

Victor BK2: Ch17

Book 2: Chapter 17: Priorities

“...take it and be grateful. You hardly had to do anything,” said a gruff, hoarse voice.

“Aye, well, I could use the work if you need a wagon guard wherever you're taking ‘em.” This voice was wheedling and soft.

“C’mon, da. He don’t need us.” A younger voice spoke up from further away. Victor strained, trying to picture where all the speakers were. He’d only been awake a few seconds, and he felt groggy, but he knew he’d been taken. He vaguely remembered the darts and gas, but even if he didn’t, his hands being bound behind his back and a dark hood over his head confirmed his predicament.

Victor felt something heavy and cold on his neck, and he knew it was a collar. He felt a strange coldness emanating from it, and it took him a moment to realize it was doing something to his pathways, something to do with his Core. He turned his mind inward to look at the blazing orbs of his Energy, fearful of what he might see.

The voices continued speaking, but Victor tuned them out as he was confronted by a scene at his Core that was more puzzling than disturbing. He could see the cold Energy bands stretching from the collar into his pathways and down into his Core. He could see them wrapped around his rage-attuned Energy, subduing the blazing red sun to a barely smoldering ember. The strange thing, however, was that his inspiration-attuned Energy seemed utterly untouched. It blazed with all of its former glory, pulsing strongly at the center of his being. Could they be so stupid?

Victor grunted and scooted up against whatever they had his hands tied to. He felt bars against his shoulders and figured he was in some sort of cage. “Hey, any asshole out there that can tell me what’s up?” He stretched out his legs, feeling for the extremities of his confinement, and that’s when he realized his ankles were bound with something heavy that rattled as he moved. Chains?

“Ahh, my guest awakes. No, I can’t quibble with you anymore, Turl. Get yourself back to Steampool and spend the coins you just earned, and put me out of your mind.” Victor heard grumbling and then the sound of departing feet. A moment later, the gruff voice spoke again, this time much closer, “Not feeling too great, I wager, eh, big fella?”

“I feel pretty ok, to be honest,” Victor said, and the words were true. The grogginess had faded, and he felt rather rested, if a bit cramped. He flexed his hands into fists, testing the tightness of the bonds on his wrists. The cold metal bit into his skin, but he heard it creak and strain.

“Now, bravado won’t get you anywhere with me, lad. I learned a lot about you after I took the contract, and I had that collar made special. When all that rage gets bottled up, you rage casters aren’t so hard to deal with, isn’t that right?”

“Rage casters?” Victor’s voice was flat as he tried to hold in his emotions, including a slowly building sense of amusement.

“Aye. Old Nareld heard all about your berserking down in them mines. Think you’re the first berserker to break the law? Think you’re the first one old Nareld brought in? Nah, boyo. Trust me when I say I intend to get paid back for the expense of hunting you down. Had to pay for five different scryings. Had to pay an alchemist to mix up the sleeping humors. Had to pay all them locals to dose ya. Better believe I’m getting paid.” The voice had come much closer, and Victor could smell the man’s onion-tainted, hot breath as it permeated the cloth of his hood.

“Hey, since I’m all harmless and shit, can you take this hood off? I’d like to see the face of the man that brought me down.”

“Nah, Nareld don’t like having his marks know his face. What if you get set free? What if you escape from the fools paying for your capture? Nah, old Nareld don’t need you coming looking.”

“I mean, you already told me your name. How many bounty hunters go around calling themselves ‘old Nareld?’” Victor couldn’t help the chuckle that followed his words.

“You’re a tough one, ain’t ya? Finding humor and laughing with your Core all blocked off? Most people’d be feeling sick as a dog, like yer little friend over there.”

“Is Thayla alright? Listen to me, Nareld: if you want any hope of escaping this situation with your limbs attached, you better pray she’s alright.”

“Oh, making threats? You’re hobbled and chained, big boy. I took all your little trinkets too. Accept your fate, lad. Don’t you worry, though—Nareld was contracted to bring you both in alive, and that’s what he’ll do. The girl’s alright, just collared and drugged.”

“So, let me get this straight. Instead of putting a general control collar on me, you had one made that suppresses my rage-attuned Energy?”

