

Victor BK9: Ch46

Book 9: Chapter 46: Loyalty

Victor knew his plan to hold back all of his abilities, to hide the nature of his Core and beat Trinnie Ro without revealing what he could do, was a lost cause. He wasn't sure it was even much of a loss; it was clear that the powers that be, the ones who'd decided to send Trinnie Ro down to fight him, had guessed or learned plenty about his skills. It wasn't like Victor's battle in the palace at Gloria had been a secret. They'd tried to keep a lid on things, but people will gossip, and there had been a lot of servants whose whereabouts during the battle hadn't been accounted for.

That said, was he suffering for nothing? Shouldn't he have maybe gone all out from the first second of the battle and tried to end things quickly? Had it just been stubbornness that made him try to play his game? Now, he had a corrupted wound splitting his right shoulder and an opponent powering up, displaying that she wasn't a slouch when it came to steel seekers. Victor could feel the Energy flowing out of her, and it was on par with anything he'd seen from Ronkerz's Big Ones.

Hoping to seal up his wound and put an end to things, Victor cast Iron Berserk. He expanded with size and power, surging to more than twenty feet in height, exploding with hard, cable-like muscles, and grunting an almost involuntary warcry as his chest expanded. The rage coursing through his pathways felt good and right, and Victor could feel it fighting against the corruption in his chest, pushing it back, knitting his flesh together—if not perfectly, then enough to allow him to move normally.

Trinnie Ro was still expanding, still coursing with electrical Energy, crackling and sizzling as sparks and ozone-rich air pulsed around her. She held her golden glaive high, and it gleamed so brightly that Victor couldn't look at it directly. It made him want to pick up Lifedrinker, but some part of him still hoped he could finish this battle without showing all his cards. Instead, he stalked toward her. He was now a good five or six feet bigger than even her charged-up form, and while she was still screaming soundlessly, channeling her torrents of Energy, Victor wound up his right fist and smashed her in the chest.

Electricity coursed through him, but not before Trinnie Ro was flung back, stumbling, arms cartwheeling, her "power-up" rudely interrupted. As for Victor, he bared his teeth and let the lightning-charged Energy run through him, dispersing in the sand, melting it to glass at his feet. Trinnie, eyes wide, perhaps surprised by his size or the strength of the blow, readied her glaive and then, in an explosion of lightning, disappeared, only to crackle into existence behind Victor, her glaive hacking sideways at his exposed flank.

Victor punched down, his knuckles impacting the flat of the blade, sending it down to his thigh, where it sliced deep through his flesh and muscle and ground against his femur. He was his full, titanic size now; the bone was like a tree trunk but harder than steel. The glaive skittered over it, and, meanwhile, Victor backhanded Trinnie Ro across the bridge of her nose, sending her reeling. He stalked toward her, snaking out a hand to snatch the electrified haft of her glaive as she raised it.

Trinnie tried to pull it away, but Victor's strength was inexorable, and he jerked it to the side, exposing her midriff to more vicious punches and jabs as he drove her back toward the wall of the arena. Victor was beyond words or taunts—he growled and grimaced, punching and kicking, constantly gripping her weapon to keep her from retreating outside the range of his blows. Of course, she could release the polearm, but he knew that wasn't an option; she wouldn't drop her golden glaive any more than he'd drop Lifedrinker involuntarily.

Victor was lucid; his rage was a cool, calculated one, and he knew his blows weren't doing any damage. Each time his fist or foot impacted Trinnie, her skin hardened like diamond, and she grimaced, but that was all. He wondered how long she could keep it up. Was it effortless, that armored flesh, or did it take Energy? Was she depleting her Core, or would she easily outlast his rage?

Growling, Victor closed with her and caught her triceps in a grapple with his right hand while still wrestling with her over the glaive with his left. Then he focused on the arena wall some twenty yards behind her. Grinning with grim brutality, he cast Energy Charge. Dark shadows enveloped the two of them, and he exploded over the sands, driving her to impact the wall. The enchanted marble split, the world echoed with the thunderous crash, and Victor slammed his knee into Trinnie Ro's abdomen, screaming with frustration at his inability to harm her.

