

## Victor BK2: Ch16

Book 2: Chapter 16: Naghelli

“What do you mean you didn’t attack me? Why would you attack me?” Thayla asked after they’d absorbed the Energy from their battle. She squinted at Victor as she jerked her spear out of the monstrous roladii.

“I mean, I was berserk. I’ve totally lost myself in the past when I berserk, but I think I’m starting to get some control.”

“Oh, right. Well, get your axe. Who knows what’s coming next.” She gestured to Lifedrinker, still buried in the back of the roladii’s skull. He nodded and stepped forward, jerking the handle up and down to break the grip of the bone on her blade.

“You said I ‘turned into a giant.’ What do you mean exactly? I know my bloodline does that, but like, when it’s happening, I don’t really feel how big I get.”

“You grew a lot! Like half again as tall as you are now and much bulkier. Not that you’re small normally, heh.”

“That’s so fucking wild.” The hoots and growls had died down during their furious melee. Victor and Thayla stood in the quiet misty air, looking up and down the cobbled road. In both directions, it led away into thicker mist and darkness. “This dude was kind of like a boss, don’t you think? I didn’t level, and I don’t see a chest.”

“Yeah,” Thayla grunted, looking around with a scowl. “Well, levels get slower. I told you that.”

“Right. Well, maybe this guy wasn’t a boss. Or maybe not all dungeon bosses give a chest. I guess I don’t have a ton of experience to draw from.”

“More than I do. At least I’m not stuck in a skull this time, hmm?” She punched his shoulder and pointed down the street to their left. “I think that’s the way we’d go on the outside to get to the Ghelli worship hall. Odds are that’s where we need to go.”

“The tether is strongly pulling in that direction, Victor.”

“Thanks, Gorz.” He looked at Thayla and added, “He says that’s the way to go.” She nodded in response, and the two of them advanced down the street, Victor’s light trailing just slightly behind and both gripping their weapons warily. Victor switched his Sovereign Will boost to his agility again, tensing his muscles in anticipation of another surprise attack.

“Victor, what rank, exactly, have you gotten your race to? I’ve never seen someone with a bloodline like yours.”

“I got boosted up to improved, rank one. I found this silvery orb with weird flakes of black floating within. Gorz said it was a delving orb or something like that; it digs through your, I dunno, DNA or something, looking for bloodlines.”

“DNA?”

“Um, I’m not an expert on the subject, but it’s a scientific term for microscopic material in our cells—all our genetic information is stored in it. That’s why I figure that’s what that orb was ‘delving.’”

“That’s ...” Thayla paused and held a finger to her lips. She gestured to a dark alley between two buildings that had come out of the fog on their left. Standing in a cluster, several strange-looking Ghelli were talking in hushed voices. They were tall, thin like most Ghelli, and their dragonfly wings were like black gossamer with streaks and patterns in shades of ochre and red. Victor and Thayla had stopped moving and were quietly staring at the group when one of them turned to regard them with black eyes.

“What the fuck?” Victor’s voice was a low whisper.

“Naghelli!” Thayla hissed, “I thought they were all gone!”

“Here are the new guests. What have they done with Garran?” an extremely tall Naghelli said, his long, spindly arms stretching out to gesture and guide his companion’s gaze their way. As more and more dark, inky, black eyes turned toward them, Victor straightened and moved more to the middle of the street.

“You guys can speak? Nice touch for a dungeon.”

“Hah, the brute thinks he’s stumbled upon a simple dungeon. What’s this, though? Do you feel it, brothers and sisters?”

“I feel it! The master’s aura is so strong here. Could it be?” One of the female Naghelli stepped forward, her long, silvery hair glimmering in Victor’s light. She wore, like the others, a tightly fitted, lacey, black blouse over silky black pants. Her top’s open neckline exposed a large swath of alabaster chest, and Victor couldn’t help noticing the pulsing red jewel dangling from a chain between her breasts.

While she spoke, the others had begun to fan out in a semi-circle, moving slowly toward Victor and Thayla. The tall man, his black, fathomless eyes squinting, held up his hands, making a box with his thumbs and forefingers, and studied Victor and Thayla through the gap. “It’s finally happened. The master’s phylactery is here. Have you come to join us, then?”

