

## Victor BK2: Ch14

Book 2: Chapter 14: Recuperation

Victor removed the shackles and gag from Thayla and folded a soft fur Oynalla had given him under her head. He sighed and sat back, watching her breath steadily with a smooth, peaceful expression on her face. The old woman watched him with a crooked grin, sipping from a cup of steaming liquid.

“You look weary, warrior. How long since you slept?”

“I don’t know. A long time.” As if on cue, Victor yawned hugely.

“Sleep then. Your work is done—your friend is safe. I’ll wake you if anything happens.” Victor looked around the cozy little space and then back at Oynalla.

“Here?”

“Yes, lumbering oaf! I would say so if I wanted you out!” She laughed in a high-pitched giggle again.

“Alright. Well, thanks,” Victor yawned again, then stretched out, perpendicular to Thayla, his head near her ankles. The furs were soft, and the room warm, and he was so exhausted that oblivion took him almost immediately. He must have slept for a long time without any dreams because when they came, they were wild and vibrant, the kinds of dreams you have when you’ve slept well and were deep into REM.

He dreamed of school, being in class, and laughing with his friends. Mrs. Lopez was trying to teach them about Shakespeare, about why his plays were important, and Marcos made a crack about how important it was to know Hamlet when you got drafted into one of the militias. Victor laughed along with his friends. In the dream, though, something happened that had never happened in reality, he looked at Mrs. Lopez’s face and saw the care and sadness, and he suddenly didn’t think things were very funny.

Victor dreamed he was walking in the desert. He didn’t know why he was there, but he felt like he was looking for something. Cicadas buzzed, and the smell of creosote was thick in the air. The breeze felt hot, as usual, but slightly moist, and he wondered if it was monsoon season. He could tell he was in the foothills of the Catalinas, and when he turned around to look downhill, he could see Tucson spreading out through the valley. He turned back to the slope he was climbing and was surprised to see Thayla standing under a palo verde tree at the top of the hill.

In his dream, Victor walked to Thayla, but she was talking to someone. It seemed to take forever to get to them, but he heard their murmuring voices while approaching, indistinct but still buzzing in his head. When he finally got there and reached out to Thayla’s shoulder to say hello, she turned, and it wasn’t her face that greeted him but a laughing, yellowed skull, cackling with the voice of an old woman.

Victor’s eyes shot open, and he was disoriented, not recognizing his surroundings. He kept trying to see his old room in his abuela’s house, but the walls were canvas, and he was lying on furs, not his

old bed. Slowly things clicked into place, and he remembered where he was, and then he heard Oynalla laughing again and Thayla's sharp voice saying something about the mines. Victor jerked his head up and looked around, and, sure enough, Thayla was sitting cross-legged facing Oynalla and sipping from a steaming cup. "Thayla," he said, voice croaking with disuse.

"Victor!" She said, setting down her cup and crawling close enough to grab his head in her arms and pull his face into her chest. "Thank you, thank you, thank you! Victor, you did it! You beat him! I'm free!" Victor spluttered, aware that she was pressing his face into her breasts while she squeezed his head, but he was unwilling to ruin her innocent joy by thinking about it or attempting to savor the experience. He grunted, pushing Thayla back with one hand and pushing himself to a sitting position with the other.

"Hey, we're a team. No way I was letting that dickhead take your body."

She laughed and squeezed his shoulder, and Victor was relieved to see that her eyes were no longer purely black. The pupils and irises bled together in darkness, but the whites of her eyes were back, and she looked happy and normal, though dirty and unkempt. "Your eyes. Do you still have the death affinity?"

"I do! But, Victor, something happened when you took me into yourself—when you pushed me into my body, some of your Energy came with me, and I gained an affinity for courage! Courage, Victor! It feels amazing! There's a thin band of it circling my Core, and Oynalla says I can learn to do some spirit magic now. My affinity is low, but it's there. Thank you so much, Victor. For everything. I owe you my life, my soul—everything."

"Alright, alright. First of all, you don't owe me shit. I helped you because you're my friend and it was the right thing to do. Don't go falling over yourself trying to pay me back, alright?" Thayla just smiled at him and squeezed his shoulder. "Are my words coming through?" He laughed and shrugged.

"Clever way to help her balance the death Energy," Oynalla said, chasing her words with her usual cackle.

"What do you mean?" Victor asked.