Trinnie Ro, for her part, grimaced and grunted, and then she erupted with electricity, sizzling with the charge of her Energy as she snapped out of existence, only to reappear behind Victor, hacking her glaive in a blinding X across his back, flaying him to the bone. "Just die," she hissed, her voice sizzling like the electricity that coursed through her veins. Victor bunched his legs and, using Titanic Leap, launched himself away from the shattered marble, vaulting over her as his flesh worked to knit itself back together.

His healing was slow and imperfect. Each cut took longer to knit, and Victor knew her glaive had done something to him. He could feel the oily corruption sliding along his bones, getting under his skin, twisting and breaking down the tiny vessels as his skin came back together. It was a horrifying sensation, and if they weren't already trying to kill each other, if he hadn't already tried shattering Trinnie's invulnerable flesh, he would have gone mad with the frustration of it all. As it was, he found a large part of him begging for release, begging for him to let go of his control and let his rage really take over.

As he closed with Trinnie, he ran through his other abilities in his mind, seeking a strategy to deal with her obstinate, unbreakable form and her deadly lightning-charged abilities. Seeking inspiration, he knew he was a fool for holding back that particular ability, so he cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. He supposed he hadn't used it thus far in the hopes of saving it or not revealing it. He also had to consider that he couldn't channel Iron Berserk, Inspiration of the Quinametzin, and a third powerful ability like Banner of the Champion.

Still, inspiration was what he needed, and as the glow of that golden-hued Energy entered his rage-filled vision, Victor began to calm down and think around his rage rather than with it. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the first conclusion he came to was that he had to change his tactics. Why was he trying to fight this woman with his bare hands? Was Lifedrinker such a secret? He'd already exposed her. Veil walkers and steel seekers were observing the battle, and they could learn much simply by studying Lifedrinker with their inner eyes, with their Energy sense.

Victor stopped in his tracks and watched Trinnie Ro approach. He needed to break with her long enough to pick up his weapon, so he watched her, waiting for the tell-tale surge of electrical Energy. He doubted she'd come at him directly. No, she'd teleport and hit his flank. Victor would, of course, try to avoid the blow, but he figured he might need to eat at least one more painful cut before he could get his hands on Lifedrinker—before he could feel her encouraging weight and power and start to turn things around.

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Queen Kynna Dar watched Victor and felt her world begin to crumble. Just as the black lines of corruption ate at his flesh, leaving his cuts half-healed and his moves lethargic, she could feel the impending gloom encroaching on her queendom.

She couldn't fault Victor, could she? He was giving his life, after all. Had he been a fool set on his own destruction? Was his weapon a bluff? Could he not wield the mighty axe? Hadn't he done so in her garden? The questions raced through her mind as she watched him slam Trinnie Ro against the arena wall again, recoiling as her wicked glaive sliced him.

Kynna felt sick about Victor's likely doom but also for the disloyal part she'd had to play—disloyal but not traitorous, she comforted herself. She'd done nothing to influence his performance, only hedged her bets, guarding the fate of her queendom in the event he'd overplayed his hand, which seemed more and more likely. Kynna glanced at the guardswoman whose promotion, requested by Victor himself, had come across her desk that very morning. Bryn. Her eyes were red beneath the visor of her helm, but she didn't weep. Not yet.

A commotion behind her and the stammered words, “Imperial Highness,” startled Kynna out of her melancholy reveries, and she stood, clutching her thick, formal gown as she turned and prepared to curtsy. Sure enough, Grand Prince Troyssas was entering her viewing box, her guards practically prostrating themselves in his presence as he stepped past them. Kynna curtsied low, tilting her crown and staring at the man’s glittering crystalline slippers as he approached.

“Kynna.” He chortled, no hint of formality in his tone. “Do relax. I’ve simply come to pay my respects; I doubt I’ll stay to see the end of this sad display.”

Kynna straightened, fighting her bristling pride and irrational desire to defend Victor to this man, perhaps the fourth most powerful on the planet. “It’s very kind of you to think of me, Your Imperial Highness.”

