

Victor BK2: Ch15

Book 2: Chapter 15: Gel Harra

“So it, um, excuse me, she is gaining levels or something?” Thayla asked, gesturing to Lifedrinker.

“Yeah. I’m not sure how it works—if she’s just changing as she gains consciousness, or if she will continue to grow in power as she drains Energy. Either way, I’m happy.” Victor stepped around a large clump of scrub as they climbed the latest “rolling” hill. They’d been walking for several hours at a good pace, and the hills he’d seen in the distance were quite a lot larger up close. Still, it was either climb them or spend extra hours skirting them, so they embraced the effort.

“And you bought that new haft in Steampool? I don’t even remember that town! I must have been out of it!”

“Right, it’s living wood. It wasn’t cheap, but I’m sure happy with it. By the way, I’m still holding onto most of the Energy beads we found. I owe you around five hundred.”

“You don’t have to...”

“Uh uh, none of that! We earned those together, and you’ll want some money to get things started with your daughter, right?”

“Right,” Thayla huffed, working hard to match Victor’s natural pace. He wanted to slow for her, but, more urgently, he wanted to get to wherever the tether led before dark.

“Gorz, any update?” Victor had found that Gorz wasn’t lying when he said he had a hard time staying focused on the physical world. His mapping ability seemed to happen automatically, which allowed the spirit’s mind to drift easily if he wasn’t engaged in conversation.

“The tether continues to stretch to the south, very faintly. It seems like we might be nearing its end, but I can’t be sure because it has a much weaker signature than before.”

“Alright, thanks.” Victor turned to Thayla and added, “He says we’re still going in the right direction, and we might be getting close.”

Thayla nodded, and they kept climbing, and before long, Victor crested the hilltop and looked out at the plains that continued to stretch away to the horizon. Not so distant, though, was a large copse of twisted, leafless trees, and, from his vantage, Victor could see wooden and stone, partially collapsed structures amid the dead-looking trees. “That must be, um, what did Tellen say the town was called, Gorz?”

“Gel Harra and the tether leads down into those ruins.”

“Right, Gel Harra. Ever heard of it, Thayla?”

“Nope,” Thayla said, leaning on her knees and catching her breath. “Doesn’t look very inviting. Are those trees dead?”

“I think so, and there’s no underbrush or grass around them. It’s like the soil was poisoned. Tellen told me this town died of a plague during some war. I guess it was probably an intentional attack, right? I mean, you told me people don’t really get sick ...” Victor’s words trailed off as he started to imagine the scene—people dying of some horrible disease caused by a spell or potion.

“Yeah, people have done horrible things with spells and alchemy. I’ve heard of potions that will dissolve a person into dust, let alone make them sick enough to die.” Thayla straightened up, and suddenly her spear was in her hand.

“Shit! I forgot to ask about that. He left your spear alone? Any of your other belongings missing?”

“Nothing missing, but plenty of disgusting stuff added,” Thayla said, holding up her hand with the storage ring. “Entrails, bottles of gross fluids, even some body parts. From people, I might add.” Thayla shivered. “I hope the hunters never look into the latrine where I dumped everything out.”

“Oh, sick.” Victor repressed a shudder. “Alright, let’s get going. Gorz, please keep us following that tether.”

“I will, Victor.”

“He said he will,” Victor said for Thayla’s benefit, then started jogging down the hill. Thayla didn’t have any trouble keeping up going downhill. Soon, they were leaping and bounding, making it a contest to see who could get down the hill the fastest. Victor won, but he felt he had to give gravity at least half the credit. As they started jogging over the grass toward the first of the dead trees, Gorz spoke up again, “The tether is leading a bit to your left, toward the eastern edge of the ruins.”

Victor veered to his left, and, as they stepped onto the dusty, barren soil around the dead trees, he slowed, lifting Lifedrinker into his hands. Mist and shadows seemed to lurk among the lifeless branches, and Victor could only see for a few dozen steps in any direction. A shiver ran over his shoulders, and he spun, only to find Thayla looking around warily with her spear held ready. “This place is already giving me the creeps,” he said.

