

## Victor BK9: Ch45

Book 9: Chapter 45: All Out

When Victor stepped onto the black sands of the arena, his chest swelled with the cheering roar of the crowd. He wasn't the first to arrive. Trinnie Ro stood on the red sands, watching him with narrowed eyes, but Victor avoided looking her way. Instead, he lifted his fists and walked in a slow circle, staring up into the stands, trying to lock eyes with as many spectators as possible. He thrived on the crowd's attention; it fed his very soul and lifted his mood despite the many conflicted emotions going through his mind.

He didn't wear his armor—neither his new nor his old. He wasn't quite ready to wear the enormously heavy stuff he'd pulled from the dungeon, and if everything he'd read were true, his Sojourn set would be like paper before Trinnie Ro's glaive. Even his wyrm-scale vest, crafted lovingly by a genuine dragon, wouldn't stop that blade. No, it was better that he rely on his speed and his sturdy body to avoid being chopped to bits. Besides, wouldn't it provide a better show if he stood against the steel seeker champion wearing nothing but some comfortable, loose linen pants?

The sand felt good on his bare feet, and the cool morning air tickled his naked shoulders. Holding his fists above his head forced his back and shoulder muscles to expand, exposing the incredible V shape of his torso, his enormous strength evident in the way the minor muscles flexed and contracted with the movement of his arms as he pumped one fist and then another into the air.

Victor knew Grand Judicator Lohanse would take his time to appear; he always did, so he paced back and forth, whipping up the crowd's enthusiasm, at least on his half of the arena, while he basked in the glory of it all. He made a show of not looking at Trinnie Ro. He'd missed the terms negotiation meeting, so the truth was that he was very eager to take her measure, but he didn't want her to know that. He'd caught a glimpse, which was enough—tall, wiry, wearing close-fitting leather clothes trimmed in white fur, leaning on the haft of her enormous, gold-bladed glaive. She reminded him of a cat, and that wasn't something anyone wanted to see in a fighting opponent.

He was saved from the temptation to look at her again when Grand Judicator Lohanse appeared on his flying disc and boomed his usual greeting to the crowd, "Citizens! I am Grand Judicator Lohanse, and I am here to ensure all rules of law are abided by, that the agreed-upon terms are upheld, and that no outside interference mars the sanctity of this most venerated ritual of succession. Do any dare challenge my authority in this place?"

As always, a hush fell over the arena, and Victor stopped pumping his fists and lowered his arms, not wanting to irritate the man. He moved to stand near the edge of the black section of sand, looking up to his left where Kynna and her retinue sat. She met his gaze, her blazing eyes hooded

beneath worried brows. Lohanse flew around the space above the sands, his gauzy, elaborate robes flowing as he went through his usual spiel, “I have read the terms of this duel of succession. Queen Kynna of Gloria, do you agree to abide by them?”

Kynna’s voice rang out in an immediate response, “I do!”

“Queen Fabaj of Lovania?”

“I will abide by the terms, Grand Judicator.” Victor looked toward the source of the sing-song voice and saw a willowy, ebon-skinned woman with bright, luminescent blue eyes. She stood near the edge of her platform, her diamond-studded crown glittering like a halo of stars trailing wispy white flames that faded into mist behind her shoulders. Those ghostly flames reminded Victor of the spirit flames that consumed his offerings to his ancestors. He wanted to stare at the woman, he was so stricken by her beauty, but he forced his attention back to Lohanse as the judicator spoke again.

“Champions! You will not be permitted to access storage devices or use potions, tinctures, salves, or other consumable aids during this duel. Are you each equipped to your satisfaction?” Victor swore the words were exactly the same every time, even the man’s mannerisms as he swooped down to hover in the air before Trinnie Ro. “Champion of Lovania?”

“I am equipped to my satisfaction,” she replied, her voice clear and strong, each word enunciated perfectly. Lohanse nodded and whipped his magical sled around, gliding toward Victor.

“Champion of Gloria?”

“If you’ll permit me a small indulgence, Grand Judicator, I have a weapon I’d like to make ready.” Victor spoke naturally, but his voice echoed around the arena, amplified by the Judicator’s magic.