“Join you?” Victor didn’t like the looks of things. These creatures, or people, weirded him out. His unease was more because they were weirdly similar to Ghelli than because of how they looked objectively. It also bothered him that they spotted the phylactery so quickly and now mentioned a “master.”

“Of course; there will be room for servants in our Twilight Empire.” The seven Naghelli had stopped advancing, and though they stood in a loose semi-circle in front of Victor and Thayla, none bore weapons. Victor saw jewelry on their fingers, ears, and necks, however, and he knew better than to consider them unarmed.

“Victor, these aren’t real people—they must be constructs of the dungeon. Naghelli are extinct, killed off in a great war just after the worlds merged,” Thayla said, her eyes jerking from one set of dark eyes to another, her spear pointing out in front of her.

“Extinct? Oh, brothers and sisters! I knew our numbers had dwindled, but is it true? The world thinks we’re gone?” A different, shorter woman spoke this time. She had black curly hair, and her voice dripped with venomous anger. The way she clipped off her words made Victor think that if anyone doubted her existence, she was willing to remedy the misconception.

“Nonsense. We aren’t the only enclave, and you know this,” the tall, original speaker said. He turned to Thayla and continued, “Hiding, regrouping, is not extinct. The time is nearly at hand for us to push forth again. You’re lucky—you get to bear witness to our resurgence.”

“Mmhmm, and what about Belikot?” Victor asked. The entire group of Naghelli hissed and stared at Victor, exposing their very human-like teeth.

“Do not speak his name so frivolously, knave!” The silver-haired woman hissed, spittle flecking her lips in her vehemence.

“So that is the, um, ‘master’ you’re talking about?” Victor pressed.

“Yes, fool, and you’d rather he didn’t wake at the sound of his name in this, his demesne,” the tall Naghelli said, craning his neck and tilting an ear toward the darkness down the street. “You’re luck holds—he slumbers, yet.”

“What do you mean he slumbers? I’ve already fought with him outside this dungeon and put his skull someplace very out of reach.” The Naghelli looked at each other, amusement lighting their eyes and twisting their lips into grins.

“You faced one of his remnants. A sliver of his soul set loose to scout the world. Should our master wake and face you in his full glory, you’ll note the difference. Now that you’ve brought his phylactery here, he’ll wake of his own accord soon and thus, be less wrathful. One can hope,” the silver-haired woman said.

“Victor, we should get out of here,” Thayla said in a low whisper.

“Right, well, I think Thayla and I took a wrong turn. We’re going to, um, step out.” Victor took a step back, keeping the Naghelli in his field of view.

“No, no, large one,” said the curly-haired woman, stepping forward, a bright, foot-long, silvery dagger in her hand.

“You have a choice to make!” A different man suddenly spoke up on the left edge of the semi-circle. Victor glanced at him and saw his short silver hair, similar black attire, and the thick, metal cudgel in his hand.

“What choice?” Victor and Thayla took another step back.

“Choice one: fight with us, lose the phylactery and die, or, choice two: give us the phylactery and enjoy preeminence among the servants of the Empire.”

“That right?” Victor growled, twisting his hands around Lifedrinker’s handle. He cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy so that she flared brightly with a crimson halo. “You’ll have to try to take it, then.” As he spoke, Victor also cast Inspiring Presence.

The Naghelli hissed and started to move, but they seemed to advance in slow motion as inspiration struck Victor. His globe of light was so much brighter in his inspired eyes that the shadows seemed to fall away, and the mystery surrounding the weird Ghelli-like creatures dispersed. In his new clarity of mind, they just seemed like thin, frail people that should know better than to tussle with the likes of Victor Sandoval. He couldn’t help it as a chuckle rolled up out of his chest, and he stepped to the right, lifting Lifedrinker in anticipation of the first combatant to come into range.

Victor’s perception might have been overly optimistic, though, and while he might have been more than ready for a normal charge, what happened next left him baffled. Each of the Naghelli exploded into a burst of shadowy black smoke, and he was left holding his axe, staring at an empty street. He looked around, confused by their apparent retreat after they’d just threatened him, and that’s when he saw them darting through the shadows, just at the extremity of his light. He took a breath to bellow a challenge, but before he could speak, the darkly clad people launched into an attack, darting like liquid smoke and wielding gleaming silvery weapons.

