

## Victor BK9: Ch47

### Book 9: Chapter 47: What the Heart Wants

When Victor recovered from his influx of Energy, it took him several seconds to remember where he was. His knees were resting on hot, black sand, and Lifedrinker sat before him, her blade baleful in the mid-morning sunlight. Recognizing the stupor of being drunk on Energy, he wasn't surprised to see a System message waiting for him:

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 82 Warlord and gained 24 intelligence and 17 vitality.\*\*\*

"Champion," a familiar voice said from behind him, "Will you claim a prize from your fallen foe?" It was Lohanse, and as Victor recognized his voice, everything fell into place, and he remembered where he was. He squinted up at the stands, unsurprised to see less than half the seats occupied. How long had he been senseless? With a grunt, he stood, gripping Lifedrinker's haft like a lever to haul himself up.

He looked at Lohanse, resplendent in his fine ceremonial robes. "You know what I'll claim."

Suddenly, the air felt thick, and the murmurs and noise of the stadium faded, sounding like they were coming to him through a thick veil of water. Lohanse spoke, and his voice's pitch made it clear that only Victor would hear his words, "I would beg a favor, Victor. I knew Trinnie Ro's father well. Will you leave her body whole, that she might travel untroubled through the veil?"

Victor frowned. "The champion?"

"Yes, he was. A very good man."

Victor nodded to Trinnie Ro's broken body, lying in two halves, her flesh unnaturally pale. "You think it makes a difference?"

"I know not what ritual you perform with the hearts of your foes. However, watching you pull those grisly trophies, I've witnessed shreds of spirit clinging to the organs. Do you deny it?"

Victor shook his head. "I don't."

“So? Will you honor my request?”

Victor’s lust for blood and death was thoroughly satiated, and the idea that Lohanse, a man of immense power, was asking him for a favor meant something significant to him. He clenched his jaw and nodded. “I will.”

“Will you claim a different trophy, then?”

Victor let his eyes drift over Trinnie’s ruined body again. He stared at the golden glaive lying not far away. Should he take the weapon that had tormented him so? Would he ever use it? He frowned, considering an idea that danced through his mind, and then nodded. “I’ll take that wicked polearm of hers.”

As Lohanse moved to pick up the weapon for him, Victor touched Lifedrinker’s haft. “I’ll speak to you soon, chica. I have gifts for you.”

“I will wait for you, battle-heart.”

Victor smiled grimly, sending her away to her storage ring. When Lohanse stepped toward him, Trinnie’s beautiful glaive in his hands, Victor studied the long, sword-like blade—it was already whole, having mended itself of the damage Lifedrinker had dealt it. “Does it live?” he asked.

Lohanse nodded. “I believe so, though it doesn’t speak to me.”

“Then I’ll put it with Lifedrinker; it won’t suffer in that storage device.”

Lohanse nodded, offering Victor the haft of the polearm. “Your axe is something remarkable, young man.”

“She is,” Victor agreed, touching the golden glaive’s haft, wincing slightly at the cold, electric tingle that ran through his fingers. He sent it to storage, wondering if the two weapons would be aware of each other in there. He looked up and saw most of the remaining spectators streaming out of the arena. Kynna’s platform was empty. “Looks like it’s time to go.”

“Aye, lad. The people who waited around for you to regain consciousness hoped to witness another brutal heart-taking.”

“Ah.” Victor nodded, then turned toward the tunnel leading back to his ready room. He took one step before he felt a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“I promised you a debt, and I’m a man of my word. I’ll offer you a word of caution for free, however. Will you hear it?”

Victor turned to regard the veil walker, arching a heavy black eyebrow. “I will.”

“Know this, then: the great houses have taken note of you. Trinnie Ro wasn’t here by some obscene coincidence. There will be schemes within schemes to keep Gloria from rising to power again. If Queen Kynna intends to do more than conquer Bandia in retaliation for Thorn’s betrayal, then you should expect danger around every corner, behind every curtain, and, certainly, at every duel. It might be time to stop playing games.”

Victor absently rubbed his right shoulder where Trinnie’s golden glaive had sliced through his flesh and bone. He contemplated the man’s words for a moment, more in a show of respect and to let Lohanse know he was taking his words seriously than because he felt he needed the warning. After a moment, he looked at the veil walker in his depthless, power-filled eyes. “I came to that conclusion during the battle, Grand Judicator. I appreciate the warning, nonetheless.” RÁNΘΞÈ\$

Lohanse nodded, then released his grip on Victor’s shoulder. “Until your next battle, then.”

