

## Victor BK2: Ch12

### Book 2: Chapter 12: A Stranger at the Fire

Under the light of the two moons, Victor ran down the dirt, sometimes gravel, road. One of the moons had rings, and Victor wondered how that worked—did moons have rings or was there another planet so close it looked like a moon? He wasn't an astronomy expert, so he figured he'd just accept the locals' assurance that they were moons. The guard at the gate had said he'd have good light from the "the sisters" while traveling.

He'd been sorely tempted to take a room at the inn and get a good night's sleep, but he couldn't bear the thought of comfortably sleeping while Thayla languished in an old skull in his satchel. He didn't feel sleepy and felt like his desire to get a good night's rest was more habit than need. Since he'd improved his race so much, he didn't know how much sleep he required, but he felt pretty damn outstanding as he jogged through the night. "Not only that," he said to the axe he carried sideways in front of him, "but Thayla's body will need rest. We're gonna catch that creep!"

He'd asked Gorz to keep a close eye on the tether and to let him know if it deviated from the road, but so far, it looked like Belikot's path coincided with the route toward Gelica. Sometime after midnight, Victor passed the turn-off to Greatbone Mine, and he'd had a twinge in his gut as he ran by. He wondered how Edeya and Heng and all the others were doing. He wondered about Captain Lam; had she had any run-ins with the mine operators? Had they come looking for Victor and found Edeya? He'd just have to trust that Lam got her away for now. Someday, maybe he'd get a chance to come back to the mine and make things right, as least as much as he could.

Victor didn't mind running with Lifedrinker in his hands; she fit snugly in against his palms and was long enough that he could still maintain a normal gait while holding onto her with a wide grip. He had a loop on his belt he could put her haft through, letting her head rest against his hip, but it annoyed him when he ran to have the long wooden handle slapping his calf and knee. No, while running, he'd hold her, and then he'd be ready to fight if something came out of the darkness, a prospect that seemed more and more likely the further he got away from the town, mine, and all the farms that had dotted the valleys.

Night on Fanwath was very different from night on Earth, even out in the desert near Tucson. First of all, the stars were bright and filled the sky so immensely that it took Victor a while of staring before he could get his mind back on the task at hand. The depth and variety of the starfield was something that couldn't be understood by looking at a photo or video—standing under that expanse made him realize why primitive humans had been so in awe of the planets and stars. Secondly, the sounds made it abundantly clear that he wasn't running through the Sonoran desert—yelps, screeches, barks, howls, growls, buzzing, flapping, and scurrying noises abounded. He felt like he was surrounded by all the wildlife known to humankind.

Amazingly, nothing bothered him throughout the night, and when the sky started to lighten, he slowed to take in the sunrise and get a look at his surroundings. He stepped off the road and climbed up the side of a gently sloping hill, scrabbling over tufts of hard yellow grass. When he got to the top of the hill, the eastern sky was pale gray, and he could see for miles and miles in that direction. Hills rolled away, covered in the same kind of grass as the one he was on, and eventually came up against the starkly jutting, jagged mountains he'd just run down from. He had no idea he'd lost so much elevation through the night.

Slowly spinning in a circle, he saw the hills falling away to the east, replaced by endless expanses of yellow grassland. A bit to the south, he thought he could see the shadowy blur of a forest on the horizon. “Or maybe an ocean,” he admitted—he didn’t know what either would look like from a distance. More hills and mountains lay to the north. “Gorz, what way does the tether go?”

“From here, Victor, primarily west and very slightly to the south.”

“So, still on the road. I wish you could tell if we were gaining ground.”

“As do I. If only you knew a locating or scrying spell. Perhaps you’ll meet someone who does.”

“Uh, there might have been someone in that town! Let me add this to the list of things you should have mentioned to me, Gorz. Like, oh, I don’t know, hundreds of ghouls sleeping in the room I was standing in.”

“Victor, I’ve told you that the physical world slips from my conscious perception when I’m not actively trying to concentrate on something. Time moves quickly, and I’m unaware of your every move. My apologies!”

“It’s alright, Gorz; I’m just busting your balls.”

“Pardon me?”