“Aye, I know how you berserkers work. It’s no wonder you pulled off that mine collar.”

“So the mine hired you?”

“Naw. You’ll see soon enough. In a week or so, we’ll be in Gelica, and I’ll hand you off to Lady ap’Yensha’s men, much the richer for my trouble.”

“Ap’Yensha. They’re one of the clans that own the mine, though, right?”

“You might be a brute, but at least you know a thing or two. Aye, that’s right. Now, don’t you worry; old Nareld treats his prisoners with dignity. I’ll be good to you and the lady and feed ya proper. No harm’s coming your way while in my care.”

“That’s very nice, Nareld. Now, I’d like to make a deal with you,” Victor said, leaning forward.

“Oh, now, don’t try to bribe me, lad. I’ve got all your belongings, and I’m being paid the full value of everything I turn in to ap’Yensha on top of the bounty.”

“No, it’s not that kind of deal. I’m going to promise not to kill you in a few minutes as long as you promise to drop this bounty and never mention Thayla or me again.”

“What? Boy, I think that alchemist mixed his dose too strong. Is your mind slipping? Can’t you feel your Core? The lights on the collar are glowing. I know it’s working!”

“Hmm? Oh yeah, I think it works, but Nareld, I don’t need rage-attuned Energy to get out of this shit.” Victor knew his spells would work as long as he had Energy, and he had plenty of inspiration-attuned Energy at hand. He cast Sovereign Will, boosting his strength, and then Channel Energy, flooding his arms and shoulders with inspiration-attuned Energy.

Victor couldn’t see himself, but Nareld could, and when Victor’s long, cable-like muscles suddenly swelled, and his arms and shoulders began to flicker with a white-gold radiance, he backed up, gasping. A moment later, Victor jerked his hands apart, and the chain between his manacled wrists simply snapped, one of the iron links having shattered. Victor reached up and pulled the hood off his head.

Sunlight stabbed into Victor’s eyes, and, as he rapidly blinked his eyes, he saw that they were somewhere out on the grassy plains. Some roladii were staked nearby, munching peacefully at the yellow tufts, and Victor saw a large, gray-furred Vodkin, fumbling with a crossbow and digging around through an overfull quiver, clearly looking for a particular bolt.

The Vodkin’s face was panicked, and his breathing was harsh and shallow. Victor didn’t waste time, reaching up to his collar and pulling with all his might. It was tougher than the one from the mine, but it still wasn’t designed to withstand the kind of force Victor was delivering, and he felt the metal start to give as he twisted.

“Stop whatever you’re doing, Nareld. If you shoot me, I’m going to fucking go berserk, and I don’t want to kill some old guy just trying to make a buck.” Victor growled as he twisted again on the metal, stretching the straining metal another centimeter.

“Huh, huh, how ...” Nareld was still fumbling with the crossbow, clearly panicked beyond reason. As he pulled and twisted on the collar, Victor saw that he was inside an iron cage on the flatbed of a wagon. Nareld was standing just behind the wagon, and he’d managed to knock a black, barbed bolt to his crossbow and was cranking back the string. Victor grunted and twisted, pulling with all his might, and the metal finally cracked and pulled apart.

Heat surged in his stomach as his rage-attuned Energy was suddenly unbound, and Victor had to strain to hold it back. He dropped the twisted, broken collar and growled, “Nareld. I’m not fucking joking. Put it down, or you’re probably gonna die.” Victor saw the older man hesitate, and that’s when he cast Channel Spirit again, this time driving rage-attuned Energy into his arms and legs. He reached down, gripped the shackles at his ankles, and pulled, shattering the brittle iron chain. Then, he surged to his feet and kicked his cage door open, hopping down with a clatter of loose, broken chains.

“You could earn some points with me by giving me the key. I don’t like this look,” Victor said, holding up his manacled wrists. Nareld had set the crossbow down and was holding his hands out.

“Easy now, lad. Old Nareld was just doing a job. I didn’t hurt ya none.”

“So, you’re willing to take my deal?”