“Me too!” Thayla hissed.

“You know, you’re lucky to have courage-attuned Energy. I have to make it with a weave of my other Energies. Push some of it into your pathways—you’ll feel better. I’ll try to ask Gorz if there’s a way I can teach you my Heroic Heart spell, though.” He looked around and added, “I mean when we have some downtime.”

Victor summoned his Globe of Inspiration, urging it to follow him with a nudge of will. Then he cast Heroic Heart—he wasn’t going to let some necromancer or something mess with his mind. Heat rushed out of his chest and into his pathways, and he straightened, doubt having fled his mind. The trees looked sad and pathetic, devoid of life but not sinister. The clinging mist he’d perceived before was gone. The shadows were banished by his light or the sun, which Victor could see clearly now, high in the sky.

“That did help,” Thayla said. “I just wish I had more of that Energy.”

“Something to work on,” Victor said, continuing his advance. They passed many trees, never crossing any paths or game trails, but after a few minutes, Victor saw a crumbled stone wall ahead. He nodded to Thayla, and she nodded back, gesturing with her spear. Stalking as quietly as he could, Victor moved to a corner of the wall and peered around. He looked at a dusty expanse of barren land between structures—ancient homes built from stone and wood. The blocks were losing their mortar and crumbling, and the wood was dry, broken, devoid of paint, and sagging under the weight of slowly collapsing roofs.

“The tether leads away to the left, past this building,” Gorz said.

Victor motioned for Thayla to follow and then crept around the crumbling wall. As he rounded the corner to the left, he saw a dusty street lined with more crumbling buildings, and at the end, maybe the length of a city block away, sat a squat, half-collapsed building that looked very much like a church to Victor. There weren’t any crosses, but at the peak of its roof, a huge window of stained glass, still intact, depicted a Ghelli soaring into the clouds. The figure, armored in silver and with wings trailing sparkles, reminded him of Captain Lam for a moment.

The left side of the building was in ruins, but the big double doors were still in their frame, and the right-hand one was slightly ajar. “That’s where the tether leads, I’ll bet.”

“This was a Ghelli village? These trees must have been a lot different, once,” Thayla said in a hushed voice, looking around.

“Ghelli like trees?”

“Yes, I’ve never met a Ghelli that enjoyed living outside one of their forests.”

“Huh. Lam must hate it down in the mines.”

“Lam’s unlike any Ghelli I’ve ever met,” Thayla said with a shrug.

“Good point.” Victor started walking down the dusty road toward the strange building. “Is that a church? I’ve never learned about the Ghelli religion. Is there such a thing?”

“Sure. Like any people, they have different groups that believe different things. Most believe all living things are connected, and they’re especially reverent to trees. Some Ghelli cities are built around ancient trees they call “mother” trees.” Thayla shrugged. “Shadeni and Ardeni mostly believe in reincarnation and that our ancestors live through us.”

Victor slowed and looked at Thayla. They were about halfway to the church, and he paused to say, “Do you believe that?”

“Sure.” She shrugged again. “I’ve had dreams and memories I can’t explain. Maybe it was a past life? What about you? You told me about your bloodline and that vision you had. Isn’t it possible that was a past life? Or one of your ancestors that’s still alive in your blood?”

“Alright, good point. This is interesting shit, Thayla, but we’re in the middle of a creepy, dead town, about to follow an evil phylactery to something it’s connected to. I guess maybe we should continue this discussion later, eh?”

“Right,” Thayla snickered, tightening her grip on her spear and nodding down the road. “Let’s get to the bottom of this.” Nothing accosted them as they advanced on the large stone building. Victor began to feel a cold, pulsating aura of Energy as they neared, though, and he raised an eyebrow at Thayla, silently asking if she felt it too. She nodded and gestured toward the gap between the large, sagging doors.