The man’s neutral expression faltered for just a fraction of a second, the corners of his mouth flickering downward, but he nodded nonetheless. “Very well, Champion. You’re entitled to an indulgence or two before you put your life on the line.”

Victor smiled and then summoned Lifedrinker from her container. Before coming to the arena, Victor had cast Alter Self, reducing his height to ten feet, which was tall but not uncommon for the people of Ruhn. That said, the axe looked enormous in his hands, and he made a show of struggling to hold the blade up, allowing her axe-head to fall to the sand. He propped the handle up on his shoulder, smiling with chagrin. Lifedrinker was more than fourteen feet long from the tip of her upward-swooping blade to the butt of her haft. Her blade was a crescent that measured more than four feet from tip to tip.

Victor smiled at Lohanse and then, shrugging, dragged Lifedrinker toward the arena wall behind him. “I’ll just keep her back here, sir, in case I have need of her.” The axe plowed a deep trench in the sand as he pulled her behind him, grunting with each long step.

As he walked, he heard the crowd reacting to his antics, and Victor found it easy to affect a lopsided grin. Lohanse spoke, and he knew the words were for him alone, “I’m not sure what game you play now, young titan, but if you—”

“I won’t make a mockery of your duel, sir.”

“See that you do not.”

Victor smiled, and then Lifedrinker spoke into his mind. “Are you well, heart-slaughterer? Why do you drag me so?”

“I’m good, chica. Don’t worry. Just a little show,” Victor whispered, trusting that Lohanse wouldn’t amplify the words. When he reached the arena wall, he propped Lifedrinker’s haft against it, then turned back to the center where he saw Trinnie Ro watching him with a glower, still leaning against her enormous, bladed polearm.

When he stood empty-handed, directly across from the other warrior, he nodded to Grand Judicator Lohanse. “I’m ready.”

To his credit, Lohanse ignored Victor’s lack of a weapon and nodded. “Very well.” He swooped up into the sky on his see-through disc and banked in a long, slow loop around the arena before he stopped directly above and shouted, “Fight!”

Victor lifted his fists and stepped back, waiting to see what Trinnie Ro would do. He’d thought about using a different weapon during the battle, something to throw off future challengers, but reading Trinnie’s dossier had dissuaded him of that notion. He’d begun to suspect that she’d been chosen to “step down” into her current role in order to put a stop to him for a reason. That reason was her ability to harden her flesh to the point where few weapons could penetrate it. Everyone in the empire knew about Victor’s use of a spear and, in particular, the heavy, dense spear he’d given to Queen Kynna. They wouldn’t have chosen the woman before him now if they hadn’t thought her armored flesh could withstand that weapon.

Nothing in his storage rings was better at breaking through armor than the spear he'd given Kynna. If he went shopping for something else, he didn't know how successful he'd be, and, besides, he hadn't had much time for something like that. So, Victor had concluded that he needed to either beat her without a weapon or use Lifedrinker.

Of course, he wanted to save Lifedrinker, but he wasn't stupid enough to leave himself without the option of winning if it came down to him needing her. Hence his little performance, dragging her to the wall, struggling with her weight in his "reduced" state. If nothing else, he hoped it made Trinnie Ro wonder what he was up to, which would mean at least a small part of her mind would be distracted.

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He was currently channeling his Sovereign Will boost into agility and vitality. Again, he'd wanted to look weaker than usual, so he'd decided speed and resilience would be the order of the hour, at least at the start of the fight. It was a good thing, too, because Trinnie Ro moved like quicksilver, sliding over the sand, whipping her massive polearm around in a diagonal overhead cleave that left no evidence save for a flash of golden light as it split the air like a thunderclap. **RAOISE**

Victor couldn't see the strike to avoid it, but he could see Trinnie. He could see the shift in her center of gravity and the tilt of her shoulders, so he ducked and glided forward to his left, and the terrible blade carved the air a fraction of an inch above his right shoulder. Victor dropped and kicked out with his left leg, but Trinnie Ro danced back with a grunt, heaving her weapon around to slice in a flat arc. Victor narrowly rolled to the side, avoiding having his leg truncated at the knee by a hair's breadth.