"Hmm? Oh, you didn't do it on purpose? When you pushed so much of your courage-attuned Energy into her, wrapping her soul in it, you changed her—gave her this new affinity. Her Core is a novel thing now. The academics would fall over themselves to hear of this. Those stodgy fools! As if they'd have the guts to try something like that!" She cackled again.

"Oynalla!" Victor recognized Tellen's voice calling from outside the tent, "Oynalla! I hear you cackling in there! Is our guest awake? I need to speak with him."

“We’ll talk more about this,” Victor said to Thayla, then he stood, stooping, and lifted the tent flap. “Tellen!” he said with a grin, holding out a hand. The wiry Shadeni smiled and took it, gripping firmly.

“We were successful, then?” Tellen asked, and Victor saw his satchel was looped over the Ban-tok’s shoulder.

“We were. Thank you, Tellen. Thayla! Come here, Thayla. Tellen helped me to trick Belikot so I could catch him by surprise.” Victor stepped out, making space, and held the flap as Thayla emerged into the morning light.

“Thank you, Tellen,” Thayla said, warmly grasping the other man by the shoulders and looking into his face. “I owe you a great debt.”

“Nonsense. Victor has paid your debt. I’m glad you’re well, and that demon is dealt with.” He shrugged the satchel off and held it out to Victor. “I think this should be destroyed. I was pursued in the night by apparitions and strange creatures. I felt this pulling toward the southeast, and, I’ll be honest, I nearly threw it off at one point.” Victor took the satchel with the phylactery.

“I can settle that,” he said, trying to put the satchel into the dimensional storage bag he’d taken from the cult leader—he didn’t want it in the ring with Belikot’s skull. He felt resistance, though, and the satchel disappeared into the pouch, but the phylactery fell to the grass with a thud. “Huh. I can’t put it into my storage bag?” Thayla reached for it, but Victor put a foot on it and held her shoulder, pulling her back. “I’d rather you didn’t touch it, Thayla. I’m sorry, but that thing is evil as hell, and I don’t know if you’re more susceptible because of, you know, everything.”

Thayla stood up and scowled at him, but then she nodded. “You’re right. Best to be careful until I’ve learned more.”

“If it won’t go into your container, that means it’s a dimensional container itself,” Tellen said with certainty.

“Oh. You can’t put a dimensional container into another one?” Victor asked.

“Not usually. Some buildings have their interiors enhanced with dimensional magic, and you can bring containers into them, but that’s uncommon and requires powerful enchantments. We don’t worry about such things out here on the plains.” Tellen chuckled.

“Victor, might I add something?” Gorz suddenly asked in his mind.

“Yes, Gorz?”

“I still sense a faint tether stretching away to the south from the phylactery.”

“Huh,” Victor said, pulling his satchel back out of the pouch and hanging it over his shoulder. He stooped to pick up the phylactery and put it into the leather bag. “My companion spirit says that this thing is still connected to something to the south. Maybe to those ruins where Belikot was hiding?”

“We’ll be moving camp in a month, but I hate having something evil lurking so near. Maybe we should move sooner,” Tellen said, looking around at the tents and lines of smoke rising into the air from the various fires.

“What if Belikot started a second phylactery? What if part of him is still free?” Thayla asked, her eyes growing with the implications running through her mind.

“Well, shit,” Victor said, thinking. “Maybe we should check it out. I’m tempted to take Lifedrinker to this thing right now, but if I’m going to destroy Belikot’s phylactery, I’d like to make sure there isn’t another one nearby. Let’s follow the tether, figure out what it is, and destroy it. Then, maybe I’ll take that skull out of storage and smash it, too.”

“Yes, let’s do it, but I’d like to get cleaned up, Victor. I feel ...” Thayla shook her head, frowning, “I feel wonderful, Victor, but my clothes, my body—I need to get clean.”

“Yes! I, too, could use some cleansing heat! Come, friends, let’s visit the steam lodge.” Tellen reached up, grasped Victor’s shoulder, and pulled him into a walk with a grin. “Thayla, if you can spare a bead, I bet Chala will scrub your clothes and braid your hair.”

“Of course,” Thayla said with a sigh of relief. “Is she your daughter?”

“No. Well, sort of. I’m her uncle, but her father is dead. She and her sister are my wards.” Tellen meandered through the tents until they passed by a dark red, very large one, and Victor realized it was the tent he and Tellen had sat outside of drinking cheb-cheb the night before last. “Chala,” he called through the flap. He waited a moment, then repeated, “Chala! You have work.” After another minute, a curly-haired, lean, Shadeni teen slipped out of the tent. She was wearing the typical beaded leather of the clan, but hers had a much higher percentage of turquoise, and her face was painted in faded, fierce, black and white, angled stripes.