Victor moved forward, hooked Lifedrinker’s beard on the edge of the open door, and pulled, dragging it roughly over the dirt-covered, stone stoop. His orb and the rays of pale sunlight exposed a large hall, much like Victor imagined a medieval church might look. Broken furniture lined the walls, stacked by some person, monster, or force beyond Victor’s understanding. In the rainbow light coming through the overlarge stained glass window, Victor saw a greenish-yellow portal swirling near the far wall.

“No!” Thayla hissed.

At the same time, Victor said, “Oh, fuck.” He looked at Thayla and confirmed his thinking: “Another dungeon?”

“I fear so,” she said.

“Victor, the tether does, indeed, stretch into that portal.”

Victor growled and kicked the door wide, striding into the hall. Nothing responded to his presence other than the dust on the walls and beams, which drifted down in a shower of rainbow motes, falling through the light. Victor glanced up at the stained glass, admiring its beauty as the sun’s light shone through. Then he walked toward the portal, looking around the corners of the church or meeting hall—whatever it was. The portal was the only thing of note, and the sickly cool aura

emanating from it told Victor all he needed to know about what he'd find on the other side. "More undead."

"Probably," Thayla replied, leaning on her spear and staring at the swirling pattern at the portal's center.

"Alright, fuck this. Let's smash the phylactery, smash the skull, and say goodbye to this part of the world."

"I can't do that," Thayla said, her voice quiet but resigned.

"What do you mean?"

"Victor, after what that thing did to me, after the connection we made ..." she paused, her eyes darting around as she searched for the right words. "I can't let him live. I have to see Belikot destroyed, and I think there's something connected to him in that dungeon. If we destroy what we have, I'm afraid this other part will grow stronger and come for us. Or, at least for me."

"And you don't want that hanging over your head when you're with your daughter."

"Exactly," Thayla sighed, visibly frustrated.

"Alright. Fuck it. I've killed plenty of undead; why not some more?"

"You can go, Victor. I won't hold it against you! Go to Gelica; enjoy your life!" Her eyes were earnest, and she reached out to squeeze Victor's shoulder while she spoke, and he couldn't help smiling at her. It felt good to have someone who cared about his happiness.

"C'mon, Thayla. You know me better than that. I couldn't leave if I wanted to. Nope," he said, sighing with mock exhaustion, "time for me to be the hero again." He reached out and put an arm over Thayla's shoulders, leaning heavily on her. "So tiring always having to save the day, you know?" Just as he'd hoped, he got a smile out of her, though she squirmed out from under his arm, turning to face him.

"I'm serious!"

"Yeah, me too. C'mon, it's a dungeon! I'm a warrior adventurer! I should want to go in there, regardless of this tether bullshit."

"Adventurer now, hmm?"

"That's right. Just ask the people in Steampool!" Victor laughed, then picked up a nearly petrified, broken chair and threw it at the portal. To his surprise, it bounced off like it had hit a stone wall and clattered in broken pieces over the flagstone floor.

“I don’t think chairs can enter dungeons by themselves,” Thayla snorted.

“Right, right,” Victor nodded, moving closer to the portal. “Well? Let’s get this shit over with. What do you say?”

“If you’re sure,” Thayla said.

“One hundred percent.” Victor held out a hand, and Thayla took it. “In together, out together, right?” Thayla nodded, squeezing his hand tightly, then Victor walked forward and stepped into the cold, pulsing circle of Energy. He grunted as the icy tendrils pulled him through a dark void, and then he was stumbling over dusty ground illuminated by pale moonlight. Thayla came through, still gripping his hand, but she stumbled and fell, cussing a word that Victor didn’t think he’d ever heard—something like, “gakuk!”