“Never mind.” Victor shook his head wryly and pulled out a jug of watery wine Captain Lam had given him. He drank thirstily, stretched his legs out, and started running again. The sun was well on its way up the eastern sky when Victor noticed something off to his left. He slowed to look again and saw a rolling cloud of dust coming toward him over the plains. Instinctively, he ducked down, reducing his silhouette, then, crouching in the grass, he watched the dust, looking for the source.

It wasn’t long before he could make out the dark shapes at the head of the dust cloud. In just a few minutes, they resolved into riders—humanoid figures atop leaping, two-legged mounts. “What the fuck? Are those ostriches?” The riders were streaming over the grassland toward the road, and as they got closer, Victor could see that the mounts were definitely not ostriches; they were larger, thicker, and their feathers were a lot brighter. Moreover, they had a lot of gray skin that wasn’t feathered.

Victor counted nine riders, and he watched them, crouched on top of the hill, expecting them to pass by to the road. They were about a quarter-mile distant when they slowed and veered directly toward him, which made him urgently reassess his visibility. “Shit!” He didn’t fancy running away from giant bird monsters and their riders, so, figuring his position was blown, he stood up straight, Lifedrinker gripped before him.

The riders slowed when he stood up but continued their approach to his hill. Victor stood near the crest; if they wanted to fight, he’d make them work to get near him. Lifedrinker buzzed in his hand, and he knew she was anxious for action. He still held out hope that these riders didn’t mean him harm, but he was glad to have her ready. When the riders were only a hundred yards or so away,

Victor cast Heroic Heart because he didn't know what to expect, and he liked that the spell protected him from mental manipulation.

As always, he felt the heat flood out from his chest, and then the gray light of early morning seemed more golden, and the riders less a threat and more a curiosity. A broad smile displayed his even, white teeth, and he took a step forward, Lifedrinker light and easy in his hands. "Hello, riders!" he called out, pulling the words from deep in his gut, a heavy timber rolling out over the grass.

A large Shadeni man, riding toward the middle of the group, held up a hand, and they all came to a halt near the bottom of the hill. The man glanced from side to side, his braided black beard clacking with beads and bones, then he rode forward about halfway between Victor and his fellows. "Hail, warrior! We have no ill intent—I am Tellen, Ban-tok of this tribe, and we are hunters."

"Hello," Victor's bolstered confidence didn't really allow him to pause or be cautious; he stepped toward the hunter, releasing Lifedrinker with one hand, so he held her down by his side. "I'm Victor, a traveling adventurer." Victor had a vague recollection of Belsa talking about being in a tribe, so he knew some Shadeni lived that way. They looked rough and travel-worn, their clothes mainly leather, decorated with beads and tassels. They all had long black hair, and most wore it braided like their leader.

Victor had seen a lot of Shadeni in his time on Fanwath, but here, arrayed before him in the bright morning light, the hunters' different eye colors were especially striking. Most were some shade of red or pink, but he saw a pair of yellow-green eyes, and Tellen's eyes were a luminous, bright purple.

"Well met, then, Victor. We're returning from a long hunt, and we thought we should investigate when we saw you on this hill. We're a long way between civilized places here, and we wanted to see that you weren't in need of help or any sort of danger to our clan."

"I'm no danger to good people," Victor said, still grinning broadly.

"It is good, then, that my people aren't bandits." The Ban-tok spoke frankly, taking Victor's words at face value. "Do you mind me asking your destination?"

"I'm traveling toward Gelica, looking for a friend." Victor gestured vaguely to the west.

"Ahh, well, you're still many days from Gelica. Our camp lies between here and there, a day or so further west, in the plains north of this road. You'll see our fires as you go by. You have my invitation if you'd care to stop for a meal and a safe night's rest."

"Thanks! I might take you up on that offer." Victor nodded. The man was silent for a moment, and Victor felt awkward like he'd failed to say the right words. "I'm sorry, um, Ban-tok, but I'm not familiar with your customs," he added.

“All is well, Victor. I’m merely debating if we should offer you transport, but our roladii are weary, and you’re a large man.” He patted the shoulder of his strange mount.

“Nah, that’s fine. Thank you for the consideration, but I’ll make my own way. Good to meet you, Ban-tok.”

“Thank you for your respect, Victor, but you may call me Tellen. Good journey to you; I hope we’ll see you in a day or two.” He clicked his tongue sharply, and his mount turned around and started moving back to the other riders. “All’s well!” he called out, then waved a hand in the air in a tight circle, and the hunters all turned and charged off, skirting the hill and thundering away down the road.

