

Victor BK2: Ch23

Book 2: Chapter 23: Contacts

Victor looked around the pantry space in the basement of the villa they'd rented. Jars of pickled fruits and jams lined one wall, and sacks of flour and sugar and bins of root vegetables lined the other. The pantry door was solid, and with a little bit of work, he and Thayla had secured a thick wooden bar over it. "This should do. Even if this place is a set-up, they won't expect us to be hiding in the pantry in the basement, right?"

"Makes sense to me," Thayla replied, giving the door a stiff tug to make sure it wouldn't budge. Victor threw out a couple of blankets and then sat down, Lifedrinker in his lap. It was near midnight—they'd spent the evening visiting with Yasha, taking a tour of the villa, and then shopping for travel supplies from a general store they'd seen near the home.

They'd bought ropes, pitons, blankets, sleeping mats, two tents, cooking supplies, racks of spices, an Energy powered camp stove, glow-lanterns, fishing gear, snares, shovels, hammers, pliers, hatchets, and even a massive canvas tarp. Victor figured that as long as he had storage rings with enormous space inside, he might as well be stocked up and ready for anything.

"All right, so you'll wake me at the first hint of any trouble, right?"

"Of course, Victor! I won't leave you helpless." Thayla looked almost irritated by the question.

"I know you won't, but even if you aren't sure, even if it's just a strange noise that you think might be a rat or something, wake me up." He laid back on the blankets, still holding Lifedrinker in his hands—he felt comforted by her handle's warm, vibrant aura.

Thayla put her glow lamp into her ring, and darkness closed in. "I'm here, and my spear's ready."

"Here I go," Victor said, then he closed his eyes, relaxed his body the way Oynalla had taught him, and cast Spirit Walk. He and Thayla had practiced the spell almost every night, and it came quickly to him. He stood up from the ground in a twilit, grass-covered plain. At the very edges of his vision, he thought he saw movement and flashes of color, and he wondered if they were other spirit walkers—the city had a lot of people in it, surely some of them had this ability.

Victor slowly spun in a circle, taking in his surroundings, marveling at the bright, iridescent stars in the black sky. The moons were especially radiant and seemed to pulsate with slightly different shades of white and blue light. Using them as a guide, Victor oriented himself toward the east and thought of Oynalla. He pictured the woman both as she was in reality and how she'd appeared on the spirit plane. He saw her bright, intelligent eyes and remembered her cackle, and suddenly he felt a sensation of movement.

The feeling was almost like he was sliding over the ground on a pathway, and Victor stepped into it, letting the momentum take him. As he did so, he accelerated, and his surroundings became a blur.

He perceived just a few seconds of time passing, and then the world stopped blurring by, and he stood on a different grassy plain, one with taller, sporadic clumps of grass, and right in front of him stood the beautiful, youthful version of Oynalla. She clapped her hands and cackled.

“So easily you come to me? Wonderful! Oynalla is still a great teacher!”

“Hello, Oynalla! We’ve missed you! Thayla wanted to come but was afraid she’d run out of Energy. She’s been practicing, though!”

“Yes, warrior, I imagined that was the case. When I saw your smooth face and untroubled brow, I knew she was well.”

“Did you worry something was wrong?”

“Not exactly—I’ve been keeping an eye on you two since you left, and earlier today, I lost track. You found some wards to protect you from prying eyes, hmm?”

“Oh great! Yes, that’s why I came to you tonight—we wanted to see if they worked. Things were going, well, too smoothly, and we started to fear we were being tricked.”

“Mmhmm, Oynalla knows the feeling of not believing life can be easy, especially after long, troubling times. Still, sometimes the Ancestors look away from you for a while and stop meddling with your affairs. In those moments, it can be surprising to have things happen exactly as you might hope.” She laughed again, but not a cackle, more a warm chuckle that Victor found infectious.

“You think your ancestors are meddlers? Do they ever make things easier?”

“The Ancestors that choose to bide their time nosing about in our affairs rarely concern themselves with our happiness. No, they want to see a particular end and like to treat us as a means to that end.”

“So, benevolent ancestors are more hands-off? Doesn’t seem fair.” Victor’s words elicited another true cackle from Oynalla, one that lasted a while.

“Imagine believing life is fair! Silly warrior. Do you think your foes feel that things are fair when you refuse to die, refuse to keep bleeding, and rip them limb from limb?”

“Fair point,” Victor said with a chagrined smile. Suddenly Oynalla looked away, staring into the horizon behind him.