“Nonsense. You’ve done much to offer entertainment over the last months. What a wonderful surprise it was to see you come out from beneath the bootheels of old Groff and Vennar. Hah! I bet they rue the day they encircled Gloria, hmm?” He stepped past Kynna, his bulk like a small planetoid beside her, pulling against her like gravity. He peered down into the arena, watching for a moment as Victor, again, leaped away from Trinnie Ro, trailing buckets of dark, black blood. “What a strange champion. He certainly took you far, in any case. Far enough to negotiate a proper outcome to this contest, at least.”

“Yes, Your Imperial—”

“Highness will do, dear Kynna.”

“Yes, Highness.”

“So, what was the settlement? Iron Mountain and a hundred years of peace? Something you can live with, at least, yes? A bit of a pity you won’t have your vengeance; Bandia will escape Gloria’s wrath for the moment.” He winced and moved a massive, thick hand to his blush-covered cheek, suddenly holding a jade-inlaid fan to shield his eyes. “My, but he does bleed, does he not?”

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“He’s full of surprises, Highness. I wouldn’t count him out—”

“Come, enough fantasies. Take your medicine, love. He’s a brute—a barbarian with a berserker’s talents. His healing’s been dealt with, and, as you see, even his rather unique bloodline isn’t enough to overcome a proper steel seeker with talents and equipment to match.”

Kynna looked past Troyssas to the arena floor and saw Victor backing away from Trinnie, his hands out, somehow managing to avoid most of her hacks and cleaves without further injury. Troyssas wasn't wrong, though; the damage had been done. Victor's vibrant, tanned flesh was tracked with black veins, and his cuts hung partly open, spilling dark, stained blood to the sands. They were on the black side, so it wasn't obvious how much he was bleeding, but when Kynna squinted, she could see the damp, glittering nature of his blood on the sands.

She felt eyes on her and glanced to her left where Bryn stared, eyes wide, horror marring her expression. She must have realized what Troyssas meant about Iron Mountain. Kynna had negotiated very favorable terms, indeed. If Victor were to win, Lovania would be her subject state, but if he lost, Kynna simply had to give up her most valuable duchy—Iron Mountain—and swear a non-aggression pact. No one could blame her. The terms were too good to pass up; after all, she had her people, her family, to consider.

The terms were, in fact, too good, and Kynna knew why: the imperial family had made a point of pushing this duel forward. They'd created openings for other champions, clearing the path for Trinnie Ro's placement with Lovania. They wanted Victor killed and Kynna's ambitions along with him. Kynna met Bryn's gaze, daring her to speak, but the woman knew her place; she jerked her chin back to the arena, watching the man she'd come to admire fight to the last. How long would it be? How long could a man, even one as great as Victor, function with such injuries?

Something in Kynna made her want to argue with Troyssas. Perhaps she simply didn't want her guards—and Bryn—to hear her blithely accept Victor's fate. "Are you sure you must leave, Highness? Victor may yet surprise us."

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"Nonsense! He's suffered an unfortunate turn of fate, finding himself up against Trinnie Ro, but misfortune is what it is. She's quite thoroughly adept at countering his strengths. Her glaive poisons the berserker's blood, canceling his regeneration, and her durability is without peer; even his prodigious strength cannot harm her. What other little tricks does he have? He was mediocre with that spear, and, for some reason, he eschews his axe, not that it could harm Trinnie Ro's flesh. He's let things go too far, in any case. I doubt he could even pick that weapon up in his current condition. No, I think the most we can hope for is a mercifully quick death for the poor man. I'm sorry for your loss."

"...can do much more than that..." Bryn's whisper was muttered between clenched teeth, but Kynna heard her. If Troyssas heard her, though, he didn't react. Likely, he hadn't registered the

noise of vocal cords so far beneath him. He fluttered his fan and turned toward the steps leading down from Kynna's viewing platform.

"Thank you again for looking in on me, Highness."

The imperial prince turned and favored her with a thick, burgundy-lipped smile, fluttering his perfumed fan again, this time wafting some of the jasmine scents toward Kynna. "Again, I'm sorry you won't have your vengeance for Thorn's betrayal, but mind your opportunities, dear Kynna. Perhaps a place at the imperial court is in your future. If nothing else, this barbarian has reminded people of Gloria's past greatness."

