

## Victor BK2: Ch10

Book 2: Chapter 10: Steampool Vale

The portal's cold pull lasted only a second or two, and then Victor stepped onto a dusty, rubble-strewn stone floor. The portal swirled behind him, throwing his shadow onto broken stonework in a constantly shifting pattern, almost like he was dancing. In its green and blue light, he saw that he was inside a collapsed stone building. "Well, partially collapsed," he said, looking up at the high ceiling. It was like the room he was standing in had once been a cave, but someone had built stone block walls inside it.

A very faint pale glimmer of light came through a crack in the collapsed rubble to his left, and Victor went over there to investigate. Sure enough, the remains of a heavy wooden door jutted out from some piled stones, and he figured that was the way out. Up near the top of the pile, the light was seeping through gaps in the fallen stone, mortar, and dirt. Victor took hold of the door's top edge and gave it a pull. He planned to slide the door toward him, dragging a lot of the broken stones with it, and create a space he could crawl through.

It was heavier than he'd anticipated, and he ended up having to boost his strength with Sovereign Will before he could get the petrified, solid plank moving. His idea worked, though; as he dragged the door toward him, a heavy pile of loose blocks, rocks, and dirt slid with it, and a broad shaft of sunlight fell into the chamber.

Victor mounted the pile and worked his way through the gap, his back brushing against the original cave's ceiling. When he slid down the far side of the rubble, he found himself standing near an opening that gave a dizzying view down into a rocky valley. He stepped toward the cave mouth and looked down over the rocky slope. If his eyes weren't deceiving him, it looked like a dirt road wound between the high hills. "Gorz, does this look familiar?"

"Yes, though when Reevus came here, a path led up the side of this hill to the structure where the portal rests, and it wasn't in ruins."

"Didn't you say a village was nearby?"

"Yes, if you descend this slope to the south and turn to the west, you should reach a village called Steampool Vale in less than a day. Coincidentally, I can see Belikot's tether stretching away to the southwest."

"Down we go, then," Victor said, starting out into the gray daylight. He wasn't sure if it was morning or late afternoon, but then he recalled Gorz said he was going south, so he looked for the sun. There it was, just a bit over the hills to his left, and he smiled as its warmth fell full on his face. "Morning time still," he said, soaking it up for a few minutes. "God, it feels good to be out of the dark for a change." He took a deep breath, savoring the clean, brisk air.

The bristly yellow grass that grew between the stones on the hillside provided uncomfortable footholds but better than the sharp, loose rocks. Victor sorely missed his sturdy boots for the first time. Sure, the gore and filth of the dungeon had been uncomfortable between his toes, but climbing down the rocky hillside was a new level of unpleasantness. He tried to avoid sharp rocks, but, even

so, by the time he made it to the road, he was leaving bloody spots on the flat stones he tried to hop between.

Sitting on a large, flat rock near the roadside, he took a few minutes to channel Sovereign Will into his vitality and waited while his boosted constitution brought thick scabs to the cuts on his feet. He found that his body was tougher and more resilient than ever, even without the boost; his improved race and overall higher attributes were starting to make a clear impact. He decided to keep enhancing his vitality while traveling and turned to the west, jogging down the road.

He supposed “road” was being rather generous—it was more like a pair of trails with yellow grass growing between them. As he loped along the right-hand rut, Victor became increasingly aware of his improved stamina. He felt like he could run like that forever; his breath hardly quickened, and his muscles didn’t complain in the slightest. Lifedrinker grew uncomfortable, stuffed into his belt, though, so he carried the heavy axehead while running. “Maybe I can get a proper sling or something made for you when I get you a new handle,” he said, swapping her into his left hand for a while.

“Victor, the tether is still stretching away into the distance, though according to my map, we should be drawing near Steampool Vale.”

“Has it been that long? You said a day’s travel.”

“I said less than a day, and you’re traveling at a faster rate than Reevus. He wasn’t as physically adept as you.”

“Gotcha,” Victor slowed down, and when he glanced at the sun, he saw it was high overhead. He’d been jogging for a few hours and still felt fine. He pulled one of his water-filled wine bottles out of his ring, drank it down, and then took in his surroundings. Rocky hills still rose on both sides of the road. Sparse yellow grass and thin, twisted little pine trees dotted some of the slopes. Despite the high, bright sun, the air was cool, and Victor figured the road must be at a significant elevation. “Unless it’s wintertime or something.”

