

Victor BK2: Ch24

Book 2: Chapter 24: Heart Finder

Nissa regarded Victor and Thayla over her wooden chopping block, bits of diced herbs clinging to the knife in her hand. “So you know Lam, hmm?” They’d knocked on the restaurant door, seeing that a light was on in the kitchen, and when Thayla had mentioned Lam to the grumpy, narrow-faced Ghelli woman, she’d motioned for them to follow her back to the kitchen.

“That’s right,” Victor said. “She asked us to leave a message for her with you.”

“Don’t get me wrong, I love Lam, but I need to keep my nose clean. I’m not the same Ghelli she used to run with.” She smirked, reliving some private memory, and then went back to dicing herbs.

“This won’t get you into any trouble. We’re just going to tell you where she can meet us,” Thayla said.

“Mmhmm, and I won’t have some thugs coming here to torture the information out of me?” The knife beat out a staccato rhythm, faster than Victor’s eyes could follow.

“I don’t see how—no one knows we have any connection to you. I mean, we don’t—Lam does.” Thayla pressed.

“Alright, then, spit it out. What do you want me to tell her?”

“If you could just tell her to get breakfast at Parlo’s Bakery near Boyii Square, we’ll look for her there each morning,” Thayla said, giving the instructions that she and Victor had decided upon. They knew they could trust Lam, but they didn’t know if Nissa was as trustworthy as Lam thought.

“Parlo’s. All right, got it. Is that everything?” She scraped her herbs into a pile on the cutting board, then put a bright orange pepper under her knife, “If it is, you might want to leave—scorch peppers aren’t fun to be around when they’re being chopped.”

“One more thing,” Victor said, calmly putting one of his large hands over the pepper. “I know you don’t know us and don’t have a reason to want to help, but we don’t have any good contacts here in the city. Do you think you could point us in the direction of a spirit caster? Someone who runs a business, so it won’t seem odd, us showing up.”

“A spirit caster? What kind? A Fate Teller? A Heart Witch? A Spirit Singer? I know a few.” Nissa reached forward and grabbed onto Victor’s thumb, trying to lift his hand off her cutting board. “Do you mind?”

“We’re looking for someone that might be able to help with some questions about spirit Cores in general. Someone friendly and knowledgeable.” Victor said, still holding his hand over the pepper.

“Well, if you care about discretion and want someone friendly, Ren the Heart Witch is your best bet. People don’t go to her for things they want blabbed about, if you know what I mean.” She winked at Victor and nodded toward Thayla.

“We aren’t interested in love potions,” Thayla said, slapping a hand on Victor’s shoulder. “Let her have her cutting board back. Even so, Nissa, can you tell us where to find Ren?”

“She’s in the shambles down by the docks. I’ll have to write you instructions, or you’ll be wandering around down there for days.” Nissa turned and rummaged through one of her drawers until she pulled out a pencil and a notepad that looked like something a server would write orders on. She wrote several lines of text, even drew a sketch of a map on the paper, then handed it to Thayla. “Here. Now, can you kindly get out so I can prepare for my lunch rush? Use the back door, please.” She pointed to a door at the rear of the kitchen.

“Thanks, Nissa,” Thayla said, tugging Victor along, “We’ll tell Lam how much you helped us.”

“Sure, sure,” she said, then started chopping the pepper on her cutting board, and, even from several feet away, Victor’s eyes began to burn. He and Thayla rushed out of the kitchen.

“I get the feeling that she and Lam don’t really hang out anymore,” Victor said as they walked through the back alley back to the street.

“Yeah, well, at least she helped us out. My contact is down at the docks, so this worked out nicely.”

“The one that’s going to point us toward your daughter?”

“Hopefully,” Thayla said, her face betraying her worry. “Rallo isn’t really a friend—more of a mutual acquaintance of mine and Rhessa’s. He used to find jobs for us when we ‘worked.’”

“What kind of work?” Victor asked, failing to note the inflection Thayla put on the word.