“Um, could ya go over it again? What was it? I, uh, don’t try to stop ya, and you don’t kill me?” Nareld was backing away, his black otter eyes wide and his cat-like whiskers trembling, as his lips worked to draw wheezing breaths.

“That’s part of it, Nareld. I’d also like you to forget you ever saw us. I don’t want more information about me getting back to ap’Yensha.” Victor turned around slowly, looking for Thayla, and saw that she was also in the wagon, but further toward the bench, and she wasn’t in a cage—just chained to a ring in the corner. “Keys, Nareld. While you’re at it, give me my shit. Where’s my axe?”

“Yer belongings are all up under the driver’s bench.”

“Keys?” Victor held out a hand, and Nareld, his furry arm trembling, reached out and deposited a brass keyring into it. There were several keys on the ring—a simple iron one, a many-toothed silvery one, and three different brass-colored ones.

“The, uh, the silver key was for your collar.”

“Huh,” Victor used the iron key to remove the manacle and shackle cuffs from his wrists and ankles, then he looked at Nareld with a scowl. “Do I need to tie you up or knock you out or something?”

“No! No, Victor. I promise I won’t be any trouble. I ain’t got the means to fight you without setting a trap. You can see that, right?”

“Hmm. Put your hands on top of your head and follow me.” Victor waited for him to comply, and the furry Vodkin, somewhat comically, held his hands on top of his head, still breathing shallowly with wide, spooked eyes. Victor nodded and walked to the front of the wagon where Thayla lay. He held the keyring next to her collar, finding the correct shade of brass, and then he unlocked it, slipping it from around her neck.

Victor took the collar and turned to Nareld. “You ever worn one of these? It’s not fun, Nareld.” He reached out and snapped the collar shut around the Vodkin’s thick neck. It had been loose on Thayla, but it squeezed the extra skin and blubber around Nareld’s neck, causing it to bunch in a thick roll on top of the collar. Nareld grunted and winced, muttering protestations.

“... not necessary! I won’t cause any trouble.” He groaned, and his arms fell limply at his sides as his cheeks drooped and his eyes pooled with tears.

“Sucks having your Energy blocked off, doesn’t it? It’s even nastier than the control collars they use in the mines.”

“Please! I was only working a contract! Don’t leave this on me; I’ll be helpless.” The old hunter’s pleas fell on deaf ears as Victor unlocked the chains around Thayla’s wrists, lifted her out of the wagon, and set her on the grass. He hopped up to the front of the wagon and opened the top of the driver’s bench, and there, beautiful as ever, sat Lifedrinker. Victor lifted her and slipped her through the loop on his belt, then he saw Gorz and pulled the amulet back on over his head.

Gorz started talking immediately, but Victor tuned him out for the moment, digging around until he found a felt pouch that clinked with the tell-tale sound of jewelry. He opened it and poured his and Thayla’s rings into his palm. Victor glanced at Nareld and saw the Vodkin leaning against the wagon, still looking sallow and weak. “If nothing’s missing, Nareld, I’ll let Thayla decide if you should keep the collar on or not.”

Victor slipped his rings on, and then he dug around until he found his storage pouch. There were other belongings in the space under the seat, but none of the clothes, bottles, weapons, or packages of food interested Victor, and he thought it sent a clearer message to the old hunter when he left all his stuff intact: Victor didn’t need his things, and he wasn’t a common bandit. He jumped down from the wagon and walked over to Thayla.

She seemed at peace lying in the sunny grass, and Victor almost hated to bother her. Still, he stooped, slipped her rings onto her fingers, and gently jostled her shoulder. “Thayla. Thayla, wake up.”

“Now that you’ve freed up her Energy, she should wake from the drugs soon.” Nareld sounded weak and morose, and Victor found himself feeling sort of sorry for the guy. He shook his head and growled. What the fuck was wrong with him? This asshole was going to sell them back into slavery or, probably, something

much worse. Victor sighed and sat down in the grass next to Thayla, keeping Nareld in his line of sight while he soaked in the warm sun.

“When was ap’Yensha expecting you? You have some way of communicating with her?”

“If I tell you, will you take off this damned collar?”

“I told you, that’s up to Thayla. I’m sure she’ll be nicer if you cooperate.”