“Ban-tok?” she asked with a yawn.

“This is Thayla, and she’s an honored guest. She needs her clothes cleaned, and her hair washed and braided. Come; we’re going to the steam lodge.”

“Here,” Thayla said, holding out a hand, and the girl accepted something that clicked like marbles with a wide grin.

Tellen led them further into the clustered tents until they approached an earthen dome that seemed to be an extension of the ground. “The first thing we build at a new camp after the latrines—the steam lodge.” He walked around the dome until he came to a thick, brown hide and pulled it aside, leading the way into a small room lined with pegs and benches. “It’s important to us. We use it for cleanliness, but also for sacred rites and meetings of the elders.” Tellen started undressing at one of the benches, hanging his leather vest on the peg and sitting on the bench to remove his boots.

“Uh, are you cool with this, Thayla?” Victor asked, looking around and not seeing any towels or a ladies’ room.

“Well, I’m Shadeni, but not from a nomadic clan.” She looked around with a skeptical gaze.

“Thayla, come with me; there’s another entrance and towels. Tellen should have known!” Chala scolded, then ducked out through the leather flap.

“I’m used to our customs; I’m sorry, Victor,” Tellen grunted as he pulled off his boots. “Here,” he said, tossing him a large, blue towel. It was soft, like cotton, and unlike anything he’d seen in the camp thus far. “I have a few civilized things, and, of course, that includes a towel or three for my guests,” he started laughing, then walked, completely naked, through another leather flap, deeper into the building. He poked his head back out and said, “Just come through here when you’re ready. It’s dark, steamy, and a perfect place to relax and talk.”

Victor shrugged and started hanging his gear next to Tellen’s. Most of his valuables were in his ring, and when he took off his pants and ringmail, he slipped them into it as well. Shrugging, he did the same with his boots. He hung his belt up with his storage pouch still attached, and then he hoisted the phylactery satchel, about to hang it from a peg. Suddenly he imagined some corrupted clan member snatching the phylactery away and performing some ritual to summon Belikot’s soul. “Uh-uh, not on my watch,” he said, slinging the satchel over his shoulder.

He took a second look at Lifedrinker leaning against the wall under his belt. It might offend someone, but Victor wasn’t leaving her out here. “Nope,” he said, and, after he wrapped the towel around his waist, he picked up the axe and slipped under the hide into the hot, steamy, dark interior of the lodge.

“Over here, Victor,” Thayla called from his left. There was dim, diffuse, orange lighting in the lodge, and Victor could just make out the beams crisscrossing the ceiling and the woven reed mats on the floor. He walked over the mats toward Thayla’s voice and found the woman, a towel much like his, wrapped around her body, sitting on a wooden bench. Chala sat behind her, also in a towel, and Victor was relieved to see that it wasn’t just outsiders who opted for some modesty.

Chala brushed some glistening concoction into Thayla’s hair and hummed a soft, lilting tune. Victor sat next to them, and, as his eyes started to adjust, he realized Tellen was seated not far to his right, leaning back against the earthen wall with his eyes closed. The air was stiflingly hot and wet, and

Victor was sweating profusely. “Feels good,” he grunted, leaning back to close his eyes. He leaned Lifedrinker against the bench between him and Thayla.

“You brought your axe?” Thayla snorted.

“She didn't want me to leave her alone.”

“Oh, Ancestors! You've gotten worse with that thing?”

“What the hell? Don't take out your frustrations on Lifedrinker—she's never done anything against you!” Victor grinned, speaking lazily, enjoying the old banter.

“What about you, Victor? You've changed since I was last ... present.”

“What do you mean?”

“Uh, you're even bigger, for one.”

“He is big, isn't he, Miss Thayla?” Chala asked.

“Hey! I'm right here. Chala, you're a lot more polite than I remember. What happened to ‘let me put an arrow in him?’” Victor chuckled as he remembered the girl calling her challenge out of the darkness.

“Well, you're friends of the clan now. And Miss Thayla pays very well!” Victor opened his eyes to peak at the girl, and she grinned wickedly.

“Anyway, yeah, I advanced my race some more in that dungeon, Thayla. It took me a while to fight my way back to where you were. I'm sorry about that.”