“Oh,” she sighed, “no sense trying to keep secrets from you, I guess. I mean, I think you’ve shown me I can trust you more than anyone else. Rhessa and I used to go to parties thrown by wealthy merchants and nobility. We’d flirt and sometimes more, and when things were in full swing, and people were out of

their minds with drink and potions, we'd rob the place, slipping away before anyone knew something had happened."

"Shit, for real?" Victor glanced at Thayla with a raised eyebrow. He'd always assumed she was a victim of circumstances, especially when he'd learned about her daughter.

"Yeah, for real. I tried to straighten up and lead a clean life when I got pregnant, but my past caught up with me. The constable that caught up with me didn't have a warrant for Rhessa, so he let me leave my daughter with her, and she promised me she would disappear with her—keep her safe, and raise her away from that kind of life."

"So you think this guy that used to give you jobs might know where Rhessa ran off to?"

"It's just a hope at this point. I don't know if Rhessa ever had any contact with him. Rallo was good to us, but he was tied to our old lives."

"Alright, so, we seeing him first or the love potion lady?"

"The shambles are on the way to the docks, so let's find Ren first," Thayla said and started walking with purpose toward the city's western side. Victor followed, and soon the jostling crowds and noise and commotion of the streets made conversation difficult, so he let his mind wander.

He thought about all the different threads pulling him in various directions in this world. He wanted to revisit Persi Gables and the Wagon Wheel. He wasn't sure what he'd do there, but he felt like some sort of reckoning was in order, even if it was just to see if Belsa was still there. He wanted to look into the noble that tried to wreck his Core. He wanted to do something about the mines, though one of his motivations for returning there, seeing if he could help Edeya, was being taken care of for him, thanks to Lam. He wanted to find some sort of resolution with Belikot. Most of all, Victor wanted to help Thayla get her daughter and get them safely to Oynalla.

Thoughts of Persi Gables and his time in the pits there naturally brought back memories of how he came into this world. He thought about how he'd been yanked out of his abuela's house and confronted with those strange mages that had so effortlessly controlled him. He remembered how they'd dismissed him and sold him into a kind of slavery that, in their minds, would lead to his quick death. He imagined it would be good to do a little investigating into those assholes, too.

"And that's just the tip of the iceberg," Victor said aloud. He thought about all the other little things on his mind—learning more about his spirit Core, gaining more levels, exploring, and, beneath it all, gaining enough power and influence to do something about the labor system in this world.

Lost in thought, Victor almost tuned out the city, but when they turned down a steep hill leading toward the docks, the smells and scenery intruded on his reverie. He could see the wide, green

ribbon of the Rill Catcher stretching north to south in a meandering pathway through the densely packed structures of the docks district. No wall stood on that side of the city, the river itself serving as the defensive barrier. The buildings were lower, more numerous, and built of cheaper stuff than in the other parts of the city. The far side of the river was even worse, with thousands of ramshackle structures vying for space along the muddy, partially graveled roads.

As Victor took in the distinctly fishy smells and the crowds of people battling for space, he said, loudly so Thayla could hear him, “They push all the poor people into this section of the city?”

“Well, it’s not like they push them here, but this is where most of the jobs are, and living is cheapest. If you go a bit further south or north, there are nicer homes that overlook the river, but, here in the heart of the city, the docks are important business—everything else is secondary.”

“And the shambles? That’s these winding streets along the hill, I guess?”

“Yes, and the little shacks people live in.” Thayla stepped to the side of the street to look more closely at the directions Nissa had given them. Then, she started walking again, trusting Victor to keep pace. He followed her through a veritable maze of narrow streets with leaning wooden structures built one atop the other. The people in the dingy district were either hurrying to get somewhere or lingering around with their friends, drinking from shared bottles. The clean smell of the upper city was gone, and the tang of urine was heavy in the air.