“When I took the contract, they gave me three message sheets. I already used ‘em up, though.”

“Message sheets?” Victor took a bottle of water out of his ring and drank it. When he put it back, he glanced through his things, making sure nothing was missing.

“Aye. I could write a message on this paper, and they’d see it. Each sheet only worked once, though.” The old Vodkin sank into the grass, leaning against the wagon wheel, looking downright pathetic.

“Let me guess: you announced your success with the last one?”

“Yes. By Vod, yes! Alright? Yes, I already told them I caught you. I’m ruined! Everyone will either think me a liar or a fool.”

“No, not everyone. Just the assholes that hired you to come after me. Disappear, man. Go somewhere far away. I’ll be much less forgiving if you and I cross paths again.”

“Ungh,” Thayla grunted as she worked her elbows underneath her, lifting her head. “What happened?”

“This guy tried to kidnap us. He’s working for some ap’Yensha lady.”

“Not just any lady, the head of their clan! Rellia ap’Yensha!” Nareld tried to sound vehement, but his weak, morose voice barely carried over the grass.

“Wow, Victor, what’d you do to that guy?” Thayla scooted up into a sitting position and glanced at him sideways, gently rubbing one of her temples.

“Nothing—just took that collar off you and put it on him.”

“He collared me?” Thayla reached up and felt at her neck, a deep scowl furrowing her brow.

“Yeah, they got the drop on us, but I worked around the ‘special’ collar he’d made for me.” Victor shrugged, and Thayla looked at him, raising an eyebrow.

“I’ll explain it more when he’s not around,” Victor said, and Thayla nodded, still looking a bit groggy. “Anyway, he didn’t really hurt us, and he’s just a bounty hunter. I told him you’d decide if he keeps the collar on or not.”

“Yes, he keeps it,” Thayla said without hesitation.

“No, please!” The Vodkin begged, still sitting with drooping shoulders next to his wagon.

“Damn your pleas!” Thayla hissed. “You’re part of the whole thing! Capturing and using people—none of you are innocent. I’d like to kill you here, but I know Victor won’t let me. No, you can rot here or shuffle your way to a town and beg someone to help you get that off. See what it’s like for a while, what you do so flippantly when you capture someone they tell you to!” Thayla had clambered to her feet while speaking, and she hissed the last words with pure venom.

Thayla walked over to the big Vodkin and reached out a hand. Victor wondered what she was doing, but he just watched. Nareld hesitantly held out a hand, and Thayla grabbed the wrist, hauling the man to his feet. He stood before her, sallow and sagging, with a questioning look in his big, moist eyes. Thayla didn’t say anything. She just walked behind him and shoved him away from the wagon to stumble into the grassy plains.

Victor stood, bemused, watching while Thayla produced a leather flask from her ring and then started sprinkling liquid all over the wagon. “Oh, hey, Thayla, are you sure you wanna do that?” he asked as he realized she was dousing the wooden wagon with oil.

“I sure am, Victor,” she growled, and then she produced a spark between her thumb and forefinger, and flames started to lick through the oil in an orange-blue ripple.

“No!” Nareld moaned, sitting in the grass and watching his wagon slowly go up in flames.

“Don’t whine to me, bounty hunter!” Thayla growled at him. “Do you know what the people who hired you would do to us? You’re getting off easy!”

“Alright, Thayla,” Victor said, walking over to her. He put an arm over her shoulders and steered her toward the north. “Let’s get going. This old asshole isn’t going to mess with us again.”

“I swear, Vodkin,” Thayla said, looking back at Nareld, “If we ever meet again, you’ll taste my spear.” She jerked away from Victor and stalked over to the two roladii tied nearby. Victor sighed and waited while she yanked their leads off the stakes and clicked her tongue, leading them back with her. “Payment for our trouble,” she hissed, looking at the collared Vodkin sitting slumped in the grass, watching his wagon burn.

Victor didn't say anything, just started walking, and Thayla followed. As they began their trek toward the road, he had a lot on his mind. What were they going to do about Belikot? His vote was to forget about him for now. Belikot had plenty to deal with—some kind of “great cause,” the Naghelli, waking up from some sort of slumber. Surely he didn't have time to mess around with a couple of adventurers busy dealing with a hundred other things.