“Don't you dare apologize! I caused that mess by trusting that skull. Not to mention, the whole thing seems like a blurry nightmare now. I'm not sure how long it took you, and that's okay. I'm just glad to be back and that you caught him before he did something terrible to my body.”

“Right. Me too, Thayla. Me too.”

“So, what's next?”

“Next? Well, let's deal with this phylactery,” Victor patted the bag on the bench next to him. “After that, I don't know. Gelica?”

“Yes! We can sell some treasure, do some shopping, and I want to find an old contact, someone who might be able to point me toward my daughter. You haven't heard anything from the, uh, the people who were looking for us?”

“Nah, nothing. I hope they think we're dead. They must think we're dead, right?”

“You have enemies hunting you,” Tellen suddenly asked.

“We did, yes, but it was a long time ago, and they have no reason to believe we’re still alive.” Victor knocked on the wooden bench, wondering where that old “knock on wood” thing came from.

“I hope you’ve evaded them, Victor,” Tellen said, his voice thick and slurred. Was he falling asleep?

“Anyway, that sounds good, Thayla. I hope we can find her.”

“We?” she asked softly.

“Well, yeah. I’m not planning on ditching you as soon as we hit the city. I figure I’ll help you, then maybe you can help me with a thing or two. I mean, that’s what friends do, right?” Thayla didn’t answer, but she reached over and took his hand, squeezing it.

Several minutes passed, and Victor’s eyes grew heavy in the steam, and then he heard a splash and smelled citrus. He opened his eyes to see Chala rinsing Thayla’s hair from a wooden bowl. She splashed the clean-smelling liquid over her hair three more times, and then she started gently wringing it out with a towel. “Chala, you’re earning your pay,” Thayla purred.

“You have beautiful hair, Miss.”

“Thank you.” Thayla sighed, closing her eyes. After a minute, she said, “Victor, what will you need my help with?”

“I’ve told you about my friends in the pit and how that asshole sold me out?”

“Yes.” Thayla sighed, her voice heavy and sleepy.

“Well, I think I’d like to see who’s still alive and who I can help. If a few people get a taste of justice while I’m at it, that’s a bonus.”

Thayla squeezed his hand tighter, and then she said, her voice small, “Victor, you know my daughter’s only six, right?”

“Oh, yeah,” suddenly things clicked for Victor, and he felt like a complete moron. Why would Thayla want to take on slavers and pit fighters when she’d just reunited with her six-year-old daughter? “Listen, I’m an idiot. Of course, you’re going to be busy with your daughter. Don’t worry about what I said. I still want to help you, and you won’t have to worry about following me to Persi Gables or any of that shit.”

“I want to help you, you know, Victor,” she said, her voice low and subdued.

“Yeah, of course you do. Don’t sweat it, Thayla. It’s all good. You think I want to be responsible for a kid losing her mom?” He squeezed her hand and chuckled. “Besides, if you’re with your daughter, someplace nice, it’ll give me a friend to visit. I need more of those in this world.”

“You’re a good person, Victor,” Thayla said wistfully, closing her eyes while Chala braided her hair. Victor smiled, savoring the warmth, both outside from the steam and inside from Thayla’s words. They stayed in the steam lodge much longer than would probably have been safe for ordinary people, but with their Energy infused bodies, they were just fine when they finally stumbled out into the late morning light.

Victor blinked rapidly, his body so loose and relaxed that he felt like he could melt into a puddle. He never washed with soap or anything, but he’d sweat away all the dirt and grime on his body, and when he scrubbed himself dry with the towel, he felt like a new man. Of course, his ringmail shirt and enchanted pants were clean, as usual, which helped. “Feeling good?” he asked, grinning at Thayla.

At some point, while they’d been steaming, Chala or one of her friends had scrubbed and dried Thayla’s leather pants and vest, and they’d given her a pale blue, long-sleeved shirt with tiny little pearl snaps up the middle and at the cuffs. “I feel wonderful! Look at this beautiful shirt!”

“Yeah, I like it. Blue’s good on you.” Thayla smiled at him, and Victor thought she looked younger and less troubled than he had ever seen her. Was it the courage Energy he’d given her? Oynalla had mentioned balance, which he thought was a good descriptor for what he was noticing in her—she seemed more balanced.

“Let’s break our fast, and then I’ll see you two safely on your way, hmm?” Tellen asked, straightening his leather shirt.