Victor reached down to help her up, and then, in a frenzy of growls and slashing claws, shadows jumped out of the darkness, tearing into them. Most of the ripping claws aimed at Victor slid harmlessly off his armored shirt, but several tore gouges in his arm, and one hooked painfully into the meat of his thigh. He roared, finished yanking Thayla to her feet, and cast Inspiring Presence. The shadows peeled back, and he saw an easy path between the snarling, black-furred, rotting wolf creatures.

He whipped Lifedrinker in a liquid cleave, striding out of the melee in her wake, only to turn and chop at the creatures’ flanks. Thayla shouted and rolled, whirling her spear around to create some space, and the fight was truly joined. There had to be a dozen or more of the monsters. They were similar in size and shape to a German shepherd, but their fur was black, matted, and missing in patches. Their exposed flesh was rotten and falling away, especially around their snouts, and cold blue lights shone from their eye sockets.

The zombie wolves were fast, and their claws and teeth were sharp, but they weren’t nearly as tough as the ghouls from the other dungeon. As Victor cleaved off limbs and chopped through spines, they fell and were easy to dispatch. Thayla danced among them, using her superior spear skills and speed to drive her weapon’s sharp, broad blade through eye sockets in killing blows or into their torsos to hold them down while Victor killed them. The battle was furious and noisy, and Victor and Thayla suffered half a dozen gashes and bites. Still, it was over as fast as it began, and soon they stood panting over the broken corpses of their foes.

“Where are we?” Thayla asked, looking around, particularly gazing up at the moons.

“We’re outside, but look,” Victor pointed at a nearby tree. It was twisted just like the ones outside the dead village, but this one was decked in black, red-veined leaves. They were broad, shaped somewhat like maple leaves, but they seemed to seeth with shadows. Looking past the tree and the ones behind it, he saw a shadowy cobbled street leading between stone and wood buildings, pale blue streetlights illuminating the scene in pools of soft, cold light.

“Is this Gel Harra? Like a twisted copy of it?” Thayla asked.

“Yeah, I guess so. Nothing says dungeons have to be underground, I guess.” Victor sighed with relief as motes of golden Energy flowed into them from the dead wolf creatures. His painful lacerations closed up, and Thayla’s looked much better, largely scabbed over. “Gorz? Is the tether visible in here?”

“Yes, Victor, it’s rather strong and leads toward those structures in the distance.”

“Well, the tether is here. Hang on,” Victor said, then he resummoned his Globe of Inspiration, making it large and bright by pushing nearly a thousand Energy into it. “No more ambushes from the shadows, eh?”

“Good!” Thayla said, following close beside him as Victor began walking toward the cobbles ahead. They were only halfway when another pack of the wolf monsters attacked them. This time, in the bright light of inspiration and with Sovereign Will boosting his agility, Victor butchered them without a single injury. Thayla did her part to keep them at bay and drive them off his flanks, but Victor moved like a dancer among them, dealing glittering death with each swing of Lifedrinker.

They paused to take in the Energy of their victory, and, not having accumulated any new wounds, Thayla’s damaged flesh knitted further. They hurried to the edge of the cobbled road and the first two buildings, and Victor thought they looked like houses. Their lower levels were built from stone blocks, but the second floor was made from masterfully woven wood. The construction was unlike anything he’d ever seen—long solid beams of wood twisted with each other and braided through perpendicular slats. It looked like the wood had grown into the shape of a house.

“That’s how Ghelli build with wood,” Thayla said. “They grow it into the shape they want.”

“Pretty cool. Did the village outside the dungeon used to look like this, you think?”

“Maybe, but there were still wooden structures standing, and they weren’t built this way.”

“Yeah, you’re right. Maybe the dungeon is more like what it could have been? I don’t know. I’m just guessing shit now.” Victor shrugged, looking around warily, expecting the next monster to jump them at any second. The air was cold, and the lingering wisps of mist that tried to cling to existence inside his light were palpably damp. Strange hoots and garbled roars started to drift through the night air, and Victor slowly turned in a circle, holding Lifedrinker ready. “I don’t know. I’m not sure this is a copy of Gel Harra. Do these streets and buildings match up to the ruins?”