Thayla had to stop several times to scrutinize the instructions, and twice she backtracked to turn into different alley-like streets. When she’d reached the end of Nissa’s written directions, and they still hadn’t found Ren’s shop, she said, “Ask someone for directions, Victor, and try to look like you mean business.”

“All Right,” Victor said, then he approached a group of Shadeni men sitting around on broken barrels and drinking from brown bottles. “Hey,” he growled, speaking from his belly, “Where’s Ren’s shop?”

One of the men looked at him with bleary eyes, made a circle with a thumb and forefinger, and then jammed his other thumb through it repeatedly. His friends laughed raucously, one falling off his barrel, eliciting more laughter. Victor walked up to the guy who’d made the gesture and channeled some rage into his pathways, repeating his question while leaning very close to the man’s face.

“Orl’s bones, man!” the drunk said, pulling back, but Victor snaked a hand out to grab his shirt, pulling him close again.

“Where?” he growled.

“Right there! That’s her house behind that mean-looking bitch.” He gestured toward Thayla.

“Thanks,” Victor stood and shrugged. “I guess you found it, after all,” he said to Thayla. He strode past her and knocked on the shack-like building’s flimsy door. Glancing over his shoulder, he saw Thayla behind him, eyeing the people in the

area warily, and he decided to speed things along. He pulled at the door, which opened easily—not even latched. Victor stepped into the dim interior, and Thayla followed. “Hello?” he called out.

“Well, come in then, and close that door,” a high-pitched voice said from the shadows to his left, and, as Thayla shut the door and Victor’s eyes adjusted, he saw a small Vodkin woman sitting on a couch, smoke spiraling up out of a thin brass pipe held between her thin, black lips. She had sleek white fur with pale brown spots, and her long whiskers twitched while she inhaled the smoke. “What brings you to Ren? Looking for lost love?”

“No, we just need some advice,” Thayla said, coming up from behind Victor and ducking to avoid the many strands of beads hanging from the ceiling.

“Oh? I’ve seen a lot in my years, and I do have some wisdom to share, but your friend seems to be the type to solve problems with his axe.” She leaned back, blowing out a long stream of blue-tinged smoke. Her huge, black eyes seemed even more depthless than other Vodkin Victor had met, and he wondered what she saw.

“This problem can’t be solved with my axe. I need advice about my spirit.”

“Oh?” She leaned forward, this time with genuine interest in her eyes. She closed them for a moment, and Victor was surprised to see how long and thick her lashes were. When she opened them, she smiled and said, “Oh, now I see. You have a strong spirit Core, warrior! Sit, sit.” She gestured to the wicker chairs facing her couch. Thayla had to lift a tattered robe from hers and set it aside on a cluttered table, but the two of them sat down.

“Do you know much about spirit walking?” Victor asked.

“I know how to do it if that’s what you mean.”

“Not exactly. I know the spell also, but I’m having a problem with my spirit wandering on its own while I sleep—particularly when I sleep deeply and dream.”

“Oh? Your mentor didn’t teach you to control your spirit?”

“I don’t really have a mentor—I guess I kind of met one recently, but my time with her was short.”

“Hah! Until you gain more control, I could teach you to tether yourself. I mean to say if your spirit wandering is worrying you. I assume that’s why you came, no? The wandering is troubling you somehow? It’s the simplest of patterns. I’ll show you for a small favor.”

“A favor? Ren, we have a lot on our plate, and not much of it is in our control. Couldn’t we just pay you?” Thayla interjected.

“Tosh, this is easy,” Ren said, and, from somewhere, she produced a jagged, pale crystal. “I just want the warrior here to channel some of his Energy into this crystal. I could work some interesting magics with that rage attunement.”

“Oh,” Thayla said. “All right, Victor, that’s pretty painless.”

“Huh,” Victor said, reaching out to pick up the crystal. It was heavy and cold. “How much Energy do you want in it?”

“As much as it will hold, silly man.”

“First, let me see the spell pattern,” Victor said, frowning.