“Something dark and powerful comes this way. Return to your body, warrior. Come to me at this hour whenever you can, and try to bring my daughter with you!” She reached out and touched Victor’s forehead, and then he was blinking his real, physical eyes, staring into the dark pantry.

“Damn, she fucking kicked me out!” he said, his words dry and scratchy like he’d been holding his mouth open the whole time he was out.

“Was she mad?” Thayla asked, producing her glow lamp.

“Nah, she said something dark was coming our way and kicked me out. She wants us to visit her again, though. She said this was a good time.”

“Us?”

“Yeah, so you better keep working on cultivating that courage-attunement. By the way, she called you ‘daughter.’” Victor paused as Thayla looked away for a moment, either embarrassed or ashamed at whatever emotion she was feeling. “Anyway, she said the wards worked—she lost track of us earlier today when we picked them up.”

“Oh, good! I like this villa and didn’t want to have to move.” Thayla said, briefly brushing her eyes. She held out a hand, and Victor took it, pulling himself up to his feet. Thayla grunted and had to hold onto the door handle for balance.

“Don’t say it! I am not going on a diet.” Victor laughed and lifted the bar from the door, opening up the pantry to the rest of the basement. “Want to contact Lam now or wait for morning?”

“Now! She’s likely in her quarters at this hour. Who knows what she’ll be doing in the morning.”

“Yeah, good point.” Victor gestured to the larger basement space, “Since we’re sure we’re not being scried, no one should know we’re here. Let’s head upstairs to the sitting room, and you can use the stone in comfort.”

“Yep,” Thayla said, brushing past him and walking to the stairs. Victor followed her up and then through a short hallway into the villa’s sitting room. Wicker chairs with soft pads around a pale green, rag-style rug filled most of the space. Wide, glass-paneled French doors opened onto a stone-flagged courtyard. Victor crossed the room and opened them, letting some night air into the room.

“That’s better,” he said, taking a deep breath of the cool, jasmine-scented breeze. “Am I smelling jasmine blossoms?”

“Rust orchids.”

“Huh, smells like some flowers that grew by my auntie’s house.” Victor took another big breath, then moved over to one of the wicker couches and sat down, watching Thayla. She took the black stone from her storage container and contemplated it.

“I don’t know how this is going to work. Will it just alert her that I used it? Will she be able to see us? Speak to us?”

“No idea. Are you worried about whether we can trust her or not?” Victor frowned.

“Sort of, but I guess that’s a little silly—if she’d wanted to doublecross us, why would she help us to slip away? Why give us all these supplies and weapons?” She nodded at the axe hanging from Victor’s belt.

“Yeah. Go for it; she’s not going to sell us out. She wanted info on that dungeon, anyway, so it’s not like she’s not motivated.”

“Right,” Thayla nodded, “here goes.” She lifted the stone in her palm and concentrated for a moment. Victor felt her reach out with a tendril of courage-attuned Energy, and he wondered if he’d have noticed if it had been some other Energy attunement. The thread of courage Energy had a very familiar feel to him, and he smiled at the feelings it triggered: confidence, boldness in action, a warm feeling spreading from his heart.

The stone shifted from black to yellow and then back again to black. It did it again, three seconds later, and then again, three seconds after that. “Does that mean it’s working?” Victor asked.

“I don’t know! It’s getting warm,” Thayla said, closing her fist over the stone and releasing it. “It feels nice.” Suddenly the stone seemed to burst into a million fragments that hovered in a small cloud in front of Thayla’s face. A moment later, they started to swirl around and then condense into a grayscale shape: Lam’s face. The representation of Lam blinked a few times, and then she opened her mouth.

“Thayla? You’re alive! I’d lost hope of hearing from you, then my stone started to pulse, and I knew someone had the one I gave you.”

“Lam? Can you hear me?” Thayla asked, talking to the gray-black face.

“Yes! Be quick, though—these stones are linked but can only maintain a connection for a few moments. How are you? Are you someplace safe? Did Victor survive?”

“We’re safe! We’re in Gelica, but we have assassins and bounty hunters chasing us. We need to figure out a way to get the mining consortium to let things drop.”

“Gelica! So the dungeon was real? Victor found the way in?”

“Yes! Do you think you can help us, Captain?”

“I’m due a visit to the city. I’ll come to you, and I’ll bring along a friend of yours! She’s been driving me crazy with questions about what happened to you both.”