“The buildings are very different, but the layout of the streets seems similar. If we turn to the left, we should see the main road and the Ghelli worship hall at the end.” Thayla pointed to the crossroads a short way ahead. Victor nodded and started that way.

He’d just rounded the corner when he heard clanking and the clop of heavy feet rapidly click-clacking on the cobbles. He spun to his right and barely had time to react by diving into a roll, narrowly avoiding being smashed by a huge roladii driven by a black-armored warrior. When he rolled back to his feet, he saw Thayla had rushed forward with her spear, menacing the great, armored roladii and its rider as it performed a slow turn to face her and Victor.

The roladii was easily twice as bulky as the ones that Tellen and his people rode. More than just being larger, it was covered in heavy black armor plates. Dark smoke drifted from its smoldering orange eyes, and when Victor’s gaze traveled up, past its head to the rider, he saw a similar countenance: a black plate helmet with orange, smoking lights behind the eye slits. Victor sidestepped around Thayla, circling the rider, so he couldn’t charge them both at once.

As the rider pulled at the reins and the beast of a mount snorted black clouds of soot, Victor cast Channel Energy, flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy. Sovereign Will was already bolstering his agility, and he thought it wise to stay nimble on his toes. Thayla’s spear had a blue nimbus around the blade, and she circled opposite Victor, eyes scowling and lips pressed tight.

“Come on!” Victor roared, trying to taunt the rider into doing something rash. The black-armored roladii stamped and snorted, turning toward Victor and the rider brandished a smoldering red and black spiked mace. Victor lifted Lifedrinker sideways in front of his chest and nodded, again shouting, “Come on!”

With his agility boosted, Victor was fast, faster than Thayla even, and still, the roladii’s charge was a blur to him, a streak of smoking black flesh and metal that tore into him like a comet. He’d just registered the movement and started to step aside when hundreds or thousands of pounds of monster smashed into him with tremendous force, knocking him back like he’d been hit by a wrecking ball. The impact stunned Victor, driving his axe into his chest and knocking his grip loose. The air was forced from his lungs, and, as he gasped, still struggling to figure out what happened, his back and head cracked into the stone wall of a nearby building.

Stars exploded in Victor’s eyes, and, unable to breathe, he convulsed on the ground for a few heartbeats before his mind caught up with the events that put him there. Lying on his side, back against the wall, his vision started to clear, and he saw Thayla dancing around the roladii and its rider. She was jabbing her spear in flashes of blue Energy at the haunches of the mount. She’d leap to the side, always staying in its blind spot, never giving it a chance to charge her. The rider was roaring, smoke streaming from his black helmet, jerking the reins and swinging his smoldering mace ineffectually at Thayla, unable to match the reach of her spear.

As his chest stopped spasming and he finally sucked in a breath, the black edges of Victor’s vision cleared, only to be replaced by a hot, liquid rage. Who was this fucking pendejo to throw him like a punk kid against this wall? He saw Lifedrinker lying on the cobbles, and his anger stoked even higher. He knew his rage-attuned Energy was bleeding out of his Core into his pathways, but he didn’t try to tamp it down. No, he opened the floodgates, letting it surge and burn. His vision started

to tint red, and a low, rolling laugh began to rumble out of his throat. He stood up, a flickering red nimbus rolling along his shoulders, and walked over to Lifedrinker. "Enough dancing!" he barked, changing his Sovereign Will boost to strength.

Victor kept the knight in view as he squatted to pick up Lifedrinker, and when she was resting solidly in both his hands, Victor's laugh rolled out louder. Could he trust himself to keep Thayla safe if he went Berserk? Was his will strong enough? He wasn't sure, but he desperately wanted to berserk. His fury at the rider was burning in his blood, and his heart was beating in slow, deep, hateful thuds. He could feel the Quinametzin in his blood, screaming to be let loose. His hands twisted on the wooden haft of his axe, and he looked from Thayla to the rider, watching as she taunted the beast. She was clever, but she wasn't hurting it.