Victor turned and stalked down the corridor into his waiting room. When he arrived, he was a little surprised to find only Bryn waiting. He’d thought Kynna would be eager to congratulate him, though he had to admit, she’d looked a little distraught at the end of the fight. Had the battle taken a lot out of her? Had she thought Victor would lose? He’d be lying if he hadn’t had some doubts during the fight. How would the witnesses have felt? “Hello, Bryn.”

“Your Grace! Congratulations!” She still wore her helmet, but Victor could see her eyes were bright with good cheer. “I knew you had more fight in you!”

Victor chuckled. “Ah, so there was some speculation about my demise?”

“The atmosphere in the queen’s box was grim for a while there, milord. The queen has returned to Iron Mountain to arrange the festivities.”

Victor frowned. “Shouldn’t they already be arranged?”

“Indeed, milord. I believe it was an excuse to leave and gather her...wits.”

“Was she stunned by my performance?” As he approached Bryn, Victor realized he was towering over her, so he cast Alter Self, bringing himself down closer to ten feet so he’d be comfortable in doorways and on the furniture back at the palace.

“I believe she suffered a wide range of emotional responses to your performance.” Bryn moved to the door, pulling it open for him. “I’ll gladly give you more details back at your palace, Your Grace, but...” She gestured to the glowing crystals near the clock on the wall. Victor got her meaning; this wasn’t the place to speak openly. He nodded and followed her through the door into the tunnel, where he found half a dozen more of the queen’s guards waiting to escort him to the portal.

Back at the palace, Victor made his way directly to his quarters. He wanted to meet with Kynna, and he wanted to get an update from Trobban, but more than anything, he wanted to have a long hot soak in his bath. He was tired—not so much physically as mentally. He’d worn himself out worrying about fighting Trinnie Ro, and now that it was over, he felt like he’d shed a mountain of stress, and all he wanted to do was soak and forget about the whole damn thing. When he stepped out of the elevator and Bryn exited behind him, he turned to regard her. “You should take the rest of the day off.”

“I...” She looked like she wanted to say more but stopped to breathe or think, and then she just nodded briefly. “Thank you, Victor.”

“Oh,” Victor held up a hand, “one thing before you go.” He reached into his storage ring and summoned out Trinnie’s golden glaive. “I got this for you.”

Bryn gasped and took a step back, shaking her head vehemently. “I cannot!”

“The hell you can’t. I want you to have it. I don’t know if the queen or Draj Haveshi has spoken to you yet, but I’m also going to, um, elevate you. I’m going to award you some land and a title.”

“Victor!” Again, Bryn shook her head, waving both her hands in negation. “I’ve done nothing to earn—”

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“Bullshit, you haven’t!” Victor thrust the glaive toward her, noting how it seemed to caress his flesh with tiny electric tingles. “Bryn, you’ve been by my side on Ruhn since day one. You put your life on the line more than once, and I intend to hold you to that standard for the rest of my visit here, and that could be years. I demand a lot from the people who work for me, and in return, I like to think I offer appropriate rewards.

“Now, this glaive represents something important to me—Trinnie Ro was a hell of a fighter, and I learned a lot while fighting against this weapon. I want it to go to someone who will respect and use it, not stick it on a shelf or hide it away in a storage ring. It’s a conscious weapon, Bryn. Don’t insult...” Victor paused and considered the feelings he was getting from the glaive through his hands. He grinned and nodded. “Don’t insult her by refusing.”

“Her...” Bryn’s voice was full of wonder as she stretched out trembling hands to grasp the glaive’s haft below Victor’s. When she felt the weapon’s electric touch and accepted the weight of it, her eyes flew wide and Victor could see the smile on her face through the grill of her visor.

“There. Now, I don’t know exactly where your land will be, but you’ll need to hire an estate manager, anyway, ‘cause I’m not letting you go. Not yet.”

Bryn reached up and touched her helmet, sending it away to storage, and Victor saw her big brown eyes were streaming with tears. She blinked them several times, then fell to a knee, pressing her forehead to the glaive’s haft. “I swear, Victor, Your Grace, I swear I will serve you faithfully with this weapon.”

Victor stepped forward and rested a hand on her shoulder, looking into her eyes. “I know you will, Bryn. Now stand up and go enjoy the rest of your day.”

“Your Grace, there’s something I should tell you.”

Victor arched an eyebrow. “Yeah?”

“Yes.” Bryn stood, then glanced around the little antechamber between the elevator and Victor’s quarters. “Can we step inside?”