Victor's cheeks turned up into a smile at the mention—she had to be talking about Edeya!

“Is Edeya well?” Victor asked, but it didn't seem Lam could hear him.

“We can make the journey in two days. I have a close friend that owns a restaurant—Nissa's Small Plates. Talk to Nissa; tell her where I can find you. She won't speak to anyone; you can trust her.”

“Okay, thank you. Lam, is there any . . .” Suddenly, the shadowy image of Lam's face fell to the floor—a million particles of inert dust. “Guess it ran out of time.”

“That was pretty cool, though!” Victor said, leaning forward to look at the pile of black dust at Thayla's feet.

“Yeah, I didn't expect that! She's bringing Edeya! Aren't you excited to see how she's been?”

“Hell yeah,” Victor nodded, clapping his hands together. “Well, shall we get some sleep? Tomorrow we can find Nissa's restaurant.”

“Yeah, I'm beat. Lock up the doors, though, please.” Thayla gestured to the doors Victor had just opened.

“Right. See you in the morning.” He moved to close the doors, and while he was latching the bolt, Thayla moved off toward the bedrooms. They each had a comfortable room, and the villa sported a Roman-style bathing room with a large, perpetually full, steamy bath. Thayla said it wasn't uncommon for wealthier people to have such pools in their homes—Energy powered the heaters and filters.

Thayla didn't avail herself of the bath, heading straight to sleep, but Victor wasn't all that tired, so he spent some time splashing and floating around in the hot water, sampling the soaps and oils that the owner had arrayed in great quantity and variation. After his bath, he went to his room and fell asleep rather quickly, more tired than he'd thought.

He must have slept well because Victor found himself in that cozy half-awake, half-asleep state he sometimes got into when he'd slept through the night. His dreams were vivid, and he was almost lucid in them. One strange scene after another drifted through his mind, and he could feel his face stretching into a smile while he laughed at his friend Paul mimicking their wrestling coach, “Oh, you didn't make weight? When I was your age, I spent half my day wearing three sweat suits and laying under the mats with the heaters cranked up! Get some gum in your mouth and start spitting! You got two hours!”

That strange memory-dream faded away as Victor found himself walking through the desert with his old friend, Anthony, looking for a stick suitable to use as a “sword.” Their neighbors, twins named John and Eric, had bullied Anthony on the bus again, and Victor was going to help him get even.

The dream morphed away from memory when he found himself holding an axe, not a stick, standing in a dark hallway made of stone. Victor's heart started to beat faster, and he crept toward an even darker opening ahead, trying not to breathe loudly. He moved into the darkness, unable to see anything, and when he whirled back toward the hallway he'd come from, it was gone, and he stood alone in the fathomless black.

Somewhere in the back of his dream-muddled mind, Victor thought he should be able to produce a light somehow, but he couldn't quite figure out how. His breaths came short and shallow, and his hands gripped the handle of his axe until his knuckles started to hurt, and then a voice came out of the darkness, familiar but different, "Ahh, your spirit wanders wide, warrior."

Victor couldn't quite put a finger on whose voice it was—deep and raspy, echoing strangely, confident, but not demeaning. It was a man's voice, but had he ever heard it before? Why was it familiar? Before he could puzzle out any more, it spoke again, "Nothing to say? You should learn to guard yourself better when you sleep. A spirit as strong as yours can venture to places you aren't ready to see. You need to keep your mind in control of it. Luckily for you, I bear you no ill-will. It was irritating that you took my apprentice away, but the service you did far outweighed such an insignificant loss. As a gesture of goodwill, I'll tell you this: I'm not the only one that saw your spirit drifting around this night."

"Apprentice?" Victor managed to say, his mind jumping to every possible conclusion. "Thayla? Are you Belikot?"

"Wake up now! And learn to tether your spirit before you sleep so deeply again." The voice was deep and suggestive, and Victor, worried that he'd done something he shouldn't have, willed himself awake. Gray morning light was filtering through the gauzy drapes on his windows, and his bed felt like a warm nest in the cold morning air. A chilly draft drew his eyes to the windows, and he saw the drapes flutter. Had he opened them last night? He stood and walked over to the window, pulling the fabric aside to look out on the villa's courtyard.

A thin layer of frost lay over the flagstones and the marble fountain. The short shrubs were similarly coated, and Victor shivered, cranking the window closed. "I guess summer's definitely over."