“Gorz, that’s still the direction the tether is pointing, right?”

“It is, Victor, though, as we travel west, it seems to be veering further south of the road’s path. I think you’ve gained ground running through the night.”

“I hope so! I might need less sleep than a normal human, but I’m thinking I’ll need to rest sooner or later.”

“Yes, you will require rest at some point, Victor. Even people with advanced racial status must sleep from time to time.”

Victor sat down on the side of the hill, watching the retreating dust cloud thrown by the riders while he ate the last of the sausages Lam had given him and Thayla. It felt like years had passed since he’d stood in that back room of Lam’s barracks and confessed, hoping for her to help. He tried to count how many actual days had passed since then, but he lost track when he considered the number of days he spent unconscious. Something around three weeks, he figured. “Feels a lot longer,” he grunted, throwing a loose stone down toward the road.

After another drink of watery wine, Victor stood and resumed his jog, following the road and the long-dispersed cloud of dust the hunters had left in their wake. The morning stretched into midday and then into the afternoon, and Victor came upon the first fellow traveler he’d met on the trail. As he rounded a slight bend in the long, dusty road, he saw a shape up ahead and, after some scrutiny, decided it was a wagon. It wasn’t coming toward him—rather, he was coming up behind it.

The wagon was a dilapidated affair, tall and gray, the wood warped with age and weather. Painted on the back in faded, crumbling red paint was the word “Tinker.” Victor rapidly gained on the slowly moving, swaying conveyance, marveling at its strange design. It was taller than it was long, like a vertical rectangle of old, creaking wood. Little shutters squeaked and flapped with each jolting bump in the road, and, when Victor examined the tall wooden wheels, he saw giant, coiled springs sitting over the axles on which the whole wagon frame bounced and jostled.

When Victor jogged past the front left wheel and finally could see around the side of the vehicle, he saw an unusually short Vodkin sitting on a metal chair affixed to a wooden beam. He held the reins of a plodding, hissing lizard that would have given an elephant a run for its money, sizewise. The driver didn’t notice him at first, and Victor called up, “Hello there!” The furry man nearly fell out of his seat in surprise, his large belly jiggling as he jolted up from his slouch and hastily looked around

for the speaker. When his eyes fell on Victor, striding next to the wagon with his axe in his hands, he hesitantly held up a hand.

“Hail trav’ler!” He turned to his giant lizard and pulled on the thick leather rein, “Whoa, Grella, whoa!” The plodding beast stopped immediately, perhaps happy to not be moving. It lazily swung its long gray neck back and forth while its thick, red ribbon of a tongue flicked in and out of its mouth. “Not lookin’ for trouble, are ya? I’m jus’ a poor tinker, nothin’ much ta offer.”

“No, no trouble. I’m just traveling, looking for a friend. You seen a tall Shadeni woman pass by? Black eyes, long black braids? Maybe carrying a nice-looking spear?”

“Oh, aye. Passed me a day out of Steampool. I wa’ camped aside the road, fixin’ a loose hub. She give me the impression she din’t wan’ ta visit. I try to greet her, offer a spot by the fire, but she jus’ glare and kept walkin’.”

“This was when?”

“Night afore last,” he said, hawking a large, brown glob of saliva down to the road near his lizard’s rear foot.

“She was alone? Still had her spear?”

“Aye.”

“Thanks for the information, tinker. Good luck,” Victor said and started into a jog. He heard the man call after him, saying something about safe travels. Victor’s heart had sped up a bit as he realized he was gaining on Thayla. At the rate he was going, if he hustled through the night, he might catch her the next day. “Him. I might catch up to him,” he said, trying to keep in mind that it was Belikot driving Thayla’s body around. He sure hoped the phylactery would work when he confronted him.

As he ran, Victor tried to think of a plan. He wanted to wake Thayla and tell her his progress, but he felt like he had the element of surprise at the moment, and waking Thayla might blow it. As he thought about that, he started thinking about the phylactery and the tether, and then he slowed his run and slapped himself on the head. “Gorz. Don’t you think Belikot can feel this phylactery coming closer?”

“I would say that there’s an excellent chance that Belikot is aware of his phylactery and can feel this tether just as I can see it.”