“Fear not, warrior. The pretty mistresses in the upper quarters might frown on Ren’s services, but I’ve never cheated anyone in a bargain. You fill that crystal, and I’ll teach you to tether your spirit tight while you dream.”

Victor looked at Thayla, and she raised her eyebrows as if to say, “Up to you.”

He sighed and said, “All right.” Victor turned inward to his Core and pulled a thick band of rage-attuned Energy out into his pathways, pushing it toward the hand that held the crystal. When his fist began to radiate with red light, he pushed the Energy out and into the Crystal. It rapidly soaked it up, turning from pale white to pink, then gradually darkening to red.

As Victor kept pushing Energy out, the red hue deepened and then began to pulse brightly from the Crystal, and within a matter of seconds, he found he couldn’t put any more Energy into it. “That’s it?” he asked, looking at his status sheet to see he still had more than eighty percent of his total Energy.

“Nicely done, warrior!” Ren said, reaching for the crystal. Victor closed his fingers around it again and grinned.

“The spell?”

“Tosh! Such a lack of trust! Very well,” she said, then briefly touched a bug-shaped, bronze pin on her maroon blouse. A second later, she held a rolled piece of parchment. “You’ll have to learn it now—this pattern-page good for a few uses, and I’d like to keep it for my apprentice. If I ever find one.”

“How does it work?” Victor asked.

“Just stare at the symbols for a few seconds,” Ren replied as she unrolled the parchment and held it so that the ink-covered side faced Victor.

“It’s enchanted parchment, Victor. It will impart the spell pattern directly into your mind. Some people call them learning scrolls.”

“Oh, cool,” Victor said, looking at the weird, squiggly symbols all over the paper. As he tried to decipher them, they seemed to move around on the paper, subtly at first but then more obviously. As he traced their movements, some of them seemed to lift off the page and flow toward his eyes. A moment later, dozens of them were streaming into him, and he felt the warmth of Energy in his skull, behind his eyes, and he wondered what it was doing to his brain. As quickly as it started, it stopped, and a System message appeared in his view:

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Tether Spirit – Basic.

Tether Spirit: Prerequisite: A Spirit-Class Core. When you cast this spell, your spirit will be bound to your corporeal form for a period of twelve hours. This will serve to protect you from hostile attempts to sever your spirit and will keep your spirit from drifting while your conscious mind is unable to be vigilant. Energy Cost: 10, Cooldown: Short.

Victor looked at the parchment and saw it still had all its markings, but they’d faded somewhat, appearing more gray than black. Ren snatched the paper away and then held her hand out expectantly. Victor nodded and passed her the glowing red crystal. “Fair deal; thanks, Ren.”

“You learned it, Victor?” Thayla asked.

“Yeah—it seems pretty basic. I can probably teach it to you after I study the pattern for a while.”

“Is that how you thank me? Teaching my secrets to everyone in town?” Ren curled her lips into a frown and tucked her parchment away into her storage device.

“Not everyone in town, just my close friend here. I promise,” Victor said, trying to use a soothing tone.

“Tosh, tosh. Do as you will, but be careful! See that you show her the exact pattern, or she may be left vulnerable.”

“Alright, thanks, Ren.”

“Ren, can you really find lost love?” Thayla asked just as Victor was starting to stand up.

“I can! Love is my affinity. Can’t you feel it in your chests?” She hummed a gentle buzzing tune, and suddenly Victor did feel it—warmth in the center of himself, not really his chest, more close to his Core. Images of his mother and abuela came into his mind, and, to his dismay, he saw a memory of Thayla smiling and laughing.

“Like a sister, maybe,” he said softly. Thayla looked at him sharply, but she smiled, giving him a knowing wink.

“Did you see your missing loved one?” Ren asked Thayla.

“Yes, but just a memory. I need to find her!”

“Do you have anything of hers?” Ren drew a long pull of smoke through her pipe, watching for Thayla’s response.

“No,” Thayla’s eyes welled with tears. “They took everything from me when I was captured.”