He found Thayla in the kitchen, rooting through the "cold-cabinet," as she'd called it. To Victor, it seemed just like a refrigerator, but it was made of wood strapped with rune-covered bronze. Brightly glowing crystals were inset into the back of the interior, and it felt just as cold as the fridge at his abuela's house. "Looking for breakfast?"

"I found sausages, but they were slimy and smelled. There're eggs, though." Thayla turned and set a ceramic bowl filled with eggs on the counter. She looked up at Victor and smiled, "You look like you slept well!" She chuckled and pointedly looked at his hair.

"What? My hair a mess? Damn, but I had some weird dreams." Victor pulled out one of the stools in front of the long kitchen counter and sat down. "Either my subconscious is weirder than I thought, or Belikot spoke to me in my dream."

Thayla dropped the frying pan she'd picked up. It clattered on the tile floor, and she turned to look at him. "Not funny, Victor."

"Yeah, I'm not trying to be funny. He said my spirit was 'wandering' in my sleep. I mean, on the bright side, he didn't act like we were enemies. He even said he wanted to warn me that he wasn't the only one that had noticed my spirit wandering around last night. He said I need to learn to tether myself before I sleep so deeply again. Whatever that means. Ahh, it all sounds stupid when I say it out loud. I probably had a dumb dream."

"I don't know, Victor," Thayla said, stooping to pick up the pan and placing it on the stovetop. "Where would you come up with something like that? I mean, if it was just a dream—your spirit wandering, Belikot warning you. Is that something you'd dream up on your own?"

"Maybe. Oynalla talked about stuff like that, and we've been practicing Spirit Walk. I'm sure Belikot is one of the worries I've got buried in here," Victor thumped his skull.

"Well, just in case, we should see if we can find anything out about keeping your spirit from wandering while you dream."

"All right, add it to the list. Anything good to drink in there?"

"Some juice," Thayla said, pulling a pitcher out of the cold-cabinet and getting him a glass from a nearby cupboard. Victor drank the tangy, sweet juice, and Thayla scrambled up some eggs for them to eat.

"I could go for some toast or bacon. We should go shopping after we find that friend of Captain Lam's."

"Yeah, I had the same thought."

"Well, I'm ready when you are," Victor said, rinsing his plate in the sink.

"Okay, let me go get cleaned up a little bit. I'll meet you in the courtyard." Thayla walked back toward the bedrooms, and Victor stretched, moving out to the courtyard to stand in the morning sun. The frost had already melted away, and though there was still a chill in the air, the sun felt good on his face. Victor could hear the sounds of the city waking up around them and even saw the silhouettes of people walking by through the wrought iron gate. Victor had admired the gate when Yasha had first shown them the villa; it was heavy with a solid feel, and the tiny holes in the metal were nearly impossible to see through, let alone sneak through.

Long metal bolts held the gate shut, and they made quite a racket when you slid them open. Victor thought it was a nice security touch, but he supposed he was still thinking like an earthling—anyone with a decent agility score or some Energy abilities could get over the wall, completely ignoring the

heavy gate. Victor walked over to it, pulled the lever, slid the long bolts free, and swung the gate toward him. A woman was walking by on the sidewalk, and he smiled and said, “Good morning.”

“And to you,” she said, hurrying on her way.

“Trying to flirt with the locals?” Thayla asked, noiselessly walking up behind him.

“Damn, Thayla! Do you have to creep up on me like that?”

“Was I really creeping, or were you just too busy staring at that poor woman to notice me?”

“All right, all right. Where do we go first?”

“First, we should find the source of that smell! She sniffed loudly, her lips turned up in a pleased smile. Victor turned his attention to his nose and took a big whiff; sure enough, the sugary smell of toasted caramel wafted into his nostrils.

“You think it’s a pastry shop or something?”

“Yes! And we need to buy a bunch of them!” Thayla started up the street toward the corner, and Victor closed the gate, following behind.

“Did you lock the villa?” he asked as he caught up.

“Sure did.” Thayla wore a smug smile and seemed almost bubbling with positive energy, and Victor couldn’t quite put a finger on why, but she seemed different.

“What’s up with you? You seem happy or something.”

“I’m not allowed to be happy? No, no, I’m teasing. I’ll tell you what it is: I’ve thought about what you said, about your conversation with Belikot while you were sleeping. If he really did warn you and said he held no ill-will, that’s good, right? That’s a weight off my mind. I think I’ve been worried that we’d run into him sooner or later, or at least some Naghelli assassins he might send after me. I think it’s like you said all along—he’s got bigger problems than you and me, especially if we’re not looking to get back at him.”

