

Victor BK2: Ch22

Book 2: Chapter 22: Welcome to Gelica

Victor and Thayla saw the walls of Gelica from several miles out. The traffic on the road was heavy, with carts, people, and animals going in both directions in a staggered line, and Victor wondered if it was always so busy or if it was just the hour of the day. The sun was nearing its zenith when they had to slow to a stop and get into line at the gate. A dozen or more carts and groups of people were ahead of them, so they settled in for a bit of a wait.

“I’m hungry,” Victor said.

“You’re always hungry, though you shouldn’t be. It’s in your head, you know?” Thayla said, giving him a sidelong glance.

“Doesn’t matter; I want some food,” Victor said. “You think muscles like these can sustain themselves on thin air?” He flexed his biceps, grinning.

“You’re a dolt,” Thayla chuckled.

“What should our first stop be?” Victor asked, changing the subject.

“I think we need to find an enchanter, a high-class one. I’m thinking it would be good to not be scried when we’re securing a place to stay.”

“Yeah, good call. Let’s get some protection from that kind of magic, then we’ll get a place to stay, then we’ll use that thing Lam gave you. Sound good?”

“Yes, but can your stomach wait that long?”

“Oh, I’m sure I’ll see a street vendor on the way. I’m assuming Gelica is something like Persi Gables in that regard? When they led us around to different fighting venues, I saw lots of vendors selling food.”

“You haven’t been to Gelica?” Thayla asked, glancing at the tall, off-white, stone city walls.

“Yeah, I have, but I was unconscious. The guy who wrecked my Core sold me to the mines here, but I was out of it.” As Victor spoke, the Ardeni man sitting atop a roladii-drawn cart glanced back at him and quickly looked away when their eyes met.

“Maybe we shouldn’t talk so loudly about our plans and problems,” Thayla said in a low voice.

“Right.” Victor sighed and stretched, looking up and down the line, relieved to move a bit when the guards waved a train of three wagons through the gate. Nearly an hour later, it was finally their turn to face the scrutiny of the guards, who reminded him of road crews back home—one guy was talking to the people

coming through the gate while six or seven others leaned against the wall or on their spears, watching.

“Nature of your visit?” the burly Cadwalli asked.

“Shopping and meeting with friends,” Thayla said. Victor just stood behind her and nodded.

“You have funds for lodging?”

“Yes,” Thayla said.

“Right, well, there’s a ten bead visitor tariff at the moment,” the guard said, pointing to a painted wooden placard affixed to the wall behind him.

“So much?” Thayla raised an eyebrow.

“Town’s been busy, and we’ve had too many vagrants in the streets.” The guard shrugged, clearly used to the question.

“All right,” Victor said, handing the guard ten attuned beads. That should cover the two of us, hmm?”

“Aye, enjoy your stay,” The guard nodded, and to his credit, he put the beads into a pouch stamped with the same symbol Victor had seen flying on the flag over the gate—some sort of bird of prey clutching a large fish in its talons. Thayla hurried through the gate, and Victor followed, painfully aware of the guards all staring at him as he passed through. If the people looking for him and Thayla had put the word out to the gate guards, they’d have people on their tail in the city in no time.

“You know where to go?” Victor asked.

“Not exactly, but I know where the wealthier shops are. We should hurry because those guards were staring at you like they’d bought tickets.” Thayla put action to her words, lengthening her stride and pushing past the crowds of people in the square near the gate. Victor followed, enjoying the sights and smells of the busy square.

He’d never been to a big city back on Earth. Tucson was pretty good-sized but sprawling and so damn hot that you never met crowds of people walking around. He’d heard stories about how cities smelled like urine or garbage, especially in the past. Still, the only scents in the busy streets of Gelica were the pleasant aromas of food cooking, the various odors of people, and, under everything, the faintly fishy smell of the big river running through the center of the city.

Occasionally Victor would catch a whiff of animal dung, but the roladii were the most common animals, and their droppings came out in dry round balls with no odor that Victor could detect.