Not far ahead, the overgrown road bent to the south, and Victor couldn’t see what lay around the bend. He continued walking, still holding Lifedrinker, and when he rounded the bend, a long deep valley opened up before him. The rutted track continued down the hillside to join a wider, flatter, gravel road. When Victor gazed along the length of the gray-brown roadway to the south, he saw farmland, animal pens, big farmhouses with high, sloped roofs, and a wooden palisade toward the distant southern end of the valley, stretching around tall, peaked roofs. “Steampool Vale?” he asked, nudging his necklace.

“Yes, Victor. At the far end of this valley. Belikot’s tether stretches south and west from here; I think he’s gone beyond the town.”

“What the fuck? Didn’t he care about his phylactery? He’s just bolting off into the world?”

“I don’t know, Victor. Perhaps there’s a way for him to sever his connection to it? Maybe he intends to create a new one.”

“Is that possible?”

“I’m sorry, I have no information on the subject. I’m only speculating.”

“Right,” Victor sighed and started trudging down toward the gravel road. Belikot was a problem, for sure, and he felt some urgency about finding him, but he also needed to deal with more immediate concerns like getting some damn boots. He saw a lot of animals out in the fields and pens. Most of them reminded him a lot of sheep, though their wool had more variety in color, they had longer necks, and were taller. As he started passing by the cultivated lands, an occasional field worker would look up, and when Victor waved, they returned the greeting. All of them were red-skinned Shadeni.

When the tall wooden palisade was only half a mile distant, he passed close by a man wearing a straw hat riding on the back of a plow attached to two giant birds. His fence wasn’t far from the road, and he hopped off the plow to approach as Victor drew near. “Hello, stranger!” he called.

“Hello,” Victor said back, moving toward the fence.

“Where you coming from?” the man asked, spitting some brown saliva into the grass near his feet.

“Oh, quite a ways off, from the northeast.”

“That so? What town, friend?”

“Well, I’m from Tucson.” Victor shrugged.

“Must be pretty distant! I haven’t heard of it.”

“Oh yeah, it’s a long way off.” Victor saw the man looking at his bare feet, and he sighed heavily, saying, “Ran into some trouble, broke my axe, and lost my boots.” He held up Lifedrinker.

“Quite a blade there! Well, old Arlf in town can fix ya up. He’s been working wood since before I was born. Plenty of boots to be had in Steampool, too, provided you’ve the means to pay.” The man spat into the grass again, his tone suddenly dismissive. Victor began to wonder if he was being judged or subtly insulted.

“I have the means, don’t worry.” Victor chuckled and waved, adding, “I didn’t get robbed; I ruined them in a dungeon.” Then he started down the road again. When the man called after him, he just waved and kept walking. Victor felt a sense of confidence and sureness of purpose that felt strange but liberating. What was that farmer going to do, chase him down and demand he spill his life story? He’d just been through a literal nightmare; he’d fought dozens, no,

hundreds of monsters and come out on top. He didn't have to sit through some curmudgeon's interrogation.

As the open gates in the palisade drew near, he passed a few more people on the road. He smiled at a little girl with a basket of flowers and nodded to the woman who glanced at him sidelong as he strode by. His legs were long, and he ate up the distance effortlessly; before he knew it, he was walking through the gate and a Shadeni man wearing a food-stained, white, and red uniform and leaning on a long spear asked him to stop. "Yeah?" he asked, towering over the guard.

"Your business?" The man scowled up at him; he looked to be in his twenties, and his eyes indicated severe boredom.

"Boots," Victor said, gesturing to his feet. "And, I'm looking for a friend—a tall Shadeni woman with long black braids. She might have been carrying a nice spear. You seen her?"

"Nope. Doesn't sound familiar." The man's eyes tilted to the side, and he shifted, surreptitiously holding out a hand. Was he asking for a bribe? Victor had never dealt with someone like that, but he'd seen plenty of movies. He scanned through his ring, found his pile of Energy beads, and pulled out five. He held them out to the guard. His eyes grew wide, and he stepped close, snatching them. "Not so obvious, man! You trying to get me fired?"

"I don't give a shit." Victor shrugged. "So, you saw my friend?"