“All right, well, that’s cool. I’m glad you’re feeling better about that shit . . . Hey! A bakery!” He pointed to the corner shop with a line of patrons coming out the door. The sugar-scented, fresh bread odor was coming from within.

He and Thayla joined the queue and talked about mundane things, like finding a store to buy wine and a place to sell some more of the odds and ends Victor had collected in the dungeon, including the various weapons and armor bits. Thayla said she wanted to try to find a clothier to buy some new outfits, and that, of course, reminded Victor that he had a very limited wardrobe.

“No, Angra, I’m not doing this again. You either tell him we’re serious and he needs to back off, or I’m done!” A short Ardeni man had suddenly raised his voice and turned to face the large Vodkin behind him.

“Oh, you’re done? Maybe I’m done! Did you think a sweet roll would make up for how you spoke to my mother last night? And you referred to my nephews as a litter! A litter of nephews! I’m done with this! I’m going to talk to Drayel, all right, but it’s to tell him that you and I are through!” The big Vodkin turned on his heel and strode away, jostling Thayla. “I’m sorry, miss!” he said, tears on his fuzzy face.

“Wait! Angra!” the Ardeni called, chasing after him down the sidewalk. Victor looked at Thayla and raised an eyebrow. She suppressed a giggle and turned back toward the bakery counter.

“That’s one way to get the line moving faster,” Victor said, leaning forward to speak quietly in her ear.

“Hush!” she hissed.

When they finally got a chance to make a purchase, Victor loaded up on all sorts of pastries, creating quite a pile in one of his storage rings. He and Thayla sat at a small table and savored one of their purchases with a warm drink the locals simply called spiced milk. It reminded Victor of a cross between hot chocolate and apple cider, though if someone asked him what the actual flavors were, he’d struggle to describe them. All he knew was that it was delicious and paired perfectly with the buttery fruit-filled pastry he was eating.

When they finished eating, he and Thayla walked toward the nearby market square and started asking friendly-looking people if they knew where they might find Nissa’s Small Plates. The first few people they asked didn’t have any idea, one suggesting they look around various other city sections. Thayla didn’t give up, though, and after a few more attempts, she asked an older, gray-haired Shadeni woman selling carved figurines that looked to be made from something like ivory.

“Oh, Nissa’s? Yeah, I’ve seen it. Not my taste, or my price range, though.”

“Could you tell us where it is?” Thayla asked, picking up one of the figurines shaped like a little wolf with three bushy tails.

“Seven Bell Square. On the corner next to the candlemaker. That’s how I know it—I buy my wax there.” She gestured at the little figurines.

“These are wax?” Victor asked, picking one up. It was hard and lustrous, nothing like a candle, the only object made of wax that Victor could think of.

“Yes, but I treat them with my Artisan skills.”

“Pretty cool! How much for the one my friend has there?” Victor pointed to the little three-tailed wolf.

“Eight,” the woman said, smiling with crinkled eyes. Victor dug in his ring and took out three attuned beads.

“How about this? We got a deal?”

“Sure. Happy to help young love,” she said, snatching the beads faster than Victor thought she ought to be able to move.

“We’re not in love!” Thayla said, but she pocketed the figurine. “Thanks, Victor.”

“Sure,” Victor waved to the woman and started walking toward the broad road that led down the hill toward the greater part of the city. “You know where the square she mentioned is?”

“Yeah, it’s pretty well-known.” She moved to Victor’s side and took the lead. They walked in silence for a few minutes, then she said, “I liked the figurine because it reminded me of my daughter—she loved a story about a three-tailed boyii hound that befriended a little boy. Thanks for buying it.”

“What’s her name?”

“My daughter?”

“Yeah, I’m always thinking of her in those terms. ‘Thayla’s daughter.’ I’m just curious.”

“Her name’s Deyni.” Thayla smiled wistfully as she said the name. “I haven’t said it aloud in a while. Victor, can we make a detour when we’re done talking to Lam’s friend? I want to try to find an old acquaintance who might have an idea where Deyni and my old friend Rhessa might be hiding.”

“Fuck yes! We’ve got a couple of days until Lam gets here; we might as well accomplish something while we wait!”

“Thanks, Victor!” Thayla clapped him on the shoulder, and they continued in silence, walking toward the city center and Seven Bell Square.