

## Victor BK2: Ch21

Book 2: Chapter 21: The Red Roladii

The Red Roladii was a sprawling complex that covered three corners of a crossroads. The tavern sat at the northeast corner. A covered, wooden bridge led from it to the three-story inn on the southeast corner, and across the other road was a stable bigger than any of the buildings Victor had seen in Steampool. “Big fuckin’ place.”

“Yeah, I think this crossroad leads south to Persi Gables and then northeast toward the capital.”

“Of Ridonne?”

“Yep.” Thayla spat into the dust, and Victor couldn’t tell if she was saying something about the empire or if a bug had flown into her mouth.

“Looks busy,” Victor said, watching the stablehands rushing around with buckets, rakes, and brushes and the people moving between the various buildings. The surrounding acreage was all farmland, and the air was rich and smelled alternately fresh or like manure, depending on the wind. “Still wanna stay? I could use a hot meal and a shower.”

“They probably only have baths,” Thayla said. “Yes, I could use a damn break, too. Let’s hope we don’t have another friend waiting for us here.”

“Yeah, I wish I could blend in better.” Victor lifted Lifedrinker a couple of inches, then thumped her back down in the leather ring on his belt.

“Not likely someone will outright attack us surrounded by so many people. We’ll have a chance to talk or run. The mines won’t expect you to be as strong as you are, Victor. That Ilyathi at the bridge . . . he was not expecting to struggle against you, let alone die. What I’m saying is, if some bounty hunters are lurking around this tavern, hopefully, we can make them back down.”

“Right, well, let’s go.” Victor started walking again, waving to the field workers tending grapes or something like them on the vines in the nearby field.

“Too bad you’re not red,” Thayla said suddenly, “No one would mess with a Shadeni your size.”

“Yeah, too bad.” Victor laughed and continued, “Too bad I’m not furry, then you could say I was an ugly Vodkin.”

“Hah!” Thayla burst into laughter, “You would be an ugly Vodkin! Especially your eyes—they’re not supposed to be honey-colored. Where are your shiny, black, tearful marbles?”

“Tearful marbles? You should be a poet, Thayla.” Victor snorted.

“What makes you think I’m not? I have a journal full of poems.”

“Prove it!” Victor said, eyes suddenly wide at the idea. Thayla just snickered, though, and he said, “Tearful marbles! I know a guy named Ponda you should meet. If you told him his eyes were like tearful marbles, he’d probably twist your head off.”

“Ponda? Was he in the mine?”

“No, he worked for the asshole that made me fight in the pits. He wasn’t really that bad a guy, all things considered. You know, in my memory, he was huge and impossibly tough, but I think he was only tier-two, maybe tier-three.”

“You’ve probably changed so much that he wouldn’t recognize you,” Thayla said.

“We’ll see. I’m pretty sure I’m the only human that’s been to Persi Gables. When I head back that way, I’ll be sure to drop in and say hi.”

“Then you can Spirit Walk to me and let me know if they recognized you,” Thayla said with a chuckle. They’d spent a lot of time over the last couple of days talking about how they’d use the Spirit Walk spell to stay in touch. Thayla had been diligently working on cultivating her courage-attuned Energy, and they’d taken turns watching over each other while they practiced the spell each night before sleep.

They’d only spent a few minutes each time in the Spirit Plane. That was all Thayla could manage anyway, but she had increased the duration of her walk significantly since their first visit with Oynalla. Victor was confident he’d be able to find Thayla on the Spirit Plane fairly quickly, leaving them plenty of time to gossip.

“Travelers,” said an Ardeni man leading a roladii past in the opposite direction. “How’s the road ahead?”

“It’s calm, sir,” Thayla said, nodding.

Victor eyed the man as he went by, suspicious of every traveler, thanks to the bounty hunter on the bridge. The man nodded to him and clicked his tongue, pushing his animal into a faster pace. Thayla gave Victor a sidelong glance.

“You scared that guy,” she said.

“Well, it’s a dangerous world—he should be a little scared.” Victor shrugged and kept walking. Soon they were walking up the wooden steps leading to the deck in front of the inn, elbow to elbow with other travelers, and Victor was forced to relax. However, he still held one hand just under Lifedrinker’s axe head, her weight comforting, as he lifted her an inch or so out of her loop, letting her drop back with a satisfying thunk. They stepped through the propped open doorway, and Victor took in the common room of the Red Roladii.