Victor's curiosity was piqued, and he nodded, pulling open his suite door and stepping inside. The rooms were dim; the curtains on the balcony were drawn closed. He didn't go and open them; instead, he pulled the door shut and stood with his back to it, regarding Bryn. "What is it?"

"While you were battling, a visitor came to the queen's box, one of the Grand Princes—Troyssas."

"That's..." Victor thought about the name, trying to remember where he'd heard it. "That's one of the emperor's sons?"

"Yes, milord."

"And?"

"He spoke to the queen, and, well, their conversation made it sound like she'd arranged favorable dueling terms, perhaps at the expense of your preparation."

Victor sighed and reached up to scratch his nails through the stiff stubble along his jaw. "Elaborate."

"She arranged terms that permitted Gloria to continue with her as the queen. Her only loss, should Trinnie Ro have won the duel, would have been this duchy."

Victor sniffed and nodded. "So when she learned about Trinnie Ro, instead of backing off the duel or delaying it, she accepted some favorable terms to make it happen immediately. That's the gist of it?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Bryn looked down, something like shame in her eyes.

Victor forced a smile, then reached out and rested a hand on her shoulder. "Thanks for coming to me with this, but don't mention it again, okay? If you're worried about the queen's loyalty, then don't be. She's loyal, but first and foremost, she's loyal to her family. After that, she's loyal to her nation. There are probably a few more things in between that and me. I'm aware of that, and I'll keep my eyes open, okay? Don't get yourself in trouble sticking your neck out."

Bryn nodded, sniffing and wiping at her nose. "Did I overstep? Was it wrong to doubt the queen's  
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“The only thing I’m worried about is someone misunderstanding your loyalty, Bryn. I’m counting on you to keep your eyes open, but caution is always paramount. Understand? I can protect you from much, but not everything.”

“Understood, Your Grace.” She straightened the glaive, haft resting on the floor by her boots, and brought her other fist to her chest in a smart salute. “Thank you...Victor.”

Victor smiled and turned to open the door for her. “My pleasure. Enjoy the rest of your day.” He watched her leave, then shut the door and went to his balcony, pulling the curtains wide. He inhaled deeply, sighing with pleasure as he took in the view of Iron Mountain. His place on Fanwath was lovely, and he enjoyed the view of the Silver Sea it provided, but this was on another level. Iron Mountain was otherworldly in its majesty and evoked something in his chest that the sea couldn’t match.

He turned and went into his bathroom, which also featured a wall of glass that provided a view of the mountain. He ran hot water into the enormous tiled tub, then undressed and sank into the hot water. He felt good. He felt good about Bryn and was only moderately disappointed to learn that Kynna hadn’t prioritized his safety. Could he really blame her? She was given a chance to have her cake and eat it, too. If Victor won, her conquest continued. If he lost, she was mostly left intact with a kingdom facing hundreds of years of peace.

Even so, it stung a little when he remembered her words before the fight—how she’d said it felt like he could share her burdens. It had seemed like they’d made a connection in that moment. Had he imagined it? Maybe it was real, but to a woman who was closing in on a hundred years old and who had a million responsibilities, maybe that connection hadn’t been as meaningful. “And that’s life,” he sighed, slipping deeper into the hot, soapy water.

He wondered how long it would take to arrange the fight with Bandia. He doubted they’d be eager to do battle, having seen Victor beat Trinnie Ro—a steel seeker. He figured Kynna would need to apply some pressure and maybe some subterfuge. It might take months to set up the duel in that case. In a way, Victor hoped it wouldn’t take that long; he was eager to get things moving and finish up with his battles on Ruhn. He had people he wanted to see and...obligations he wanted to complete.

Khul Bach was waiting to be reunited with his kin, and Victor owed the Warlord of Coloss a visit. Even more than that, Victor wanted to make good on his implied promises to Nia, Agnes, and the other surviving thralls from Dark Ember; the people living under the horrific rule of the undead “great lords” deserved a chance at freedom. By comparison, this burgeoning war of succession felt

almost petty. Still, Victor owed Ranish Dar, and the master Spirit Caster wanted his granddaughter to rule the empire, so it was a task he had to face.

“I wonder,” he mused aloud, “if I should eat that Lava King heart.” His mouth filled with saliva at the prospect, and a grin spread his lips as he dunked his head to rinse soap from his short, stiff hair. Why shouldn’t he? It was as good a time as any. He had the “distillate” to drink, too. “And Lifedrinker has some metal to consume!”