“Goddamn it! That’s probably something I should have thought of sooner, but you could have mentioned it, too.”

“I’m sorry! I don’t function well in terms of creativity, or should I say I’m not good at thinking outside the constraints of my directives.”

“You don’t think outside the box?” Victor snorted. “Alright, don’t worry. At least I figured this out before walking into whatever trap he’s laying. I think I have an idea to turn the tables, in fact.”

“Excellent!”

Victor started running down the road again, this time keeping an eye peeled toward the plains on the right, hoping to catch sight of the Shadeni Hunters’ camp. He figured he might be getting close because he’d been traveling all day, and his pace was probably faster than what the Shadeni had expected. “Keep me posted as the tether leads away from the road. Is it still following it pretty closely?”

“Yes, but its angle away from the road toward the south slowly widens as you continue west.”

“Good,” Victor said. The afternoon slipped away into the evening, and still, Victor didn’t slow, steadily eating up the miles as he jogged along. He drank on the run, but only when he truly felt thirsty, which wasn’t very often. As the sun settled beneath the western horizon and the stars brightened the night sky, he kept on, pushing into the night. A few hours after dark, two things happened almost simultaneously: he saw some flickering orange lights off to his right, and Gorz said, “Victor, the tether is much more south than east from you now; if you keep going much farther, you’ll pass Belikot by.”

“What’s south of here?”

“Nothing that I’ve mapped. I’m sorry, but Reevus never visited that area of the world.”

“And he didn’t have you memorize any maps?”

“He would have, but remember, he was not raised on Fanwath. We hadn’t visited a major city in this world yet when he perished.”

“How did he come here, anyway?”

“His parents were born on this world, and he petitioned his master to open a portal for him to come and visit this world. He wanted to learn about his ancestry. Unfortunately, he came to believe he was on the wrong continent and was exploring for a city when he found the dungeon leading into the mine.”

“Well, annoying, but I’ll find you some maps to read next time we’re in a town or city. It seems kind of coincidental that Belikot turned south near the hunters’ camp, don’t you think? No worries, I’ll get to the bottom of this shit.” Victor turned toward the fires he’d seen on the plains to the north and started jogging again.

He'd covered about half the distance when a bright light flared to life in the darkness before him, and he stopped, holding Lifedrinker down by his side and shading his eyes with his other hand.

"Declare your intent!" A deep, hoarse woman's voice called.

"I'm Victor! A traveler that met your Ban-tok. He invited me to visit your camp."

"Come forward, then, Victor. But know: other eyes than mine are on you." The light pointed away from his eyes, and Victor lowered his hand and strode toward the woman's silhouette. While he walked, he slipped Lifedrinker's haft into the loop at his belt and let her hang there at his hip.

"Hey," he said, as he stepped up to the woman, her light was pointed at the ground, revealing her in a kind of twilight grayscale. She was thin and wore leather, and the way her braids hung down, he thought she looked a lot like Thayla, at least in the poor lighting.

"Well met, I'm Chandri."

"Cool, um, great. Nice to meet you. Should I just keep going? Or?"

"No, I'll walk you in. We don't want my unruly sister or her boyfriend to fill you with arrows, do we?"

"Uh, no. Definitely not."

"Well, she's on the close watch string and is too hasty to shoot, so best you follow me." A white gleam in the moonlight told Victor she was smiling, so he chuckled. He followed her as she walked toward the fires. Silhouettes of tents started to resolve in the darkness, and Victor was aware of a large mass of shadows moving not far to the north; as he stared in the moonlight, he realized it was a large herd of the bird-lizard things.

"Roladii, right?"

"Yes, those are our roladii." As she spoke, a shrill whistle called out from the tall grass to their left, and Chandri nimbly darted to Victor's side, blocking him from the source of the whistle. "Chala! He's a guest of the Ban-tok. Calm yourself!"

"Bah, are you sure? Perhaps I should just wound him a little to keep him from causing trouble?" The voice coming out of the shadows sounded like a very young woman, and Victor couldn't help smiling at the idea of some kid wanting to put an arrow in his knee so he'd behave.

"I'll behave!" He called, "No need to test your arrows." He laughed when Chandri giggled in her husky, scratchy voice.