A large fireplace dominated one wall, and several groupings of couches and comfortable-looking leather chairs were arrayed around the wide, high-ceilinged space. The front counter was long, and three people stood behind it, seeing to the needs of the guests. The outside of the inn had been weather-worn, perhaps in need of paint or stain, but the inside was clean and the woodwork polished.

Thayla walked to the counter, and Victor followed behind, keeping a wary eye out, watching the other patrons, and trying to guess their intentions. Most of them avoided eye contact with him, and a few even moved a few steps farther away. “We’d like a room,” Thayla said when a young Ardeni woman with bright coppery hair greeted her.

“You’re in luck! I have a few vacancies. We have beds in the shared dorm for two beads a night, and we have private rooms from four up to our more spacious rooms with bathing facilities for seven.”

“It seems really steep, but we’ll take one with a bath.” Thayla drummed her fingers on the counter, frowning.

“You’ll get two meal vouchers for the tavern, and of course, stable fees are included. We also have a laundry service included, though you should know our cleaning staff makes a living from gratuities.” The woman seemed a little defensive about the price, and Victor didn’t know enough about the economy of this world to know if the price was exorbitant.

“I got it,” Victor said, producing a handful of beads. He dropped four attuned beads on the counter. “That cover it?”

“Yes, sir. I have a corner room on the second floor with a sitting area and a bath. Could I get your name?”

“Alia and Tornic of Steampool,” Thayla said. Victor managed to keep his face neutral, or at least he thought he did, and he nodded.

“Very good,” the young woman said, writing in a leather-bound ledger with a long, faintly shimmering quill. “We’ll need you to be out of the room by noon, though if you choose to stay longer, you just need to let me know. Will that be all right?” She turned and opened a cabinet on the wall behind her, withdrawing a large, shiny, brass key. She laid it on the counter in front of Thayla.

“Yes, that’s fine, thanks.” Thayla picked up the key and nodded to Victor, “Come on, Tornic.”

“Nice to meet you, miss, um . . .” Victor trailed off, trying to get the woman to tell him her name.

“My apologies! I’m Ulla. Enjoy your stay!” Victor smiled, nodded, and followed after Thayla.

“Really? Tornic?” he asked as they climbed the wooden stairs to the second level.

“What’s wrong with Tornic? That’s my uncle’s name!”

Victor just grunted in response, following Thayla down the hallway to the end. Their room was on the right, and when Thayla opened the door, he saw bright sunlight coming through the west-facing windows. “Nice sunset view,” he said. His eyes fell to the rest of the room, and he realized there was just one fairly large bed. “Um . . .”

“What?”

“Well, I mean, there’s only one bed. I didn’t think about it. Don’t worry; I got the floor. It’s not like we’ve had comfortable beds up ‘til now.”

“Don’t be an idiot. There’s plenty of room for us both on that bed. Just keep your hands to yourself.” Thayla snorted as she moved to inspect the big brass bathtub. Victor shrugged and moved into the room. Just as the girl had promised, a couch, chair, and table were arranged in front of the window. A big trunk sat at the foot of the bed, and Victor wondered how much use it got, seeing as dimensional containers seemed to be pretty common.

The tub was behind a standing, paneled screen, not in its own room, and, as Thayla twisted the tap, he heard water pour forth. “At least we don’t have to ask for water to be brought up,” she said.

“Cool. We going to get cleaned up before we get some food?”

“I sure am. Um, you sit over there. I’ll go first,” Thayla said, pointing to the chair by the window. She stepped behind the screen and started pulling off her boots without waiting for Victor to move. He and Thayla had spent a lot of time together over the last weeks, so it wasn’t like Victor hadn’t seen her in all sorts of compromising positions, but the idea of seeing her get into a bathtub was different somehow. He quickly stepped over to the window and sat down, his back to the screen hiding the tub, and looked out at the people milling about at the crossroads.

It looked like people were heading to the tavern from the surrounding countryside—farmers and field workers, he guessed. He thought he could hear music coming from the tavern, and as the sun sank behind the horizon, he saw the bright lights in the windows, and his stomach rumbled. “How much longer you gonna soak in there?” he asked loudly.