Victor rolled onto his feet, but he could feel another cleave of that massive blade coming, so he launched himself up and forward with Titanic Leap, mostly escaping the cut, but not entirely—a razor-thin slice split the flesh down the center of his back, weeping blood for a heartbeat before his regeneration sealed the cut. The wound hurt

far more than it should have, and Victor realized her blade was likely poisoned, probably meant to weaken him or slow his healing. He'd certainly put his regeneration on display in the previous duels; it wouldn't be surprising if his enemies would be trying to counter it by now.

As he soared through the air, Victor wondered how strong that blade of hers was. Could it cleave through his titan bones? Part of him wanted to step into a blow, catch her polearm's shaft with one hand, and beat the hell out of her with the other, but not if doing so would cost him a limb or his life. He had a dozen strategies like that in mind, but for now, he wanted to keep testing, feeling out Trinnie Ro's capabilities, waiting for the right moment to—

Victor's world exploded in white light as thunder erupted through the arena, and a bolt of lightning like something thrown by Zeus himself exploded into him, knocking him out of the sky, sending him flopping and bouncing through the arena, his flesh smoking, his back blackened and scorched. The crowd let out a collective hiss of disbelief and sympathetic awe as another cacophonous crack of thunder rolled through the air, and a second blast of lightning hit Victor, drilling him into the arena as the sand beneath him turned to white-hot glass.

Trinnie Ro stood where Victor had left her, her golden Glaive held over her head, her long, silvery hair standing on its ends as static electricity coursed through her. She was channeling enough electricity to power a small city as lightning bolt after lightning bolt arced out of the sky, blasting Victor again and again.

Victor hated being struck by lightning. He hated it so much that when he'd read Trinnie Ro's primary affinity wasn't steel or whatever let her harden her flesh, but air, he'd almost decided to pull out all the stops and try to end the fight as rapidly as possible. He hadn't, though. He'd contented himself with the knowledge that while lightning hurt and tended to stun him, it couldn't kill him, especially when he was grounded, and the electricity would just course through him. In fact, after the third blast, he found himself able to grit his teeth through it, and by the tenth, he hardly noticed the new discomfort as his body worked to undo the damage.

Nevertheless, he laid still, letting Trinnie believe he was dead or stunned or wounded beyond recovery. When the world stopped thundering and the burning, jolting shocks stopped coming, he kept his eyes closed as his regeneration worked from the inside out, repairing his nerves, his tiny vessels, his organs, his eardrums, and eyeballs. With his senses destroyed by the onslaught, he opened his inner eye, turned his gaze away from his blazing Core, and saw Trinnie's aura approaching—a curtain of sharp, hungry power, eager to destroy and dominate.

Victor could feel her killing intent in that razored wave of electric death, and he watched the ripple of hate and bloodlust arc through it. He knew it would spike before she struck and wanted to wait until the last possible second. As the aura approached and the killing momentum rose to a crescendo, a wave about to break, Victor willed his body to heal, willed his nerves to reconnect and prepare for what he would demand.

Victor knew his ears were recovering. The blasted drums were reknitting, conveying the stunned babble of the crowd, the sizzling of the molten sand around him, and the distant echoes of thunder yet to fade into nothing. He opened his eyes at the last possible instant, pleased to see vivid colors and movement. He focused his gaze on Trinnie Ro and, from a prone position, cast Energy Charge, fueling it with a dark torrent of fear-attuned Energy.

Trinnie had her glaive held high over her head, ready to sweep down and cleave his body, but when Victor exploded off the ground in a streak of volatile purple-black shadows, she swung it down instinctively, hoping to split him in half even as he slammed into her. Victor was inside the arc of the cleave, though, and the haft of her weapon met him on the crown of his head, which the powerful Energy of his charge protected. He drove forward, slamming the glaive upward as he plowed into Trinnie, and dark, wailing, shadowy, fear-attuned Energy erupted from Victor's Core to protect him from the immense forces of the collision.