“They have sewers here?” he asked, leaning forward to Thayla’s ear so she could hear him over the shouts of street hawkers and yelling, jostling people.

“Huh? Yeah! The city rulers probably purchased them through the Settlement Stones. You have to upgrade your settlement with certain infrastructure for the Stone to increase in level to a Town and then to a City Stone. I think there are even higher-tier Stones, but I’ve never seen one. Maybe at the capital.”

Thayla was leading the way up the main road that ran into town from the gate square, and they passed another big, busy market before she started up another road that led uphill. The buildings and shops were larger and cleaner on this street, and fewer people were walking about. The farther they pushed their way up the hill, the more affluent things seemed, and soon, Victor was having difficulty distinguishing between homes and places of business because they all looked like little manors to his untrained eye.

The crowds thinned further, and most of the people in the area wore clothing that stood out as tailored and enchanted. A woman strode by with a train of liveried soldiers wearing a silky, pale-blue veil and robes that left a trail of blue mist behind her. “Talk about flashy,” Victor said, watching her procession.

“The nobility—always looking for a way to stand out or impress their peers.” Thayla shrugged and spat, to the horror of an older Shadeni woman who happened by at that moment. “Apologies, ma’am,” Thayla said, her face twisted in embarrassment.

“Come on,” Victor laughed, urging her to keep moving.

The road eventually leveled off and came into another market square, but this one was much more subdued than the ones nearer the gate. A white fountain shaped like a howling dog with four bushy tails spouted water into a series of descending basins, and around it, the square spread out in white flagstones. Elegant shops lined the court, and people sedately moved around, murmuring, laughing, and generally showing off their fancy clothing. Thayla approached one of the guards standing around the perimeter. She wore livery that matched the gate guards but was much cleaner and better fitted.

“Hello, do you mind pointing me to the establishment of an enchantment artificer?” Thayla’s voice was soft and sweet, unlike anything Victor had heard from her before.

“Hmm? What’s that, sweetie? Enchantment?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Thayla said, still speaking in a voice an octave higher than Victor was used to.

“Let’s see,” the guard said, rubbing her blue chin with her fingers. Victor saw that she had painted her nails purple to match her eyes, making him wonder about all the strange fashion possibilities that opened up when people were so colorful. “What sort of enchanting? Are you looking to have a weapon worked on? Or do you want something like a dimensional container?”

“I’m looking for protection enchantments.” Thayla clasped her hands in front of her, fidgeting like she was nervous.

“Oh, I see. Even with this brute following you around, hmm?” The guard eyed Victor from under well-maintained brows, her painted yellow lips pursing in amusement.

“I, uh . . .” Victor started, then stopped, unsure what was afoot here.

“Oh, relax, big man. I think you should visit Master Kuth’s shop. He’s a true Artificer, and everyone speaks highly of him. His shop is just up at the next intersection, that way. He’s not cheap, though!”

“Oh, well, if he’s too expensive, at least it will give us an idea of what’s possible. Thank you for your help, ma’am,” Thayla said demurely.

“Anytime, sweetie. I work this shift every weekend, if you ever want to chat or have a bite,” she reached out a hand to Thayla and continued, “I’m Tella.”

Thayla took the hand between hers and said, “I’m Alia.” They looked at each other for a moment, then Thayla smiled and said, “Come, Tornic,” and walked in the direction the woman had earlier indicated.

“The fuck was that about?” Victor asked as they moved away from the market square.

“Oh, I saw her staring at me the moment we entered the square. I figured I’d flirt a little to get good directions,” Thayla shrugged.

“I’ve never seen you act like that,” Victor laughed, remembering Thayla’s high, sweet voice.

“What? I can be charming when I want to!” Thayla jabbed at his ribs with her elbow, but all it did was make his ringed shirt jingle and clink. She snorted and walked faster, and soon they were in front of an opulent shop. The window displayed beautiful cloaks and robes sewn from luxurious fabrics in rich deep colors. Hats with feathers and pins, staves, belts, and a rack of glittering jewelry were also on display. Above the door, embedded in the stone facade, were letters crafted from green gemstones that read simply, “Kuth’s.”