"Yeah, that cold bitch came through here. Wouldn't even look at me." He backed up as Victor's chest started to rumble with an involuntary growl.

"When?" he asked gruffly, taking a deep breath and reminding himself it wasn't Thayla—just her body.

"Three days ago. Didn't even stop in town. In this gate, and then out the other, at least my friend, Moss, said so. He followed her through town. Something was off about her, and I'm not trying to be rude, alright?" He stood against the wall under the gate, his spear angled in front of him.

"Yeah, alright. Thanks," Victor said and continued into the town. Most of the people on the busy street were Shadeni, though he saw other races here and there, even a dark-furred Cadwalli who suddenly made him think of Vullu. As Victor moved to the wooden walkway running along the storefronts, people cleared out of his path, his size and strange appearance acting as a physical buffer. The buildings were tall and narrow, most sporting high gabled roofs, and Victor got the impression that shopkeepers in this town lived in the upper parts of their shops. He figured regular dwellings were on streets further back, away from the main thoroughfare.

“Mister, you’re even bigger than my dad!” A tug at his pantleg brought his attention down to a little black-haired boy with wide, pinkish-red eyes. He couldn’t help the smile stretching his cheeks as he leaned down and tousled his hair.

“Hey, ninito. Yeah, that’s ‘cause my abuela always made me eat my veggies.”

“Sorry, sir,” a woman said and reached down to grab the boy’s hand. “Come on, Ryld!” She yanked his arm and started hurrying away.

“It’s not a problem,” Victor called after her retreating back. She didn’t turn, though, and he sighed, straightened up, and looked around at the nearby shops. He saw a glass blower, a bakery, a shop with some dresses on display in the window, and, across the street, a curio shop and a furniture store. The wooden planks of the walkways under the awnings were in good repair, and Victor thought the town seemed rather idyllic. People were clean, the gravel streets were dry and even, and the bright paint on the tall buildings gave it a festive sort of feel. Maybe he was just used to the ramshackle, dingy, depressing mine.

“You looking for something, big man?” Victor looked down to see the source of the voice. A gray-haired stooped, blue-skinned Ardeni looked up at him with bright yellow eyes. The constant references to his size and the fact that no one was calling him kid or idiot gave him a funny feeling in his chest. He realized he was still smiling from the encounter with the little boy, and he drew his lips back to reveal his teeth in a broad grin and reached out a hand to the older man.

“Hey. Yeah, actually, I am. I need some new boots. Name’s Victor.”

“Good to meet you!” the man said, grabbing Victor’s hand. His nobby, lean fingers had a surprisingly firm grip. “Uld ap’Nar.”

“I also need to find someone who can fix my axe,” Victor said, letting go of the man’s hand.

“I can help you, adventurer.” The man reached up to rest a blue hand on Victor’s shoulder, then pointed with the other up the street. “Head that way until you get to the corner. Turn right, walk past two buildings, and you’ll be in front of Woodworker Teng-dak’s shop. He can fix that axe right up.”

“Not, uh, what was it?” Victor snapped his fingers, then asked in his mind, “Gorz, who did that farmer say could fix Lifedrinker?”

“Arlf.”

“Not Arlf?” he asked Uld.

“Oh, Ancestors! I wouldn’t go to him; he crafts farm equipment.”

“Oh? Interesting,” Victor didn’t know if the cranky old farmer had been trying to throw business to a friend or if this guy was getting some sort of commission. He didn’t care as long as Lifedrinker got a good haft. “What about boots, Uld?”

“Well, Victor,” the old man smiled when he used his name, leaning in closer and giving his shoulder a comradely jostle. “I know just the lady for you! Miss ap’Larl is a fantastic cobbler, and you’ll find her in the opposite direction of Teng-dak at the next corner, just one shop down on the left.”

“Thanks for all your help, Uld. Can I do anything to repay you?” Victor had no idea where his sudden manners or friendliness were coming from, but he was soaking in the positive vibes from the older man and didn’t want to sour things by bolting off in a selfish rush.

“Oh, what a fine specimen of the younger generation! What manners! Let me ask you, Victor, was I right in calling you an adventurer?” Uld had slowly moved to the side, so they were out of the center of the walkway, and Victor leaned against the wooden wall of the bakery they stood before. He nodded, deciding that adventurer was a fine way to be described.