“Victor!” Thayla had time to shout, and then the seven Naghelli were streaking through the air, dashing over the cobbles, and leaping into a furious melee with the two would-be adventurers. Victor blocked one flashing, silver blade, catching it on Lifedrinker’s haft, and when the edge caught in her wood, and the Naghelli wielding it was brought up short, Victor kicked out. His boot crunched down on the attacker’s thigh, and Victor felt something give. The man yelled out and stumbled back, dropping the shortsword still caught in Lifedrinker’s haft.

Thayla yelped in pain, and Victor saw her gripping a wound in her thigh that pulsed thick goutts of blood through her fingers. He tried to spot the Naghelli that had delivered the injury, but suddenly something heavy smashed into his left shoulderblade, knocking him forward. These people were

stronger than they looked! While he stumbled forward, he heard Thayla cry out again, and by the time he caught his balance and looked back, she was on her knees, swaying in a daze with blood sheeting down over her face from a deep, wide gash in her forehead.

Suddenly Victor remembered Yrella. He remembered how she lay on the floor of the pit, twitching, dead before her body realized it. Before Victor could think about strategy or formalize a plan, he felt hot rage-attuned Energy flooding his pathways. His heart pounded with a terrific thud that people nearby would have heard, and suddenly he was wielding Lifedrinker in one hand like a normal person would hold a hatchet.

As Thayla toppled to the side, Victor took one step, and he was standing over her fallen form, crouched and ready, staring with red, bloodshot eyes at the darting, flashing shadows that lurked outside the light. He had no words for the emotions roiling in his heart, so he just roared, brandishing Lifedrinker. His scream crashed and echoed off the stone buildings, and the Naghelli laughed in response, mocking, sourceless laughter that drifted out of the shadows.

Rage and frustration filled Victor to overflowing, and his body veritably shook with the need to strike something, but deep in the root of his being was the need to stand guard over Thayla, and he refused to leave her vulnerable. He crouched over her, axe held high in his right hand, and waited for one of the mocking, slippery creatures to come within range of it. His desire for contact was answered, but not by one Naghelli. No, all of them struck at once, and suddenly Victor was surrounded by bursts of shadows as they all appeared, driving their silvery weapons at him from every angle.

Victor completely ignored the attacks. Instead, his eyes alighted upon one Naghelli that had appeared perfectly placed in the arc of his axe. While seven blades pierced or slashed him, Victor screamed and brought Lifedrinker down with enough force to shatter a boulder. Her keen, hungry edge cracked through a collarbone and then carved a two-foot trench through the Naghelli's torso. His eyes bugged out in surprise, terror, and the realization that he was dead.

As the split Naghelli fell back, a torrent of red fluid sluicing out over the cobbles, Victor roared again and grabbed hold of a spear that had pierced his abdomen, the narrow tip having slipped just beneath his armored shirt. He jerked the spear forward, driving it through his body and out his back, pulling its wielder within range of Lifedrinker. The woman panicked, let go of the haft, stepped back, and had her arm hacked off at the elbow. She shrieked and fell away, spraying hot blood over Victor's face. Victor roared with guttural laughter.

Most of his wounds were superficial, the spear through his abdomen being an exception. All the other cuts and stabs were rapidly healing in his rage, but still, the Naghelli were fast and skilled, and they kept piling on the wounds. Victor saw the woman with the severed arm kneeling up the street, watching him with hate-filled eyes. If he'd been less enraged, he might have heard her sobs or the cries of terror and horror when Victor split the first Naghelli. As it was, though, Victor saw only red and heard only the thudding of his heart urging him to destroy his enemies.

He crouched, axe lifted high, spear through his gut, and waited for the next attack. He stood that way several long moments before his fury-filled mind realized the wounded Naghelli woman was no longer staring at him, and the shadows had stopped moving. He wanted to dash into the night, hunting his foes, but something kept him still, and when he glanced down, he remembered what it

was—Thayla. He had to keep them away from her. He stood, heaving for breath, and, as the immediacy of combat started to fade, he began to feel the discomfort of the length of wood jabbing out of his stomach.

With a grunt and a roar of pain, Victor drove the spear the rest of the way through himself, pulling it out of his back and flinging it to the cobbles. He pressed a hand against his rigid stomach, and as the last vestiges of his rage healed the wound, at least superficially, he fell to a knee next to Thayla and waited. He waited for the madness to leave him, he waited for his enemies to return, and he waited for the vague dread that Thayla was dead to either leave him or be proven true.