Victor pulled the door open, and they stepped inside. No bell announced their presence, but Victor thought he detected a surge of Energy nearby. He looked around, unable to see its source, but his attention was soon grabbed by all of the display cabinets filled with rings, jewels, necklaces, watches, and baubles of every sort imaginable. Along the right wall hung racks of coats, robes, and cloaks, and along the wall to his left were staves and wands of every shape and size. A man worked at a tall table near the rear of the shop, his gray-haired head down and his hands busy with a brass-colored cube.

“Welcome in. I’ll be with you in a moment,” the proprietor said with a scratchy voice. Thayla walked toward him, ignoring all the displayed merchandise, and Victor followed. In his opinion, there was simply too much to look at, and he had no idea what did what. He saw that most items had little handwritten labels on them, but he figured he could shop for hours before he found what they were looking for. They stood near the workbench, trying not to loom or intrude on the Artificer’s concentration.

He ignored them for several minutes, using a tool that seemed to melt the cube’s metal as it touched it, allowing him to carve delicate glyphs into the surface. “Just let me finish this enchantment—I’ll botch it if I try to stop halfway and finish it later. Five minutes, please.” He didn’t look up as he spoke, and his tone brooked no argument.

“No worries,” Victor said, shrugging to Thayla. She nodded, and they spent a few minutes browsing through the aisles in the shop. Victor thought a lot of the jewelry was beautiful, but he already wore more rings than he ever thought he would and couldn’t see himself buying something more unless he really needed it. He saw Thayla holding a pendant with a lustrous, dark blue stone hanging from it and was about to ask her what it was when the shopkeeper cleared his throat.

“Now, thank you for your patience; what brings you into Kuth’s?”

Victor and Thayla moved back to the workbench, and Thayla said, “We’re shopping for some wards. We need to be protected from scrying attempts.”

“Scrying, eh? Jealous lover? Angry employer? No, no, none of Kuth’s business. I pride myself on discretion—it comes with the purchase. Do you each need an item? Or just one for the two of you?”

“Each of us,” Victor said.

“Any idea how strong it needs to be? What tier are those seeking to spy upon you?”

“We don’t know, but better to err on the side of caution,” Thayla replied, leaning against the workbench and staring steadily at the Ardeni craftsman. He had goggles on his head with several lenses flipped up out of the frames. Green lenses hid his eyes from view, but his mouth was very expressive, smiling widely with straight, sharp teeth exposed. Victor had assumed he was old because of his white hair, but his face was smooth and unlined, and his fingers drumming on the workbench were long and nimble. His overalls had dozens of pockets along the front, and Victor wondered what could be in them all.

“Well, there’s quite a cost differential between tier-one and tier-four protection. I’m afraid I cannot craft anything portable that would block tier-five or higher scrying.”

“Tier-four, please,” Victor said.

“Very well, I have some wards that will suit you. Such protection requires dense metal, a significant amount of it, so I only have wards that powerful in broaches, bracelets, or pendants.”

Thayla glanced at Victor, and he tried to shrug with his eyes. She nodded and said, “I think we’d prefer pendants.”

“I’m sorry, but I only have one pendant that powerful. I do have a rather manly bracelet if you could see yourself wearing such a thing, sir.” Kuth looked at Victor and reached up to flip the green lens away from his right eye, revealing a bright, magenta iris. “I think it would suit you well, warrior.”

“Sure, I guess.” Victor nodded.

“Excellent. One moment please,” Kuth said, then walked over to one of his displays and began running his finger over the contents, humming off-key the whole while. Thayla looked at Victor and raised an eyebrow. He just shrugged and thumped the workbench with his fingers, content to wait.

“I’m hungry. I can’t believe I didn’t see any good street food on the way over.”

“Oh, Ancestors! Again with your hunger?”

“There’s a lovely restaurant nearby. My daughter runs it, and I’m sure she’d appreciate the business if you stopped by when you’re done here.”

“Ardeni food?” Thayla asked.