“Yeah, I think that’s pretty spot-on, Uld.”

“Well, then I do have a way you could help me, Victor. How about meeting me at the tavern tonight? Let me buy you dinner, and you can have a talk with my grandson. He’s got his heart set on seeking glory, and I was hoping you could give him either a few pointers or some serious warnings, depending on what you thought of him.”

“You’re leaving it to me?”

“Why not? You’re the expert! Take a look at him, hear him out, and then you can decide if you want to encourage or frighten him. What do you say?”

“Well, I’m kinda in a hurry, but I haven’t had a good meal in a while. I think I could spare an hour or two for dinner. Where’s the tavern?”

“If you follow this road through town to the other gate, the tavern is there, just inside the wall on this side of the street. It’s called The Laughing Roladii.”

“Sounds good, Uld. I’ll see you in a few hours.” Victor started to leave, but Uld held out his hand again, and Victor shook it, giving it a good squeeze. Then he strode away, toward the intersection at the end of the block. “What a good old guy,” he said, smiling at the lady sweeping the walkway in front of the dress shop.

“Buy a dress for your sweet?” she asked as he stepped around her pile of dust.

“Oh, I don’t know her size,” he said.

“Well, I have some artificed dresses that will fit her for sure!”

“Well, I don’t know what colors she likes,” Victor said, grinning and stepping closer to her shop.

“Really? What colors have you seen her wearing?”

“I have to confess; I haven’t seen her wearing any colors. I haven’t met her yet!” Victor laughed and winked at the woman, then continued to the corner, taking a left. Her chuckle followed after him. “Un hombre suave,” he said, grinning.

He passed by a weaver’s shop, and then he was standing in front of a display window filled with boots and shoes. Some were sleek and elegant, and others looked built for work on a farm. He opened the door and, accompanied by the jingling of a little bell, entered the shop.

It didn’t look so different from a modern American shoe store. The significant differences being that the shelving looked hand crafted from polished hardwoods, and the smell of leather and natural oils filled the air. A small Shadeni woman with short black hair sat on a stool behind a counter, and she jumped up, putting her thumbs behind the straps of her yellow overalls as she walked toward him.

“Oh, my goodness! Here’s a man in need of some big shoes!”

“Oh, hey. Yeah, my old boots are deep underground. You got any boots that self-clean, resize, and can take some rough use?” Victor lifted one of his feet as if to illustrate the pains his new footwear would have to endure.

“Hmm, I sure have some boots that might suit you. What are your thoughts on fashion? Looking at you, I can’t get a good feel for your tastes. Let’s see, a beautiful, shiny, armored vest. Those pants look well made, a supple leather belt, and an old but nicely made satchel. Everything looks good except your axe sticking out of your belt there. Hard on your tools, hmm? Your hair looks a bit ragged and unkempt. Aren’t you interested in fashion at all?”

Suddenly self-conscious, Victor put a hand to his head and felt at his unruly black hair. “Lady, I’ve been through hell for the last couple of months. You’re lucky these pants and this vest clean themselves, or you’d be opening all the windows in here.”

“Well, I was going to mention the grime on your neck and arms, but I thought that might be too forward.” The young woman’s orange eyes crinkled in amusement, and Victor smiled.

“Yeah, I know, I know. I need a bath. Right now, I’m going to have to settle for new boots, though, because I have a friend I’ve gotta help.”

“Oh? That’s a shame; I was going to offer you a discount at my sister’s inn!”

“I guess it’s not my lucky day. Maybe if I can catch up to her and help her out fast enough, I could come back here to spend a little more time visiting.” Victor sat on one of the wooden benches near the center of the shop. “My name’s

Victor. I'm looking for something sturdy but comfortable, and I'll let you pick the style." He grinned, putting one hand on the bench and leaning into it.

"Alright, well, are you fond of those pants? Do you wear them a lot?"

"Yeah, they're my only pair."

"Oh. Now I see why you're happy they're artificed." She wrinkled her nose.

"Exactly. I used to have a matching shirt, but it got stolen. I've got this nice armored shirt now, though." Victor ran his knuckles over the black lacquered rings, making them clink against each other.