Kynna curtsied low again and watched the enormous man's bulbous figure descend the steps. Shame turned her neck hot as she straightened and turned back to the arena. None of her guards, none of her attendants looked her way. It was like they could feel the guilt radiating off her. Why was she guilty, though? Should she have bet everything on Victor? Should she have refused terms that so blatantly favored her? Should she have tried to avoid the duel? Should she have given Victor time to prepare for such an opponent? Hadn't she asked him? Hadn't she told him how dangerous Trinnie Ro was?

She sat down, resting her elbows on her knees and staring at the glittering, sapphire-studded silken slippers on her feet. She was happy that, at least, she hadn't allowed Tomorran to attend the duel. Better that he hear of Victor's demise than to see it. The crowd had taken on that weird, shell-shocked nature that often occurred when a fight was one-sided. It was almost like they were reluctant to cheer for Trinnie Ro—like the torture she was doling out was shameful. Instead, they "oohed" and gasped, even moaned, with each new spray of black-tinged blood that her golden glaive wrung from Victor's flesh.

Kynna had grown so used to those resigned, wincing collective gasps that when the tempo changed, and an underlying current of excitement bubbled up through the enormous arena, Kynna glanced up, her eyes wide. "What is it?"

"He picked up his axe," Bryn said through clenched teeth, her hands white-knuckled where they gripped the balcony railing.

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"Blood-mate! You bleed, and your touch is cold and soft! What ails you? Guide my edge to the foes that beset you!"

Victor couldn't help the mad smile that split his blood-stained lips as he felt Lifedrinker's eagerness. He was hurting, no doubt about it, but he hadn't played all his cards yet. It was clear that Trinnie Ro thought he had. She was content to wear him down, bleed him out, and poison his body while she was at it. Victor had taken his sweet time getting to Lifedrinker. He'd danced a good long time with Trinnie Ro, trying to get her to reveal her cards. Was she done? Was this the extent of it?

She'd shown him her teleportation ability. She'd shown him her glaive's wicked, quick edge that could taint his very blood. She'd powered herself up with lightning-attuned Energy, making herself nearly titanic in size and fast and strong, to boot. Finally, she'd shown him how she could call lightning from the heavens to blast the ever-living shit out of him. Wasn't that enough? Did she have to have something more held in check? He'd tried to get it out of her if there was something. He'd let her carve the hell out of him, poisoning him down to the marrow in his bones. She hadn't done anything else, but maybe she didn't realize she needed to.

"Okay, chica. Don't worry yet. Just cut this bruja for me." With those words, Victor hefted his wonderful axe and strode toward Trinnie Ro, content to let his reflexes, instincts, and Lifedrinker run the show for a while. He'd been nursing his rage, letting it fill his pathways, but no more. He could feel the corruption in his bones and knew even his Quinametzin constitution was struggling with whatever taint his tormentor's glaive was leaving behind with each cut and gash. He wondered how long he would have lasted without his titan blood, without his titan's pride that wouldn't easily allow poison to take root.

Trinnie Ro's glaive flickered like a golden serpent's tongue, and Victor's forearms twitched, lifting Lifedrinker's prodigious blade into its path. For the first time, metal on metal rang through the arena, and blazing golden sparks flew as Lifedrinker carved a sliver of metal from the poisoned weapon's edge. Victor's grin turned savage, and he licked his bloody lips as Trinnie backpedaled, her eyes wide with concern for her precious weapon. "What's the matter?" he grunted, breaking his rule about shit-talking.

"If you think an axe will save you, fool, you should step outside yourself to see your ruined flesh. You're dead; you just don't know it yet."

Victor hawked a loogie, spitting a thick, black wad of bloody phlegm onto the sand. "What, this? I'm Quinametzin, pendeja; your poison isn't going to end me." With that, Victor darted forward and began to weave Lifedrinker in a dizzying array of feints, hacks, thrusts, and cleaves, driving Trinnie back as she had to work extra hard to keep the edge of her glaive from meeting Lifedrinker's hungry blade. Their metal rang and howled as they clashed, and the spectators' reactions took on a new life as it became more and more apparent that Victor wasn't out of the fight.