“I’m getting out. Relax!” Thayla said.

“I’m hungry. Let’s go, and I can clean up when we get back.”

“No, Victor! You stink, and I don’t want to ruin this wonderful soapy smell by catching a whiff of you every few breaths.”

“Oh, jeez! All right, well, come on, get dressed. I want to get going. Victor stood and stared at the partition, waiting for her to emerge. Thayla harumphed and threw a towel over the top, hanging it to dry, then she stepped around, another towel wrapped around her head, and wearing her usual leather pants with a soft blue blouse Victor had never seen. “Where you been hiding that shirt all this time?”

“This is not an adventuring shirt! Why would I wear it out on the road?”

“Huh,” Victor said, stepping past her to start undressing for the bath. He could hear it draining, and as soon as it was empty, he closed the stopper and turned on the water again. Then he finished taking off his armored shirt and pants, tossing them atop his boots. “I need to get my socks and underwear cleaned. I mean, my socks are all fucking stiff.”

“Not something I wanted to know about you, Victor.” Thayla chuckled. “I have some socks you can borrow. My underwear won’t fit you, though.” She laughed again, louder this time.

“I still have a pair that’s, well, mostly clean.” Victor laughed too. “I’ll just go commando ‘til I get some laundry done.”

“Commando?”

“Nevermind.” Victor sank into the hot water and saw the little shelf of soaps Thayla had been talking about. He started scrubbing himself, washing off a week of grime and road dust. Thayla, to her credit, was a lot more patient with Victor than he had been with her. As soon as he sank into the hot water after rinsing his face and hair off, he felt like dozing, and he might very well have done so because when he sat up, the water was only lukewarm.

Victor stood and dried off, and then he put on his pants and armored shirt, still clean and remarkably whole. In Victor’s opinion, whoever had enchanted the pants deserved a medal because he’d taken dozens of cuts and stabs to the legs, liberally soaking them in blood and grime. Yet, they still felt whole, and not even an unpleasant odor lingered. “I need to buy some casual shirts, but I guess it’s good to wear armor at dinner when people are out for your blood,” he said, stepping around the partition.

Thayla didn’t respond because she was snoozing on the bed, completely oblivious. Victor walked over to the bed and grabbed Thayla’s big toe, giving it a squeeze. Thayla’s eyes shot open, and she leaped out of bed with a howl. “What the shit, Victor?”

“I’m hungry! Where’re those socks you promised me?” Victor laughed, backing away and holding his hands up in defense.

“You wait ‘til I wake you up next time, my friend.” Thayla produced a pair of socks and threw them at him. They were small but made of something like wool and stretched over his big feet passably well. When the two of them had their shoes on and they’d collected his dirty laundry to drop off for cleaning, they headed downstairs and then out, through the crowd, into the evening air.

They crossed the street to the tavern, and as they walked in, Victor thought it looked like a cross between a cafeteria and a renaissance festival. Rectangular wooden tables filled the ample space, and most of them had a patron or five sitting at them. A stage dominated one wall, and musicians were setting up to perform while Victor and Thayla looked around for an open pair of seats.

There had to be a dozen tavern hands bustling around the place, all wearing matching red aprons. One, a thin, lanky Shadeni, brushed past Victor with a tray of frothy mugs and said, “Pick a seat, please. Keep the aisles clear!”

“Right,” Victor muttered, putting a hand on Thayla’s shoulder and leading her over to a table with three dusty field workers already deep into their ale mugs. The table was long and had benches, not chairs, and when Victor sat on the far end of one of the benches, the other end bounced up a bit. The fieldworker sitting down there, mid-drink, sloshed beer onto his face. His friends laughed uproariously, and Thayla snickered at Victor’s abashed look.

“Thanks! I meant to wash my face,” the man laughed, holding his mug up in salute to Victor.

“My bad,” Victor said, relieved at the good humor.

“Relax, Victor,” Thayla said. “These people are all drunk and here for a good time. Look at the door and in the corners. See those burly men and women?” Victor followed her gaze, and, sure enough, several large, intimidating people stood around, eyeing the crowd carefully. “My guess is that the owner of this place doesn’t tolerate violence. Those people are here to keep the peace.”