At first, he thought he had her. He thought he'd caught her with her guard down and that he'd shatter her bones before she could brace for the impact. He watched in slow motion, though, like he was caught in an instant that lasted an eternity as she absorbed the impact. As he slammed into the woman's slender figure, he watched her eyes widen, and then he watched her tan, vibrant flesh crystallize with tiny flecks of gleaming metal, molecule by molecule. When the spell broke, and that instant was over, Trinnie was tumbling head over heels toward the arena wall, and Victor stood cloaked in swirling black shadows.

To her credit, Trinnie didn't drop her glaive, and when she impacted the arena wall, the thunderous report was reminiscent of a cannonball hitting home. The reinforced magical materials of the arena didn't crumble, but they cracked. Trinnie's body jerked and crumpled with the impact, but when she slid to the sand, she was whole. As the crowd roared with surprise and excitement for Victor's sudden recovery, she braced herself with her glaive and, haltingly at first, but then more smoothly, pulled herself to her feet.

Victor frowned as she began to gather electrically charged Energy into herself again, her hair dancing wildly as she reached up to wipe away a single drop of blood from the corner of her mouth. "Damn," he grunted. "She's hard." Growling, finding it harder and harder to hold the rage in his Core, he began stalking toward her. He flexed his neck, clenched his fists, and took a deep breath, finally feeling normal after the last barrage of lightning bolts—he wasn't eager to go through it again.

Trinnie Ro lifted her golden glaive high, and Victor braced himself, expecting a massive bolt of electricity. When she screamed and thunder crashed, though, lightning didn't fall from the heavens. Instead, Trinnie Ro vanished, and then Victor felt her glaive bite into his shoulder. He screamed in agony as it cleaved through his thick, corded muscles, bit through his clavicle, and wedged to a halt in his sternum.

Victor tried to turn, but Trinnie Ro was stronger than she looked and used the length of her weapon as a lever, pushing him away, her glaive's hot, golden blade grinding into his bones as he fought to grasp onto it somehow, desperate to rip it out of his flesh. It was doing something to him. Where Lifedrinker drained the Energy of his foes, this glaive seemed to want to impart something to him—

not Energy, but something that burned and coated his bones and flesh, tainting them with its oily touch.

For the first time since coming to Ruhn, Victor felt a bit of panic, a little twinge of, “Oh, fuck, what if I miscalculated,” and he cut the flow of Energy to his Alter Self spell. The Energy the spell had siphoned away from his Core and away from every single cell in his body snapped back into place, and he surged with renewed strength and expanded to his full, natural, nearly fifteen feet in height. The explosive growth, coupled with Victor releasing his hold on his aura, brought a gasp from Trinnie Ro, and she found herself dangling from Victor’s back, hanging from her weapon, her weight acting as a counterbalance, inexorably drawing the blade out of Victor.

Victor reached over his shoulder and snatched the back of the glaive’s blade before she could pull it free. He whirled and glared down at her, him holding the caustic, golden metal of her weapon and her the haft. “Let go,” she hissed, and Victor saw her teeth were black and needle-sharp. Before he could reply, Trinnie’s hair danced on static winds, and her glaive exploded with electricity. He was thrown back, his size made irrelevant by the powerful discharge.

Victor landed flat on his back again, stunned but not out. He shook his head, realized his shoulder still ached, and glanced down to see the cut was still there, sickly black veins probing out of it into the meat of his pectoral. “Fuck,” he grunted, rolling to his knees in time to see Trinnie Ro go through a metamorphosis of her own.

At first, he thought she was going to blast him with lightning again; she stood with the glaive held high, her hair dancing on the wind again, the air palpably thick with ozone and electricity, but instead of calling down lightning, she seemed to be swelling with the Energy. With each of Victor’s beleaguered heartbeats, she grew, the lightning sparking brighter and brighter in her eyes as the force of a hundred lightning bolts built her up.

Her skin shimmered with the power of her invulnerability, brightening like electrified silver, and Victor began to realize something: this might be the wrong opponent to hold back on. In fact, he might have waited too damn long already. She’d done something to him, poisoned or corrupted him, and his right arm wasn’t working properly. “Fuck that,” he grunted, growling as he ground his fists into the sand, pushing himself up. “If it’s time to go all out, then it’s time to go all out.”