern continent. When he'd lost a duel, his entire family had been stripped of their wealth and banished from the kingdom. Trinnie's mother and two older brothers had all killed themselves shortly after that. So, at age twelve, she found herself living on the streets of Khaliday, the empire's capital.

Victor groaned, throwing off his sheet and sitting up on the edge of his bed. Why was he replaying that dossier over and over in his head? Was he trying to torture himself? In an effort to find a distraction, he began going through his Farscribe books, looking for correspondence from his friends and loved ones to read. The first book he opened was Edeya's, and he was pleased to see a lengthy new entry from her in the book. Before he read it, he stood and summoned a comfortable robe from his storage ring and moved to the parlor, where he sat in front of the fireplace, enjoying the scent and warm orange glow of the embers, if not the warmth.

It was midnight, and the air was chilly, especially with his balcony door open as he always kept it. He enjoyed the fresh air more than he craved warmth. He sank back in the soft cushions of his chair, summoned a cup of mulled cider, and began to read Edeya's letter:

Victor,

I can't believe you've been gone nearly two months already, but when I think about it and remember that you might be gone for years, it makes me sad and regretful. Why didn't I take advantage of our time together? I wish we had spent more time talking about important things—dreams, love, family—you know, the things that really matter. Instead, I bugged you about spells and sparring and...well, and things that won't make a bit of difference in ten years.

I know I'm probably not supposed to know anything about you and Valla, but I'm not blind, and I have friends on Fanwath, too, you know. I hope you're doing all right! I hope your heart doesn't

ache. I hate that you're all alone on that distant world full of ancient kingdoms and strangers. Can't you visit? Surely, you're doing an impressive job there and making Dar's family proud. Shouldn't they reward you with a break soon? I've tried to speak to Dar about it, but he's never around, and when I catch him coming or going, he only offers platitudes.

I don't know if you can write back easily, but I hope you do. In the meantime, I'll give you an update about things here: Lam, Darren, Trin, and I have been delving into dungeons nonstop. We're all closing in on tier three, and even more exciting, your cousin, Olivia, joined us for a dungeon run last week. She's amazing, Victor! I've never seen anyone wield the elements the way she does. She melds fire with lightning and fire with earth and lightning with frost and... I could go on, but just know that she's incredible!

In the dungeon, we came to a locked metal door where we were meant to find a key to get an extra chest. Olivia melted the door. She reduced it to slag! She's only tier three, too. Did you know that? Imagine what she'll be like when she gets some more ranks. I hope she'll stay and adventure with us some more. I think she will; she's a little secretive, but I get the impression she's not happy with the politics at the academy where she's been working and studying.

I have good news about Darren! We found him another racial advancement, and he's grown his wings! They're huge! I'd be happy for him, but he's gotten a little full of himself. I suppose I can't put all the blame for that at his feet. It's the avian folk here that are causing the problem. They fawn over his "good looks," and he eats it up! Oh well, he's actually been really great. Considering how he fled First Landing in disgrace, I thought he'd have a problem with Olivia, but they've been getting along well. I'm sure most of that is due to Lesh's influence—he and Darren are always talking about the "honor of our house" and things like that.

Lam and I are getting along well. I told you I regretted not talking to you about love, so I won't hold back now. Lam loves me fiercely, Victor. I'm her everything, and sometimes that's wonderful, and sometimes it's a...lot. Do you know what I mean? Don't get me wrong! I love her too, and I never want to be apart from her, but I worry about how invested in me she is. It's a lot to carry, even if she doesn't realize it. If something happened to me, I think she'd be ruined. I suppose you saw that when I was unwell. Of course, I didn't, but I'm beginning to understand how desperate she was to see me made whole. Love like hers is wonderful and terrifying. I'm blessed, I know, but sometimes I wish I had my old friend from the mines to talk to about things like that, you know?

I miss you, Victor, and I hope you'll write back soon.

Love,

Edeya

Victor closed the book with a sigh, shaking his head as he chuckled softly. “Edeya, you crazy girl.” He wanted to write back to her immediately, but he had more books to get through, so he pulled another out, one he shared with Efanie, the fae-blooded governess he’d hired to take care of Cora Loyle. There were several entries in the book, and Victor scanned through them until he came to the most recent, then settled back to read it:

My Lord Victor,

I hope this note finds you well. It’s been a month since my last correspondence with you, and there is much to share. I’m pleased to report that Cora has settled in nicely here at your home overlooking the Silver Sea. She’s made fast friends with Deyni and Chala; they spend most days together. Your friend, Lady Thayla, has helped immensely in seeing us settled, even going so far as to include Cora in the lessons and tutelage the other girls enjoy from the experts in the area.

The girls learn about tracking, hunting, and animal taming from the Shadeni, and twice a week, they receive weapons training from a man in the Naghelli settlement. I met him, of course, and learned that he’s a good friend of yours—Kethelket. He’s humble in nature, but beneath his unassuming demeanor, he carries wisdom that speaks of extraordinary accomplishments and great trials. I’ve enjoyed visiting with him after the girls’ lessons.