“Well, southern Ardeni, aye. Spicy sauces over meats and fresh veggies. She serves everything in bowls with a bed of wild rice.” Kuth lifted what he was looking for out of the case and then made his way back to the workbench. He set two objects down in front of Thayla and Victor.

“We’ll try that restaurant,” Victor said, studying the objects. One was a silver chain with a circular pendant about two inches in diameter. It was studded with tiny red gems, and when Victor looked closely, he saw that they were set into a carving that made them look like shooting stars over a mountain range. The bracelet was thick, brass-colored, and, at its center, sported a large, singular amber-colored stone with dark stripes running through it.

“They both have the same enchantment—protection from scrying and, to a lesser extent, protection from mind-altering enchantments. The gemstones on either item will glow briefly if they block hostile Energy workings.”

“Great, how much?”

“The pendant has more precious metal and stones, so it sells for two hundred and forty beads. The bracelet sells for one-eighty.”

“You take any precious metals or gems in trade?” Victor asked.

“Probably! Show me what you have, sir.”

“All right,” Victor nodded and started pulling out the silver plates and cutlery he’d found in the dungeon. Then, he piled up the silver, gold, and platinum jewelry and the precious gems he’d found. Thayla did the same with her loot. Victor thought for a moment and then snapped his fingers, producing the creepy crown he’d taken from the cultist at the dungeon entrance. He thought about adding the blue crystal choker but then looked at the pile and thought better of it. This wasn’t a smart way to negotiate.

“That’s quite a collection . . .” Kuth started to say, but Victor cleared his throat and spoke:

“We’ve heard you have a reputation for being fair, so don’t let us down.” He allowed a slight growl to enter his voice as he spoke, and Kuth glanced up sharply, his one visible eye widening.

“Of course, of course. Let me get my scale and rate sheet.” The Artificer lifted a black slate from under the counter, set it on top of his workbench, and produced a thick notebook. He then proceeded to weigh each piece of precious metal and closely examine each gemstone, making notations in his notebook. It took him nearly an hour.

“You’ve already told us a good place to eat. Do you happen to know anyone looking to rent out some rooms? We’d rather avoid inns.” Thayla asked while the man was working.

“That’s funny, you should ask! My daughter has a merchant friend going out with a caravan. She usually tries to rent her villa while she’s gone, and it might still be available. You should ask when you stop by to eat.”

“Great, thank you!” Thayla smiled and nodded to Victor. He grinned back encouragingly. It seemed awfully convenient, but he couldn’t think of a reason to be suspicious—it wasn’t like this guy had sought them out.

“All right, good news, folks! All of these metals are useful in my business, and some of these stones are quite remarkable. I’d value this haul, minus the crown, at over seven hundred beads. The crown is a dirty piece of magic—put it on and have a good time battling for your soul with a rather insane spirit. I recommend

purging the enchantments, and then I can add another fifty beads to the haul for the materials.”

“So we can walk with the two warding items and a few hundred beads?” Victor asked.

“That’s right, and it’s my pleasure doing business—I’m always happy for a source of materials like these.”

Victor and Thayla accepted the deal and took their new warding items. They each bonded with their jewelry, and, after getting directions from Kuth to his daughter’s restaurant and promising to return if they had more materials to sell, they left the man’s shop. The restaurant was nearby, just back to the square and a short distance up a different street. Victor led the way, feeling a lot more secure now that he didn’t have to worry about people spying on him magically.

Kuth’s daughter was a friendly woman who had inherited her father’s magenta eyes and white hair, and her spicy bowls were pretty damn good, in Victor’s opinion. After he’d finished more than half of his food, he paused to take a breath and said, “You know, dungeons are pretty good money. Also, killing bounty hunters.” He snorted at his gallows humor and took another bite.

“Well, they’re dangerous, though. Look what happened to me,” Thayla replied, sitting back to let her stomach rest. They were sitting at a two-person table near the front window, and no other patrons were nearby. The restaurant was more like a cafe in Victor’s mind, and he could see Kuth’s daughter watching them from her counter, waiting to see if they needed anything else. Her business was slow and seemed like it had been for a while.