Golden motes of Energy rose from the corpse of the fallen Naghelli and surged into him, speeding things along—his rage faded, and Thayla moaned softly as her thin stream of Energy partially healed her head. Victor sighed with relief because he knew the System must consider the fight over if it was giving out Energy. His enemies had truly fled. He was still kneeling next to Thayla, so he turned to regard her. Her face was crusty with dried blood, but her eyes were alert, and she stared at Victor for a moment before comprehension animated her. “We’re not dead?”

“No, I think they ran away.”

“That doesn’t make sense. They really wanted that phylactery. Victor! Where’s your satchel?” Victor slapped a hand to his chest, feeling for the strap, and only felt his chain shirt.

“Oh, fuck no! They cut it off? I didn’t notice a thing!”

“How long?” Thayla asked, sitting up. She leaned forward and retched as soon as she was upright.

“Easy, you okay?” Victor held her shoulder.

“Things are spinning a little, and my stomach’s turning flips. I think it’s just the blow to the head—I’ll recover. We have to find that phylactery, Victor. You heard what they said!”

“About Beli...” he stopped himself and continued, “About, you know, the asshole in the skull? Yeah, I heard them, and then I fought with them, and I think we need to get the fuck out of here. You’re not ready for these guys, Thayla.” Victor didn’t want to call her out like that, but, damn it, she’d been put down in just seconds by those Naghelli shitheads.

“Victor, what if he gets more powerful? What if they come into Fanwath and start another war or something?”

“What if? Look, I’m all for trying to do the right thing, but I’m not going to fucking watch them slit your throat and then have to find your daughter to tell her about her mom. I can’t fucking do that, Thayla. Come on; when we get to Gelica, we can tell others about this place. I’ll even come back with them. All right?” He added the last as he stood and held out a hand to help her to her feet.

She took it, and, once she was on her feet and standing on trembling legs, she nodded. “You’re right. I’m not ready to face them again.”

“Let’s go,” Victor said, turning toward where they’d fought the knight and his roladii mount. He held Thayla’s wrist with his left hand and Lifedrinker with his right, peering around warily as they progressed.

“Victor, you remember those children’s horror stories we talked about back in the mine?”

“Yeah?”

“There are a lot of horrifying stories involving Naghelli. They’re not supposed to exist anymore!”

“Well, they’re tough and fast, that’s for sure. They die alright, though.” Victor shrugged, picking up the pace, tugging on Thayla. They passed to the right of the roladii corpse, turning down the short side street and the forest beyond. They walked past the dead pack of zombie hounds and entered the strange forest with twisted trees and black, feathery leaves. The portal’s glimmer was easy to spot in the distance, with no other lights to obscure or drown it out.

Victor hurried even more, still pulling on Thayla’s wrist. He refused to let go of her because he could only imagine shadowy, quick Naghelli coming out of the shadows to take her or strike her down. Thayla was keeping up, though her breathing was ragged. Victor jogged around one last tall, looming tree, and then they were in the clearing where they’d slain the first pack of zombie hounds, and the shimmering gateway sat on the other side, between two gnarled tree trunks.

Victor stepped into the clearing, and movement from near the portal brought him up short. He stepped in front of Thayla and watched as the silver-haired female Naghelli moved out of the shadows. “I bear a message, warrior.” She had eyes only for Victor, staring at him warily.

“I’m listening.”

“I am Vellia, and you’ve slain my mate, Horol. I know he joined the battle willingly and that you fought fiercely and with honor. I thank you for giving Horol a clean death.” She stood straight, pressing both her palms together in front of her chest, and bowed to Victor. Victor wondered what the hell was going on. He looked around, peering into the shadows around the clearing, but he didn’t see any other Naghelli.

“Is that all? You’re not going to threaten us with your master’s vengeance and shit?”

“My master will most likely celebrate you. With his phylactery in hand, he’ll be free to leave this realm and begin working toward our great cause again.” Victor could feel Thayla growing agitated, and he knew she wanted to say or ask

something, but she held herself still. Victor wasn't sure if it was fear, doubt, or respect that kept her quiet, but he knew she was feeling like shit, and he wanted to get her out.

“Alright, Vellia. I'm not cool with you guys jumping me and stealing my stuff, and I'm really not cool with the versions of your master I've met outside this place, so I bet we'll meet again. I gotta get going.” Victor started walking toward her, Lifedrinker swinging menacingly in his fist, and Thayla trailing behind.