“Yeah, that’d be nice, Tellen, thanks.” Victor got the impression Tellen was eager to get them on the road but didn’t want to seem rude. “We’ll get this phylactery out of here, Tellen, don’t worry.”

“Perceptive, Victor. Yes, I dread having that near my camp come dark.”

“Of course,” Thayla added. “We should go now, Victor. We can eat on the trail, and I’d rather handle this problem while the sun is up.”

“Yeah, that’s not a bad idea. Tellen, thanks for the invitation, but I think we’ll get going.”

“Hmm,” Tellen stroked his chin, “Yes, I should tell you, though, Oynalla wanted me to invite you to stay a while—she thinks she can teach you some things. If you destroy that evil artifact, then I’ll extend that invitation. Come back here when you’re rid of it.”

“Victor, I would like to talk to her some more about my Core. Do you mind?”

“No, I think it’s a good idea. Alright, Tellen. We’ll stop back by after we’ve dealt with this thing.”



“Excellent! Come, follow me,” Tellen started walking back through the tents, exchanging greetings with clan members who were much more lively now that it wasn’t so early in the morning. As he walked past his big, red tent, he hollered for Chandri, and the young woman immediately came out of the tent.

“Yes, Tellen?”

“Go fetch some of old Born’s travel bread. I can smell his baking. Bring a few loaves to our friends here; they’ll be walking toward the road.”

“Oh, thank you,” Thayla said, and Victor echoed the sentiment.

“Alright. I’ll see you in a minute, Victor,” she said, grinning at him and giving Thayla a sidelong look as she darted off between two tents.

“Ignore her,” Tellen said to Thayla. “Now, you know the way from here, Victor. I hope we see you again before nightfall, but if it’s dark when you return, the sentries will know you.”

“Thank you again, Tellen. For everything.” Victor clasped the man’s hand, returning his firm grip. Thayla also shook the Ban-tok’s hand and leaned forward to say something that Victor couldn’t quite hear. Then, Thayla turned, put a hand on Victor’s shoulder, and the two of them turned and walked away from the tents, over the grass, and toward the road. Victor glanced back and saw Tellen watching them go, a slight frown on his face. Was he worried? Did he harbor some doubt? He wished he hadn’t caught that glimpse of the man.

“What did you say to him?” Victor asked.

“I said he was a good father to those girls and shouldn’t tell people he’s not their father. He should be proud of what he’s done.”

“Ahh. Nice of you.” Victor nodded. They walked for a few minutes before the thump of feet heralded Chandri’s arrival, and they slowed to wait for her.

“Victor! You’re lucky! Born just made a batch, and he gave me fresh holbyis butter!” She held out a cloth-wrapped bundle with a little ceramic crock sitting atop it.

“Sheesh, Chandri! You guys are spoiling us.” Victor held out his hands to receive the package, and the smell of fresh bread hit his nose like a hammer. “Holy shit, that smells good!”

“Born’s the highest level baker on the plains.” Chandri shrugged.

“Well, Chandri, do you ever get to go to the city?” Victor asked on a hunch.

“Once or twice a year. Why?”

“Well, let me buy you something next time you go,” Victor said, producing a handful of attuned Energy beads. “Your sister already made some profits helping Thayla this morning; this is only fair.”

Chandri’s smile stretched her cheeks, but she said, “Victor, you aren’t trying to pay for a gift, are you?”

“No! This is just a gift. No strings attached.” He pushed his fist, clenching the beads toward her, and Chandri held her two hands together. He poured the beads into her much smaller palms and said, “I’m sure we’ll see you again, but this is just in case I forget. Thanks again, Chandri!”

“Thank you, Chandri,” Thayla said, squeezing the girl’s shoulder, and then they turned and continued to the road. Victor unwrapped the warm bundle and pulled out one of the three loaves Chandri had given him. It was smaller than a typical loaf of commercial bread on Earth but much heavier. He tore off a hunk and turned to Thayla.

“Hey, open that jar of butter for me. I’m afraid I’m gonna drop something.”

“Alright, but save some for me,” Thayla said, taking the little ceramic jar and pulling the top off. Victor smeared his hunk of bread through the warm, herbed butter, then took a huge bite, groaning in pleasure. Thayla reached for the bread, but he pulled it away.

“I don’t know—I’m so hungry, and it’s so good!” He laughed as she reached for it again, and he started running toward the road.

“Victor! Stop! I need food more than you do!” Thayla howled, giving chase.