“Bouncers,” Victor said.

“Exactly.” Thayla waved at one of the servers, and he came over after depositing a bunch of mugs. At a nearby table.

“Ale? Something stronger?” he asked as he stepped up.

“Two of those big mugs. You have something cold on tap?” Thayla asked.

“Yeah, a stout and a pale ale.”

“The pale, then. We’re hungry too,” Thayla said, nodding to Victor.

“We’ve got pork sausages, fried greens, fresh bread, and a potato mash.”

“Perfect,” Victor said.

“Which part?” The young man asked.

“All of it. We’ll take a serving of everything.”

“Right, okay, I’ll be back soon as I can,” he turned and hurried off to another table where a burly Vodkin was hollering for service.

“Pork?” Victor asked, looking at Thayla.

“Yeah?”

“Well, I never asked what kind of meat was in the sausages we got in the mines, but I didn’t know there were pigs in this world.”

“Oh, definitely! Where do you think bacon comes from?”

“I wouldn’t know—they don’t generally feed slaves bacon.” Victor shrugged. “I guess it’s good to know, though. In fact, I’m salivating thinking about it.”

“Oh, I thought that was just your usual drool . . .”

“The hell? You’re getting meaner the closer we get to civilization!”

“I’m not getting meaner. I’m just getting more comfortable with you; when I insult you, it’s a compliment. Haven’t you figured that out yet?” Thayla’s eyes were bright over her red cheeks, and her smile was infectious.

“All right, well, I like that you’re in a good mood.” Just then, the band started tuning their instruments, and the crowd got louder, trying to keep their conversations going over the noise. Victor liked the raucous atmosphere, feeling anonymous in the noisy gathering. “You think we’ll get to Gelica tomorrow?”

“Yes!” Thayla said, almost shouting to be heard. The server arrived with their mugs of ale, and Victor tossed him an attuned Energy bead. He nodded and stepped away, and Victor picked up his mug—it had to have more than forty ounces of beer in it. He held it out toward Thayla, waiting for her to pick up her own.

“To getting the fuck out of deep pits, dungeons, and collars!”

“To getting out of trouble,” Thayla said, grinning and crashing her mug into his. Beer sloshed onto the table, but they both just laughed and took a long pull of the cold, frothy beer.

When the music started, it reminded Victor of the girl who sang at the bar in Steampool, and he wondered if there were genres of music in this world. “There have to be,” he said to himself.

“What?”

“This band reminds me of the singer I heard in Steampool. Is there a name for this kind of music?”

“Sha’nel—it’s like folk music. Ardeni and Shadeni have a few variations of it, but most of the songs are really old. I’m sure they’ve changed and evolved over the years, but some of them tell stories of things that happened before the worlds were joined.”

“I like it. I like the string instruments, and the lyrics are catchy, even if I have no clue what they’re singing about.”

“Yeah, people in taverns generally love this kind of music. It evokes a lot of emotion if you let it, but it’s also nice in the background if you don’t pay attention.” Thayla took another long pull of her beer, and the server returned with a tray of steaming food.

Victor understood why the man had been a little surprised by his order—each dish might have fed a large, hungry man. They were given a plump loaf of warm bread that steamed when Thayla pulled off a hunk, a pot of fresh-churned butter, a big bowl of fragrant, garlicky greens with bits of bacon mixed in, a platter of long, plump sausages, still sizzling from the pan, and another bowl of lumpy mashed potatoes with flecks of herbs sprinkled on top.

As he set down the last dish, the server met eyes with Victor and held up two fingers. Victor nodded and handed him three Energy beads. Thayla saw him paying and said, “Hey, don’t we get a meal on the house for staying at the inn?”

“Sure, but this is more like four meals,” the server replied, shrugging. Thayla laughed and nodded.

“Okay, two more beers when you come back around, please!”

Victor and Thayla ate and drank, listening to music for hours. The road and their troubles were largely forgotten in the pleasant interlude. It took a few big beers before Victor’s large, robust body started to feel the effect. A warm buzz suffused him, and he laughed even more easily, clapped along with the songs, and felt genuine, deep pleasure to see Thayla doing the same. He’d grown very fond of her through their struggles and was happy beyond normal reason, at least in his experience, to see her enjoying herself.