“Can I know your name, warrior?” Vellia asked, stepping to the side, out of his path to the portal.

“His name is Victor, and you should mark it well,” Thayla said, suddenly standing up straight.

“Victor. Yes, I agree, little Shadeni. This one is worth taking note of. Until we meet again, then, Victor.”

“Yep,” Victor said, giving her one last look, taking care to remember the details of her face—her thick silver brows, her long, narrow nose, the bluish tint to the skin in the sockets of her dark, black eyes, and the way her lips curled in a slightly crooked smile. Victor nodded at her and then stepped into the portal, still dragging Thayla by the wrist.

Just as before, he felt the portal's cold Energy drawing him through, and then he was stepping into the dusty, ruined worship hall in the desolate village of Gel Harra. Thayla came through right behind him, and they looked at each other for a minute, and she sighed heavily.

“What a disaster. We did the opposite of what we wanted to do!”

“It is what it is, Thayla. Shit, chica, at least you aren't dead. I really thought you were dead for a minute!”

“Yeah, thank you, Victor. You saved my life again. I'm sure I'll never repay you, but ...” she trailed off, her eyes distant like she was looking for the right way to express herself.

“Hey, I'm not keeping count. What's the difference between saving someone's life once or ten times? Either way, you can't pay it back. You've saved my life a couple of times, so we both owe each other everything. Cool?”

“Cool?” she echoed, but then she smiled and said, “Yeah, cool, Victor. Cool.”

“You do get me, don't you?” Victor reached out and pulled her into a hug, and she didn't resist at all. She felt much smaller than he'd imagined, and he realized he'd built her up in his mind because of her attitude. “You're alright, Thayla. Let's go give Tellen the bad news, then let's get going to fucking Gelica, eh?”

“Alright, Victor. I’m with you, but only because you promised me you’d deal with Belikot. You are still going to deal with him, right?”

“Yeah, of course. You think I can let some assholes steal my shit and get away with it? No, no. I’ll be paying him another visit after you’re safe with your kid, alright?”

“Right,” she said, standing back from him with a smile. “Let’s hurry; I want to see what the hunters are cooking for dinner.”

“Now you’re talking!” Victor followed her to the crooked door of the partially ruined building, walking through a patch of colorful light cast by the stained glass window. Thayla stepped out, and Victor was right behind her when she fell to a knee, clutching at something in her chest. She tugged at it, and Victor saw the feathers of a tiny, dart-like arrow. Thayla fell to the ground, her legs and arms convulsing as her eyes rolled back in her head.

“Thayla!” Victor cried, diving over her, hoping to protect her from whoever had shot at her. Whistling shrieks heralded the arrival of more arrows and darts, and he felt a sting in his forearm and two more in his thigh. Another hit his calf, and several more sank into his back through the rings of his vest, their narrow, round points easily piercing the armor.

Victor felt like someone was operating a dimmer switch on the sun as darkness crept into his vision. He felt sluggish and slow, but something was bothering him. What was it? “Oh yeah, some fucking pendejos are shooting arrows into me!” he coughed, actually chuckling at how loopy he sounded. No, this wasn’t funny—this was bad! Someone was filling him with darts! Someone shot Thayla! A spark of heat flared in his chest at that thought, and Victor concentrated on it.

With a slow, ponderous buildup, Victor’s heart thudded. It sounded like a base drum, and suddenly his vision flared with a red heat, and the darkness fell back. Victor concentrated on that red, terrible fury in his chest, pushed more rage-attuned Energy out of his Core, and cast Berserk.

“He’s not going down!” a gnat’s voice called.

“Now! Throw the alchemical canister!” another deeper-voiced gnat hollered.

Victor surged to his feet, but just as he started to look around for the enemies he needed to kill, some sort of fog filled the air around him. His face felt numb, and his legs were like jelly. He sat down on his butt and laughed. What was he so angry about? Hadn’t he been shot a bunch of times? Oh, the darts! Victor laughed again, a great, deep belly laugh that shook his shoulders up and down and made it hard to breathe. Why was it so funny? He didn’t know, but he couldn’t stop laughing, and then the darkness started to creep into his vision again, and he laid back, still chuckling between deep, slow breaths.