Of course, I’ve continued Cora’s training in literature, mathematics, decorum, and my own brand of fencing. We’ve fallen into a routine, a structure that she clearly craved whether she knew it or not. Occasionally, Cora brings up her father, and we talk about him and his life, as well as the mistakes he made. You might be intrigued to learn that I’m not the only one she confides in; a few days after you left, she and Chala came to me asking if I had any objects that might represent her father. Of course, I did; I have the objects in the storage ring you gave me to hold for Cora’s sake.

I gave her one of her father’s pipes. He was well known around the Volpuré estate to be a prolific smoker, spending many evenings on the balcony of his suite overlooking the gardens with a pipe held between his teeth. Cora took the pipe, and she and Chala ran off with it. Of course, I was curious as to what they were up to, so I employed some stealth and shadowed them. To my surprise, they went down to the beach and conducted some sort of ceremony. They buried the pipe in the sand at low tide, stacking a cairn of stones atop it, and then, Chala burned a fistful of pungent herbs, and they spoke to their “ancestors.”

The author's narrative has been misappropriated; report any instances of this story on Amazon.

I'm not sure of the ritual's origin, but I believe it was good for Cora; it seemed to give her some closure, and ever since then, she's been more open to speaking about her father and her feelings. Chala is a fierce young woman, but she's clever and crafty, too. I'm very happy that she and Deyni are friends with Cora; she's learning to be a child, a girl, and a member of a community—things she sorely missed out on growing up under Fak Loyle's strict control. ~~RÃ~~^N~~OB~~^Es

As for our new home, neither of us could possibly ask for a more wonderful place to live. The wilderness is wild and beautiful, and the beach and ocean offer endless opportunities for adventure for the girls. The vistas in every direction are inspiring, and I know they do much to feed Cora's soul—she dreams big, wondrous dreams, Victor, and I know that you and she might not realize it yet, but she has much to thank you for.

I'll write again soon with more updates. In the meantime, I hope you accomplish your goals and keep yourself safe.

Warm regards,

Efanie

Victor found his eyes brimming with unspent tears as he finished reading the letter. He wasn't sad or ashamed or anything like that; he was just happy. He was pleased that Cora seemed to be doing well despite what he'd done to her father. As that thought crossed his mind, Victor shook his head and tried to reorganize how he viewed that situation.

He hadn't done anything to Fak Loyle. Fak Loyle had chosen to be a champion for a scumbag. He'd chosen to step into the ring with the intent to kill Victor. Was it Victor's fault that he didn't let him win? Was his life less valuable than Fak's just because he had a daughter? Wasn't it important that he put an end to Volpuré's crimes? To do so required Fak Loyle's defeat. It didn't take much effort to transfer that same logic to his current situation.

Was it his fault that Trinnie Ro had chosen to be a champion? Her dossier had painted quite a picture of her life. After the tragedy of her family's destruction, she'd competed in back-alley bloodsports, some kind of game that sounded like a cross between rugby, wrestling, and gladiator brawls.

She outlived everyone on her team time and time again until one of the legitimate leagues picked her up. Then she'd risen to stardom competing in coliseums, rapidly gaining levels through victory after victory. It didn't take long for someone to recruit her away, taking her to train in proper fighting techniques. A decade later, she'd returned as a duelist, a champion in training, and five

years, a dozen levels, and twenty victories later, here she was, coming to put a stop to Victor and Queen Kynna.

“Not my fault,” Victor growled. He stood and summoned a pair of pants and a shirt. Once he’d dressed, he walked to his door and looked outside. As he’d suspected, Feist was on duty, idly flipping through a slender book as he kept an eye on Victor’s elevator. He didn’t notice Victor staring at him until he cleared his throat, and then the young man nearly jumped out of his skin, dropping the book and exposing a page featuring a surprisingly lifelike image of a woman’s naked chest.

“Oof! Er, sorry about that, Your Grace.” He stooped to pick up the book and sent it away to a storage container.

“Fetch Draji Haveshi for me.”

“Right away, milord? Or first thing in the morn—”

“Right now.”

“Yes, Your Grace.” He hurried into the elevator, and Victor closed the door. He paced around his foyer for several minutes, waiting, and when he heard the elevator opening outside, he yanked open the door and motioned for Draji to enter.

Draji was surprisingly well put together. He wore a suit, though his shirt was rumpled and his hair a bit disheveled. “Your Grace, is anything amiss?”

“Only my state of mind. Come in; I have a few things to discuss with you. I’d wait for morning, but I fight at dawn.”

“Of course, of course. How might I be of service?”

Victor closed the door behind him, then led the way into the parlor, where he resumed his seat before the fire. “Sit down, Draji.” He waited until the older man was sitting across from him and then spoke, putting voice to the thoughts that had been running through his mind. “I understand the conceptual reasoning for duels always being settled by the death of one champion or another. If a champion could yield to save their own life, how could any nation ever trust that their champion

would give their all? Knowing that the only options are death or victory assures the combatants hold nothing back.”