Anticipation making him hasty, he leaped from the tub, thankful for his absurd, cat-like reflexes as he caught himself sliding on the wet, soapy tiles. He dried off and pulled on his pants, then, gripping his vault key necklace, he left the bathroom, only to stop in his tracks when he saw Kynna sitting, perfectly at ease, on the sofa that looked out on his balcony. Victor dropped the vault, letting it bounce against his sternum as he fumbled through his storage rings for a clean shirt. “Your Majesty,” he sputtered, settling for a black cotton shirt with silver buttons.

“Victor, I’m sorry I let myself in.” She gestured to the open balcony doors, and he wondered if she meant that was how she came in. Could she fly? He supposed it only made sense; she was a high-level iron ranker with the resources of a queen—she probably had a dozen ways to fly.

“Uh, no problem.” He stood back, buttoning his shirt, and she remained seated, her face focused on the view outside the window. Victor realized she didn’t wear her crown. Was that the first time he’d seen her without it? He was pretty sure it was. “I figured you’d summon me to speak with you.”

“I would have, but I couldn’t wait. I’m overwhelmed by strange emotions. Will you sit?”

Victor stepped forward, walked around the couch, and sat beside her, leaving a cushion between them. “Everything all right?”

“Yes, I believe so. Do you feel that everything is well?”

Victor nodded, stretching out his legs and propping his feet on a cushioned ottoman. “I didn’t enjoy fighting Trinnie Ro—I prefer my opponents to be less...heroic—but it’s over, and I’m ready to move on.”

“Are you? Do you not harbor any doubts about the nature of her appearance? Do you not feel that I should have, perhaps, objected to the change in champions? I could have delayed the duel. I could have—”



“You asked me if I could beat her. I told you yes. There’s nothing more to talk about.”

Kynna looked at him, her eyes locking on his. They burned white, as always, but seemed softer—like incandescent bulbs in fog. “Do you mean that? Would it matter if I told you that I was offered very favorable terms, enticing me to push the duel forward?”

“Do you feel guilty about it? If so, Your Majesty, that’s between you and your conscience. I came to fight for you, and that means against any champions that stand in your way. I’ve accepted that. If you haven’t, perhaps you should reevaluate your commitment to this campaign. I mean to conquer Ruhn for you. I can’t go hiding from this or that champion and expect it to happen anyway. So, yeah, if you’re wondering if we’re good, we are. You do the politics bullshit, and I’ll do the fighting.”

“You...” Kynna licked her lips and shook her head slightly. “People thought you were losing. I have it on good authority that Grand Prince Troyssas boasted of champions that could make Trinnie Ro seem a mere gifted child. The great houses haven’t been involved in duels, not in recent memory, so I don’t know how braggadocious he’s being, but, Victor, you seemed to struggle with Trinnie Ro!”

Victor thought about being honest with her. He thought about setting aside bravado, but when he heard about the “grand prince” talking shit, his Quinametzin pride bristled, and he chuckled, waving a hand dismissively. “Just because I put on a good show doesn’t mean there was any real danger. I’m ready to face whatever steel seekers they throw at me. Now, Your Majesty, I have a, um, natural treasure to consume and may be out of it for a few days. Is now an appropriate time to do something like that?”

“Now?” She reached a hand across the cushion between them, lightly brushing his knee with her fingertips.

Victor frowned and stood, pacing to the balcony. He wasn’t sure why. Was he irritated that she’d called his performance into question? Was he more bothered about her political scheming than he let on? Was he just uncomfortable with the idea of taking their relationship beyond professional? Maybe he was still hung up on Valla. Whatever it was, he did a good job of signaling his reticence because, as he stared at the mountain, Queen Kynna stood behind him and spoke to his back.

“I’ll leave you to it, then Victor. You have my gratitude—our nation’s gratitude. I’ll have your trophies delivered to your chambers, as it seems you won’t be attending the celebratory banquet this evening.”

Victor didn't turn around. He nodded, gripping the marble balcony railing, and stared at the mountain, drawing strength from it. "I appreciate that. I hope you understand that I'm weary."

"Of course. I should have thought of that. Please seek me out when you're rested."

Victor closed his eyes and breathed deeply, listening to her steps retreating to the door. When he heard it open and then click closed, he exhaled, sighing heavily. He hoped he hadn't insulted her too much. He was his own person, though, and he might not know what his heart wanted, but he was reasonably sure, at least at that moment, that it wasn't Kynna Dar.