“I think this beer is making me mushy,” he said during a break between songs.

“What you mean?” Thayla asked, slurring her words slightly.

“I think I’m closer to you than anyone I’ve known. Except for my abuelos.”

“What?” Thayla looked alarmed.

“Relax, I’m not trying to hit on you, but I really fucking care about you. You know what I mean?” He leaned forward, trying to display his earnestness.

“Victor, you’re drunk. I appreciate the sentiment, though. You know what it tells me, though? You’ve had a hard life! If I’m that important to you, what does that



say about the other people in your life? I don't mean here, but back in your home!"

"My aunties and uncles . . . pfft! They always judged me because of my mom. My cousins weren't close to me, either. My friends were mostly fucking fake. Even my girlfriends—none of those people went through anything real with me. You know what I mean?"

"Victor," Thayla reached forward to grab one of his hands in hers. "I know the alcohol is talking, but I also know your words are coming from the heart. You mean a lot to me too, and you better believe I know what you're talking about regarding fake relationships."

Victor felt his eyes start to well from the emotion, and he laughed at himself. "God, I am drunk!"

"Come on, let's get back to the room, but put a meaner face on, please. I don't want anyone getting any ideas." The tavern was still rowdy and loud, and Victor nodded, shaking his head to try to focus.

"I'm good, don't worry," he said, standing up, pushing the entire bench back with three other men sitting on his side. He stood and looked at the others sheepishly, "Sorry, guys." He stretched, getting some blood flowing in muscles that had been hunched over a table for hours, then he started walking for the door. Thayla followed, a hand on his shoulder so they didn't get jostled apart by the busy room.

When they stepped outside, the cool night air felt as good as dipping his head in a bucket of water for clearing the fogginess out of his brain; his senses sharpened up, and he took a deep, steadying breath, glancing back to see Thayla doing the same. He nodded to her, and they started down the steps, walking under the covered walkway toward the Inn. "Hey, is there a second story in the tavern? Holy shit, that place does some serious business," Victor said as he realized he hadn't seen where the walkway led out from the tavern.

"I guess so," Thayla said, glancing up.

"You two staying at the inn?" a third voice asked. Victor followed the sound to see a man standing with several others not far away. He'd noticed them as they left the tavern but thought they were just patrons heading home after a night out.

"Who's asking?" Victor growled reflexively.

"Just making conversation, friend," the man stepped closer, and Victor saw that he was a big Vodkin. The way he walked made Victor think this guy was used to throwing his weight around to get what he wanted. He wore dark leather clothes over his bulky torso, and Victor saw several knife handles protruding from sheathes. His friends hung back, four shadowy figures in heavy coats that didn't fit the pleasant evening.

“We’re tired; have a good night,” Thayla said, starting to walk toward the tavern again.

“Now, don’t be rude, lass. Everyone prefers honey to vinegar,” The Vodkin said, taking a step closer, and his words caused a spark to erupt in Victor’s Core.

“Tornic, no . . .” Thayla started, but it was too late. Victor had released his rage-attuned Energy and used Channel Spirit to fill his imposing frame with it. His entire body surged with power, and a red, flickering aura outlined him from his fists to his shoulder to a spiky crown that leaped and sparked with a life of its own. Victor balled up his fists and stepped up to the man, growling.

“Fuck off,” he said, the words coming from deep inside him, guttural and full of intent, and the Vodkin, clearly not used to looking up at the people he spoke to, backed away, his eyes wide with Victor’s red aura flickering in their moist, black depths.

“Right, let’s go, boys. It’s been a long night.”

Victor felt Thayla’s hand on his forearm as he glared at the retreating figures, and when they’d faded away into the night, he sighed heavily, forcing his Energy back into his Core. “Sorry,” he said, turning to look at her.

“No, you’re fine. I thought you were going to attack them. I think they were just ruffians, though, and you were a fish bigger than they wanted on their hook.”

“All right, it’s time for Tornic to get some sleep,” Victor said, smiling and looping an arm over Thayla’s shoulders. They made their way back to their room, and Victor kicked off his boots and socks, shrugged out of his armored shirt, and collapsed on top of the blanket on one side of the bed. He was asleep before Thayla could say anything, utterly exhausted for the first time in a while.