“Excuse me,” he said, waving to her. She smiled and hurried around the counter, over to their table.

“Yes? Something else I can get you?”

“You can pack me ten of these bowls to go. Do you have containers for take-out? If not, I’ll pay for some of these nice wooden bowls.”

“Ten?” Her smile brightened, and she continued, “Of course! I don’t normally sell food for people to take away, but these wooden bowls aren’t costly; I’ll just add them to the total.”

“No problem, but you should get some paper bowls made. You could make a lot of money selling these to people who are in a hurry. They could take them back to their jobs!” Victor smiled, thinking he’d had a genius idea.

“Oh, thanks for the suggestion! I’ll look into it,” she said, and Thayla snorted.

When Kuth’s daughter left to prepare the bowls, Thayla said, “You think she hasn’t thought of that? She obviously wants to have a restaurant, not a street cart.”

“Where I come from, plenty of restaurants make a killing doing to-go orders.” Victor shrugged. “You gonna finish that?”

“No, I’m stuffed,” Thayla replied. Victor pulled her bowl over and proceeded to wolf it down. The meat reminded him of barbacoa, and the tangy sauce brought back memories of squeezing lime on his abuela’s tacos. When Kuth’s daughter returned with his order, and he slipped them into his storage ring, he contemplated trying to explain tacos to her but then shook his head. Who was he to try to teach a cook about how to serve food in her home city?

“Hey, I know Kuth is your dad, but I never got your name,” Victor said instead. “My name’s Tornic, and this is Alia.”

“Very pleased to meet you! My name is Yasha.” She nodded, her white ponytail bouncing behind her head, and smiled, holding out a hand.

Victor shook her hand and said, “Hey, your dad said you might know someone with a villa to rent? We’re looking for a place to stay while we’re in the city.”

“Really? Yes! My friend, Veysi ap’Narl, has a villa for rent! She had to leave on a caravan for business and couldn’t find any renters, so she asked me if I could help out. She won’t be back for months!”

“How much is she asking?” Thayla asked.

“Forty a week,” she said with a slight frown. “I know it’s a lot, but she’s got a really nice place right here in the Garnet Quarter.”

“You’re getting a cut, I hope?” Victor asked.

“Yes! Veysi was so upset that she couldn’t find a long-term renter that she promised me a percentage if I figured something out for her.”

“All right, sign us up for two weeks, and we can talk after that. We’re not sure how long we’ll be in town,” Victor said, glancing at Thayla for confirmation. She nodded, sitting back and eyeing Yasha through half-closed eyes.

“Wonderful! I’ll get the contract, and you can read through it. I have an employee coming in the next half hour—if you’re agreeable, I can have him watch the counter while I show you the villa. Does that sound all right?”

“Yeah, sounds good,” Victor said, smiling and squashing the urge to wink. Yasha hurried back behind her counter and started rifling through some papers.

“That was pretty convenient,” Thayla said.

“Yeah, I had that thought earlier—this all seems so easy and smooth, but we sought out the artificer, and it’s not like the gate guards sent us here; it was that

random guard lady that had a crush on you.” Victor frowned and drummed his fingers on the table.

“Tonight, do you think you can try to Spirit Walk to Oynalla?”

“I can try, but she’ll need to be listening.”

“She will be. I’m pretty sure she’s been there every night since we left. She’s interested in us, Victor, and wants to hear from us. If you can get to her, you can ask her to try scrying us to see if these things really work.” Thayla lifted the pendant hanging at her neck.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s a good idea. You think she can scry? She said she didn’t know any defenses for it.”

“I’ll be surprised if she can’t,” Thayla said with a firm, quick nod.

“Right, well, we’ll try that tonight. If things check out with our new wards, you can use your stone to contact Lam. Sound all right?”

“Yes. Meanwhile, let’s check out Yasha’s villa.” Thayla nodded to the young woman as she approached, holding a sheet of thick paper covered with dense lines of script.

“The contract,” she said cheerily, blowing a strand of loose white hair out of her eyes as she set the paper onto the table.