"Well, anyway, I've got just the boots for you. Their uppers will fit nicely under the cuffs of those pants." She went to the display case behind Victor and picked up a pair of boots, holding them out for him to inspect. They looked almost like square-toed cowboy boots. They were stained black and had a sturdy multi-layered leather and wood sole, and the uppers looked like they'd come to about mid-shin. Best of all, they had shiny, steel-cased toes.

"They look great. You have any socks?"

"Of course! Let's talk price, and then I can get you set up with a few pairs, and you can bond with these boots."

"Oh, right. How much are we talking?"

She looked at him quizzically for a moment, then her impish smile returned, and she said, "Twenty standard beads for the boots, and I'll throw in the socks." Victor smiled, but his mind started racing as he realized he had no idea the value of an Energy bead. He'd tossed five at the guard, but only because he had more than a thousand in his ring. Some of those were rightfully Thayla's, but she couldn't exactly spend them right now.

"Help me out, chica. Is that a lot of money?"

"Oh, please don't call me girl—my name's Sceffi. What do you mean, 'is that a lot?'"

"Alright, I don't buy nice boots often. Are those expensive? Is that something a rich guy would buy, or, you know, average Joe the farmer?"

"You're an odd fellow, and it's not just your looks," she softened the blow of her words with a crooked smile. "These boots are expensive because of their quality. They have enchantments for unlimited sizing, scuff repair, and stain and odor removal. I have shoes that look nicer but aren't nearly as well-made. Rich, lazy people would buy those, not these fantastic boots."

"Alright, sheesh. Sounds fair, um, Sefi, was it?"

“Almost. Sceffi. Hear the slight ‘k’ sound after the s?”

“Um, not really, but I’ll try. Sceffi?”

“Really close; thanks for trying!” Her grin widened, then she held out a hand, palm up.

“Oh, right.” Victor scanned through his ring and pulled out twenty Energy beads. Most of them were pale blue, but a few of them had red swirls in them. He held out his large hand, the pile of beads glittering in his palm.

Sceffi looked at the pile of Energy beads and said, “Victor, those are attuned Energy beads.” She picked up one of the multi-colored ones and said, “This is dual-attuned. They’re all worth more than standard Energy beads.”

“Really? Shit, well, can you just take what you need out of that?” He nodded to the pile of beads, and Sceffi shrugged. She plucked out ten of the pale blue beads.

“That’ll cover it.” She handed the boots to Victor. “They’re too small; just put your toes into one and bond with it. They’ll resize, but wait, and I’ll get you socks. Sit tight.” Victor nodded, admiring the sturdy thick soles on the boots. The ones he’d bought in the mine had just had a couple of thick, stiff leather layers sewn to the uppers. These were on another level with their craftsmanship. Sceffi returned with several pairs of long, gray socks. Victor took the one she held out and admired its soft, durable material.

“What are they made of?”

“Wool, of course.”

“Wool? You have sheep here?”

“Sheep?”

“Yeah, the animal,” Victor couldn’t help a little exasperation slipping into his voice; it was one thing for people to constantly ask him to repeat himself when he was being a goof, but he was just trying to speak normally now.

“I’m not familiar. These are made from holbyis wool.”

“Right. Those are the fluffy, long-necked animals out in the valley, right?”

“Right! Where are you from, Victor?” She put a hand on her overall strap, tugging at it absently while watching him put his socks on.

“Yeah, I’m from far away.” Victor was tempted to say he was from another world, but then he thought about how dangerous people were looking for him, and he figured that sort of detail was better kept to himself. The socks felt good, and when he pulled a boot partially onto his foot and then bonded with it, the leather

stretched and molded to his foot. Soon he was standing in his new boots, walking back and forth, admiring the \*clonk\* sound they made on the wooden floors. They perfectly hugged his feet, like he'd spent weeks hiking to break them in. "Very nice, Sceffi. I'll try to return for my next pair!"

"Will you be in town much longer?" She asked, still watching him walk back and forth.

"Not this time, I'm afraid. Like I said, a friend needs help." He looked at her, made eye contact, and said, "Seriously, thanks. I'll see you again, I hope." Then he turned and, with a jingle of the little bell, stepped out the door. Feeling much more secure now that his toes were protected under a hard layer of steel, Victor strode toward Teng-dak's shop—time to get Lifedrinker a new haft.