“That is so, my lord.”

“So, here’s my problem: I made the mistake of learning about my next opponent, and I find myself deeply sympathetic to her plight—the adversity she’s overcome and the tough road she battled down to get where she is today. I don’t want to kill her, Draj.”

“Ah. Yes, the queen sought advice about this duel while you were away. It took her by surprise when her inquiries revealed the change in Lovania’s champion. She wondered if any of her other champions would stand a chance against her. The consensus was no. Forgive me if this sounds patronizing, Your Grace, but Trinnie Ro is not a delicate flower that needs your protection.”

“Yeah, I get that.”

“If you had learned more about my brother’s life, do you think you would have sought a way to keep from killing him? If you’d known that he spent three years of his youth hobbling on one foot because he kicked a Trejice viper away from our sister, saving her life but costing him a limb, would that have swayed you? If you’d known that he sacrificed most of his earnings to build institutions of learning here in the duchy or that—”

Victor sighed. “I get it, Draj. Everyone has a backstory. It doesn’t change the fact that I don’t want to kill this woman.”

“Don’t think about killing her, then. Think about keeping her from killing you. I promise you, she’ll have no qualms. She wants you dead, and those who sent her want Queen Kynna and all of us other, lesser nobles, dead or gone. In my case, I can hope for banishment, but I believe the queen’s life will be forfeit—the queen, her son, and likely all of her first cousins and their families.

“I hope you read more about Trinnie Ro in that dossier than the historical fluff about her tragic upbringing. Did you read that she can harden her skin to the point that iron will shatter against it? Did you read that she can instantly teleport to any location she can see? She wields a ghost-cobalt glaive that can sheer through solid steel. She’s going to try to cut you to pieces, and she’ll have no mercy in her heart for you, My Lord Duke.

“Trinnie Ro is a killing machine. Before she was a duelist, she played in the Crimson League, and she killed more men and women than anyone else on record—in a sport that allows for mercy, mind

you. She didn't have to kill those people! Put aside the fantasy you've created in your mind. She must be taken seriously, and you mustn't hold anything back."

Draj didn't stop there; he continued to list the ways Trinnie Ro could kill him, and then he spoke at length about her gruesome exploits in the Crimson League. Victor wasn't sure what that even was, but he didn't care. He felt a knot loosening in his chest, and he began to breathe more easily with each barbaric exploit. It was almost like every horrifying fact about Trinnie Ro that Draj listed served to soothe Victor further, and by the time the man paused to gauge the effects of his diatribe, Victor wore a broad smile.

"Holy shit, Draj. You were the right guy to bring here tonight. Thanks for helping me see things straight. You're right; I built up a fantasy in my mind, and I think a lot of it had to do with me imagining this woman as a little girl, and, well, I've got a soft spot for little girls. I have to remember she's not that girl who lost her family so tragically anymore. She's a killer, and I need to treat her that way. Thanks, man."

"It's my pleasure, Your Grace. I am here to serve; I know a great deal about the key players in the empire. I'd be more than happy to advise you in a similar capacity anytime you need it. Was there anything else I can help you with tonight?"

"Yeah, actually. You know Bryn?"

"Your guard?"

"She's more than a guard. She's like an assistant and confidant. I want to award her some land and a title."

"Ah! Do you mean to elevate her, then?"

"Elevate?"

"To the noble class, milord. If so, you should speak to the queen. I do not doubt that she'd support your wish."

"Okay, well, you know the duchy better than anyone. Find me a good holding to offer Bryn: a hunting ground, an orchard—something like that. I'll talk to the queen about her title. Good?"

Draj nodded, smiling. “Yes, of course.”

Victor stood and held out his hand. Draj hurried to his feet and grasped it. “I’m sorry I woke you up in the middle of the night, Draj, but I think it was worth it for everyone involved. You’ve helped me clear my head, which means everything before a fight.”

“I’m happy to be of service, milord.”

“All right. Get out of here. Go get some sleep.” Victor clapped him on the shoulder and ushered him to the door. When he closed it behind him, he turned to his bedroom and shook his head. He wouldn’t be able to sleep, not when he had to wake up in four hours to fight. Instead, he went back to his parlor and summoned his Farscribe book. He’d write back to Edeya and Efanie, and then he’d go through his other books. He was due for a check-in with Dar and might have messages from Lesh or Gorro ap’Dommic. Hell, he might have a message from Rellia, though he’d been avoiding that book since Valla and he had split.

So, with a busy mind, he whiled away the hours corresponding with the many people in his life, near and distant. When his thoughts drifted toward Trinnie Ro and their upcoming fight, he forced himself to picture her as Draj had painted her—a merciless killer who meant to end Victor and destroy Gloria. The more he built up that blood-soaked image, the more he smiled and relaxed, and the more his correspondence took on a light-hearted tone.