Cheers resounded with each clash of the mighty weapons, and when Trinnie tried to teleport to Victor's flank, attempting to catch him off guard, the crowd went wild when Lifedrinker was there, ready for that golden blade. With Victor's guiding hands, she rebuffed the attack, and the glaive rebounded, a new notch at the top of its sword-like edge. Trinnie scowled and redoubled her efforts, and their battle went on.

The fight was far from one-sided, but there was some truth to the idea that Victor had waited too long. He was weakened and slowed by the toxins coursing through his body. Even as his Quinametzin constitution worked to eject the poison, it seemed to multiply on itself, thickening in his blood and spreading through his marrow—the source of that infection being his split clavicle. He had an idea for how to purge himself of the poison and turn the tables, but Victor was reluctant. He wanted to see how far he could go as he was. He wanted to see what Trinnie Ro was made of. Could their dance bring out the Paragon of the Axe?

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Grand Prince Troyssas of Khaliday held up his thick hand, and Ambassador Voolian clamped his mouth shut. Troyssas turned to Brinnit, the captain of his personal guard, and barked, "What's happening in there?" Clangs rang out, and the crowd was energized. He could feel it from there.

"I'll check, Highness." Brinnit took the stairs up to the imperial box three at a time, and Troyssas contemplated returning to his seat to view the rest of the match. Surely, it was nearly over, but why the sudden change in tone? It had been a massacre; the foreign berserker had been on his last legs when he'd gone to taunt Kynna. Gods! That little wretch, Trinnie Ro, had better not be squandering the opportunity he and his sister had fed her.

"Is something the matter, Your Imperial Highness? If there's aught that I can do to improve your experience, you have but to ask. Perhaps you'd enjoy viewing the rest of the battle from the comfort of my airship? I noticed you came through the teleporter, and I'm sure I have more comfortable accommodations than those in the viewing boxes." Voolian mewled, his worthless, obsequious flattery falling on deaf ears. Troyssas was focused on the stairs, watching for Brinnit's return.

She reappeared almost immediately, descending to the breezeway in a single light-footed bound. "The barbarian has picked up his axe and seems rather skilled in its use."

"He still bleeds?"

"He does, Highness."

“And Trinnie?”

“Unscathed, Highness.”

“Enough, then. Escort me to the portal chamber.”

“As you say, Highness.” Brinnit snapped her fingers, and Troyssas’s guards melded out of the stonework around him, forming a protective wedge and marching along with his enormous, rolling steps as he left Voolian babbling about how pleased he’d been to chat with him again. In all honesty, Troyssas couldn’t recall a single word of their conversation; it had been as meaningless as breathing or taking a piss.

He glanced at Savinicus, his Master of Revels. “See that my baths are well staffed. I’ll be going in for the night.”

“Of course, Highness, any particular flavor?”

“I require soft comforts tonight, Sav. Ensure one of my singers is there.” Troyssas shuddered, appalled by the sliver of stress that had wormed its way into his mind. How dare that barbarian last as long as he had? Some folks just didn’t have the decency to die when the time was upon them. He caught Brinnit eyeing him, her expression hard, as usual, though she usually had the good sense to drop her gaze when he caught her looking. “What?” he barked.

“Will all be well if he doesn’t die?”

“God’s damn it! Why would you ask that?” Troyssas threw out a thick, meaty fist, blasting one of his guards into the wall with the crunch of shattered bones. Two of his retinue slowed to help the poor fool recover, but Brinnit didn’t flinch.

“I ask because I saw the glimmer of a paragon on his blade. If the poison doesn’t do him in, he may well cut Trinnie Ro, regardless of her diamond-hard flesh.”

“Damn you for saying so!” Troyssas pouted. He stopped in his tracks and folded his enormous arms over his bulging chest, contemplating things. If Kynna Dar’s champion managed to win, she’d be one step closer to challenging Bandia. If she won that contest, then she’d own a coastal kingdom,

which would open the way to challenges on the eastern continent. She could be a dozen well-planned challenges away from threatening one of his borders.