With every ounce of his will, Victor calmed enough to coherently grunt, "Thayla, back off." She glanced at him, carefully hopping to the roladii's blindspot first. When she saw how he stood on the road, red Energy flickering along his silhouette and blazing from his eyes, she nodded and retreated toward him, moving to his left and stepping back out of his view. The rider spun his mount, facing the two of them. Victor laughed at him, a slow, deep chuckle, "Huh, huh, huh," and he beckoned again with his axe. The rider looked at Victor and at Thayla just behind him and nodded, blowing black smoke from beneath his visor.

Victor, enraged though he was, had perfect control of himself, and he watched for the smoke to start to billow from the roladii's snout, and when it did, he cast Berserk. The red of his vision deepened, his breaths pumped like forge bellows, and Victor screamed as pure rage crashed through his pathways, and his bloodline responded like a fuel exposed to flame. The roladii blurred into a black and orange comet, streaking toward Victor, and he caught it on the living wood of Lifedrinker's haft. His huge hands and arms strained as his feet slid backward, and Lifedrinker's handle groaned and strained but held.

The roladii's forehead was pressing into him, trying to drive him back, but its momentum was broken, and Victor roared and pushed. The beast, suddenly not so large at all, gave ground and began to slide to the side, tilting and screaming as Victor drove forward on powerful, massive legs. His feet dug into the cobbles, and red heat steamed off him as he roared and pushed the roladii to the side until it stumbled, and the rider was sent sprawling. Screaming with bloodlust, Victor finished his shove, jerking Lifedrinker to the side and bringing her around in a looping, whistling chop that connected with the back of the roladii's skull, slipping neatly beneath a metal plate and burying her edge up to the haft.

Lifedrinker bucked and surged, digging for Energy, and Victor let her go. The roladii staggered for two steps and then collapsed, the axe still buried in its head. Victor stalked toward the rider, scrabbling to his feet a few paces away. He still held his smoldering mace and spun, swinging it toward Victor's head, but Victor held up a thick forearm and caught the blow. It stung and might have shattered an ordinary man's bones, but Victor shrugged it off, stepped in close, and caught the armored figure in a bear hug.

The knight or warrior, or whatever he was, seemed small and weak, and Victor was furious that he'd tried to stand against him. Who was this worm to challenge the Quinametzin? He grunted and squeezed, feeling the heavy black metal compress under his powerful arms. Victor felt something slapping against his back, and had he been interested in figuring out what it was, he'd realized the knight was flailing desperately at his back with his mace. The blows were ineffectual, jostling

the shiny black rings of his armor but hardly impacting Victor's flesh. It was like a child swatting at a grown man with a broomstick.

Victor squeezed, jerking his arms, savoring the crunch of metal and bones, and when the former rider stopped thrashing, he savagely threw the twitching form to the cobbles with a liquid crunch of meat and armor. He stepped toward the writhing, jerking body and stomped on its steel-encased head and kept stomping until the orange lights under the bent, twisted helmet stopped glowing. Victor heaved heavy, deep breaths and looked around. In the red blur of his angry eyes, he saw a woman driving a spear into the roladii, slipping it between armored plates. He stepped toward her, a rumbling growl in his chest, but then he caught her eyes, and he knew it was Thayla, a friend, and he forced himself to calm.

Victor stood there, in the middle of the street, staring at Thayla for several heartbeats, and, slowly, the red nimbus around him started to fade, he seemed to shrink into himself, and a few moments later, he breathed heavily and said, "You alright, Thayla?"

"I'm fine, Victor, but that was crazy! You turned into a giant! You stopped that roladii's charge! You crushed that knight with your bare hands!"

"Yeah, but I didn't attack you. That's good, right?"