“Chala, you’ve been warned! Be calm, or the Ban-tok will hear!” After she spoke, Chandri motioned for Victor to follow and continued walking toward the camp. Victor waved to the darkness, then followed. Shadeni came into view, sitting around the fires or walking between the tents, and when they saw Victor walking with Chandri, most of them called out greetings. Chandri led the way past a couple of fires, then toward another firepit outside a darkly colored tent, larger than most of the others. Several Shadeni sat around the fire on furs or woven rugs, and Victor saw Tellen the Ban-tok lounging back, his head on the lap of a muscular Shadeni woman.

“Ban-tok, this man says he met you on the road,” Chandri said, stepping into the man’s line of sight. He sat up then, a broad smile on his face.

“Who’s this, then? Victor? You made good time for a walker.”

“Hello,” Victor glanced around at the crowd of Shadeni watching him and thought about his words before continuing, “Ban-tok. Thank you for the invitation. Do you mind if I spend some time at your camp?”

“Of course not, Victor, provided your intentions haven’t changed since our last meeting.”

“Not at all; I have no ill-intent.” It was like a switch flipped, and suddenly everyone was talking again, and some of the younger Shadeni approached, all smiles and questions.

“What race are you?” one little boy asked.

“How tall are you?” another shouted.

“Can I see your axe?” This question came from a teenage girl as she pushed aside the smaller kids.

“Enough!” Tellen shouted. “Give him some room, and perhaps he’ll entertain your questions after a meal and a sleep. Go on! Go on, or my switch will speak for him!” At his last words, the kids squealed and dispersed into the shadows, giggling into the night as they moved on to some other game. “Come, Victor, sit by my side here.” Tellen patted the woven mat next to him, and Victor nodded, folding his legs and sitting down in front of the fire.

Most of the logs were burned down to embers, but the firepit gave off a lot of heat, and it felt good basking in it out under the stars with darkness all around. The other Shadeni around the fire introduced themselves and greeted Victor, and he nodded, glad to have Gorz memorizing those little details. “I’ve already eaten, Victor, but we had a large roast with plenty left over. Beln, will you get Victor a plate of meat?” The large man across the fire from Victor stood up and walked away, and Victor hoped he wasn’t irritated about having to get him food.



“Thanks,” he said to Tellen, then he looked around at the others nearby and repeated it, “Thanks, everyone. I appreciate your hospitality.” Goddamn! Why couldn’t he talk like that back when he lived in Tucson? He’d have made a lot more friends, that’s for sure.

“Victor, have you ever had cheb-cheb?”

“Cheb-cheb?”

“Aha!” Tellen slapped his knee and smiled hugely. “It’s a liquor made from the seeds of the chebli flower. Not very common this far east, but I traded for a case when we last passed Gelica.” Like magic, two glasses appeared in the Ban-tok’s hand, and then he produced a dark brown bottle, about the size and shape of a gourd with a long neck. He pulled the cork with his teeth and poured a generous amount into the glasses in his other fist. The liquid was amber and reflected the flickering orange of the firepit in the oily sheen of its surface.

Tellen handed one glass to Victor and then held his out to the fire and said, “To hunters and travelers!”

Victor got the idea, held out his glass, and said, “To sharing a fire with strangers.” Everyone around the fire made enthusiastic sounds of approval, Tellen’s smile widened, and he took a big drink from his glass. Victor did likewise and was pleasantly surprised by the smooth warmth of the alcohol sliding down his throat to sit like a pool of hot honey in his belly.

They sat in comfortable silence for a while, sipping their drinks, and by the time Beln arrived with a wooden platter of sliced, rare, but heavily seasoned meat, Victor had a nice buzz going. He figured this must be excellent alcohol, indeed, to affect him so much. He’d drunk an entire bottle of Thayla’s wine and not gotten as drunk, and that was before his latest racial advancements. After eating most of the meat and finishing his drink, he sat back, leaning on his elbows, and looked up at the stars.

“Wonderous, aren’t they?” Tellen asked, leaning back beside him.

“They sure are. I feel like I need to tell you something, Tellen,” Victor spoke softly like he didn’t want to disturb the things out in the dark.

“What’s that, Victor?” Tellen took a sip from his second or third glass of cheb-cheb.

“There’s a real evil asshole not far from your camp, and I was wondering if I could get a little help tricking him. My friend’s life depends on it.”