She claimed she was aiming to conquer Bandia because of Thorn's betrayal. If that were the case, her little conquest would end there. If not...if not, then the great houses had champions that would make Trinnie Ro seem a child. No, things weren't lost, even if that barbarian managed to win the day, however unlikely that might be. "Brinnit, you will stay and observe the rest of the fight. Carpecus," he turned to his chief advisor, "I'll need you to make a report to my sister. We may have much to discuss."

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Victor's rictus smile grew wider and wider as he began to drive Trinnie Ro back. His axe hummed through the air, an instrument of death that weighed thousands of pounds and moved like the flicker of a murderous thought. Trinnie's glaive was a nuisance, a feather-light obstacle that he could bat aside, cut through, or dismiss as the ghostly edge of his paragon began to appear, slipping past Trinnie Ro's guard and slicing through her impossibly hard flesh. Panic entered her mean-eyed glare, and instead of asking him why he wouldn't simply die, she began to pant for breath, baring her sharp, black teeth in ever-increasing stress.

Victor was past the point of sympathy. He never hesitated to follow up his attacks, watering the sands with Trinnie's bright red blood. As more and more shreds of golden metal flew through the air and the cuts on Trinnie's flesh mounted, Victor found himself feeling better.

Slowly but surely, his body was pushing the poison out, even without him burning it from his veins with an infusion of magma. His Spirit Core was flaring brightly; he'd only used about half his Energy to maintain his Iron Berserk and his Inspiration of the Quinametzin. He'd saved most of his trump cards: his Volcanic Fury, his Glacial Wrath, his Aspect of Terror, even his Banner and Wild Totem.

He'd gone through hell for nearly thirty minutes, but had it been worth it? Would saving all those tricks up his sleeve and not exposing his Breath Core pay off down the road? Anyone who fought him now would know that Lifedrinker was a force to be reckoned with. They'd know he was a master of the axe. They'd know that while poison might weaken him, it would take a hell of a corruption to kill him. Was it time to stop caring? Was it time to just put his cards on the table and straight up beat the hell out of all comers?

Trinnie Ro was tough, but was she the toughest? They'd brought her down to put an end to him, but had they held stronger champions in reserve? Victor knew damn well the great houses wouldn't

leave themselves defenseless. If they gave Trinnie Ro to a lesser house, you better believe they thought their own champions could end her. All those thoughts ran through his mind as his frustration fed the fury of his lethal combinations, and he pushed Trinnie Ro into a fatal error.

When she charged herself with lightning, and Victor knew her teleportation was imminent, he watched the corners of her eyes where she'd tell him where to strike. Sure enough, just for a fraction of a second, the whites tilted to the right, and Victor whirled, hacking Lifedrinker in a broad, screaming cleave, the Paragon of the Axe extending her edge by six feet. Trinnie Ro flashed with lightning and reappeared in Lifedrinker's path, and Victor cleaved her in half, splitting her just above the hips in a shower of crimson droplets.

As half of Trinnie Ro fell to his left and the other toppled to the right, Victor lifted Lifedrinker high and roared into the crowd's answering cheers. He was just starting to feel normal again, and he knew his roar was amplified by his Voice of the Angry Mountain. He could feel it shaking the ground around him. He could see the arena walls where he and Trinnie had cracked the marble, showering dust and debris down onto the sands. His voice echoed and reverberated back to him, and, to Victor's rage-addled mind, it made him imagine other titans were answering his cry. He screamed all the louder, and the people in the stands went wild with his enthusiasm.

When he turned to look at Kynna, he saw her standing, her face stunned, her eyes wide. He'd done it, and she couldn't believe it. He laughed at the expression and shook Lifedrinker in victory, and the axe screamed with him, her bloodlust unquenched. "Let us kill all these fools, blood-heart! Let us dance on their bones!"

Victor laughed and shook her harder in response, so proud of his wonderful axe, so amazed by her ability to outclass that golden glaive. His heart was swollen with his pride for her, and as he screamed his victory cry, tears filled his eyes, and he choked out a softer declaration, just for her, "I love you, chica! Thank you for saving me so many times."