Aside from Belikot, Victor's mind was trying to wrap around a much more immediate problem: for some reason, the fucking ap'Yensha clan didn't want to let bygones be bygones. Thanks to Nareld's message, they knew Victor and Thayla were alive. Would they be willing to forget about the two of them? It didn't seem likely.

“We have to do something about ap'Yensha,” Thayla said.

“Hey, are you able to read minds now?” Victor said with a laugh.

“No, but I'm sick of people treating me like property, and this bitch doesn't want to let us go. We need to deal with her, one way or another, Victor,” Thayla spat, and Victor could see just how angry she still was.

“Alright, I'm with you. I was thinking something similar, Thayla. How can you go be with your daughter if she's hiring assholes like that guy,” Victor jerked his thumb back over his shoulder, “to find you?”

“Exactly!”

“So, we head to Gelica? Is that where they are?”

“I think so—I know those families are in more than one city, but the ones dealing with the mine are probably in Gelica.”

“Do we still stop by to let Tellen know about Belikot?” Victor gestured vaguely to the north.

“Yes, I think we owe him that much,” Thayla replied. “What do we do about Belikot, anyway?”

“What can we do? He's going on the back burner for now. After we deal with ap'Yensha and get you somewhere safe with your daughter, I'll look into him. Alright?”

“Back burner? Like on a stove? I like that one, Victor. Yes, I agree we need to focus on more immediate, more ... living problems.” She smiled, squeezed Victor's shoulder, then turned and clicked her tongue at the two roladii plodding behind her. “They're kind of sweet, the way they just followed along, no questions asked.”

“Well, sweet to you, but not their owner. Poor bastard!”

“Don’t you dare feel sorry for that man! How many people has he captured for people like ap’Yensha over the years? How many girls has he delivered to the mines? He received more mercy than he deserved!”

“Right, yeah. When you look at it like that, I can see why you burned his wagon.” They walked in silence for a while, and suddenly something dawned on Victor, “Hey, it’s not noon yet. I guess we were unconscious through the night.”

“Yeah, and there’s the road,” Thayla said, pointing toward the horizon. Victor had to squint against the glare of the bright blue sky, but he saw she was right—a thin ribbon of brown wended across the grassy plains in the distance. They walked for a while more before Victor saw the delicate lines of white smoke rising in the far distance beyond the road, which had grown clear and wide as they drew near.

“Tellen’s camp,” he said, pointing to the thin, wavy, white lines. Thayla nodded, and they continued on. The sun was past midday when they crossed the road, and Victor paused to look for a long while in both directions. He couldn’t see any movement or sign of any civilization, and he wondered just how much traffic ever came this way. He wondered if the smart move would be to choose a direction and just keep going until they were so far away that the ap’Yensha clan couldn’t be bothered to try to come for them.

“It’s quiet out here,” Thayla said, almost like she was having similar thoughts.

“What if we found your daughter and just made a run for it? It’s a big world, isn’t it?”

“Yes, very big, but we’d have to travel far, indeed, to escape their reach,” Thayla sighed and kicked at the road’s dirt. “I’m not sure how we’ll even manage this problem. If we killed all the ap’Yensha family in Gelica, there’d still be thousands of them in different towns and cities.”

“I guess we need to figure out which members are concerned with us and then see if we can deal with them without getting the entire clan after us.” Victor shrugged, not really sure what else to say.

“Deal with them?” Thayla asked, raising an eyebrow.

“Whatever it takes. If we have to fight, we will. If we can strike a bargain, I’ll consider that too. Though I’m not fond of their business practices ...” Victor stopped, grasping for words, not sure exactly what he was trying to say. Finally, he continued, “Let’s cross that bridge when we come to it. First, we get to Gelica, then we get some information, and then we make a plan.”

“Sounds like you’ve already made the start of a plan, Victor,” Thayla smiled and started walking over the plains toward the hunters’ camp.

“You think they have any more of that bread?” Victor asked, following after her and the two plodding, snuffling roladii.