“Oho! So the imperial masters had business that required you to give up your freedom, hmm?” Ren let out a very unladylike growl that rolled around in her throat, almost like a purr. “Don’t worry; Ren can help. Here.” She stood and waddled over to a trunk, lifting the lid and rummaging for several minutes. She returned holding a small, polished, pink stone. It was flat on one side and had little lines carved in every direction from a central indentation.

She sat in front of Thayla again and pulled a long, slender needle from her hair. “I need a drop of your blood.” Thayla glanced nervously at Victor and then licked her lips, holding out a finger.

“Wait!” Victor said, snatching her hand away. “Ren, Thayla’s been through a lot of shit in the last weeks. You better not be trying to mess with her somehow.”

“No, warrior. If I do some aught to hurt her, you may split me with that terrible axe. I have only good intentions, and we’ll seal this bargain with a payment so all parties are satisfied.” At her words, Victor reluctantly let go of Thayla’s hand and then watched.

Ren, quick as a snake’s tongue, pricked the needle into Thayla’s finger. Thayla jerked away from reflex, but the damage was done—a thick droplet of blood welled up on her fingertip. “Quick now! Let it drop into the center of the stone.” She held the pale pink stone out, and Thayla did as she was told, letting the drop of blood fall into the center. Ren smiled and then hummed again, a soft buzzing sound, and her hand began to glow with violet light. As Victor watched, Thayla’s blood sank into the stone and was completely gone.

“What did you do?” Victor asked.

“Just the perfect thing for your friend here.” She looked into Thayla’s eyes and said, “Hold this in your hand, and when you think of the one you love, your blood will point the way.”

“Really?” Thayla asked.

“Yes, truly. Now about my fee,” the furry woman said, holding the stone back.

“What do you want?” Thayla asked, desperation in her eyes. Victor put his hand on Lifedrinker’s cold metal head, annoyed that this woman seemed to be profiting from Thayla’s distress.

“Nothing much! Just another gem filled with the warrior’s Energy.” She turned to Victor with a narrow-eyed grin.

“What the fuck are you going to do with that rage-attuned Energy? I don’t want to be responsible for helping you cause a fight or something.”

“Tosh! Is it Ren’s fault that you came here with such potent Energy? Perhaps you have something else to offer?”

“I do!” Thayla said, cutting Victor’s response off.

“Can it be? Two spirit casters visiting me at once?” Ren studied Thayla for a long moment, then shook her head. “I can’t see it—my Discerning Eye isn’t what it once was. What attunement do you have, girl?”

“Courage.”

“Are you . . . truly?” She quickly tried to compose herself, but the damage had been done—Thayla and Victor had both seen the greed in her eyes.

“I’ll give you some, enough to work several spells, but I won’t fill a crystal as large as the one Victor did.”

“A bargain well-struck, dear.” Ren closed her eyes, touching her pin, and a moment later, she held a crystal similar to the one Victor had filled. She handed it to Thayla. “Give me what you can, and the Heart Finder is yours.”

“All right,” Thayla said, taking the crystal. She closed her eyes, and a few moments later, her hand and the crystal began to glow with red-gold light. She grimaced in concentration, but long before the crystal was full, she stopped and held it up. It pulsed at its center with a dim but warm light.

“No more?” Ren asked, perhaps a bit disappointed.

“It’s enough,” Victor said, motioning for the woman to hand over the Heart Finder.

“True, a bargain’s a bargain!” The little woman said, handing the polished pink stone to Thayla. Thayla quickly handed over the crystal, and then she held the stone in her palm and closed her eyes. A moment later, a thin bead of red filled one of the carved lines on the stone’s surface, pointing to, as far as Victor could tell, the south.

“No way to tell distance?” Victor asked.

“Tut! Of course! A bright, thick line means they’re very close. A thin red line like this means they’re within a few days’ travel. If it were thinner still and more pink than red, it would mean they are quite distant.” Thayla opened her eyes, looked at the stone, and smiled brightly.

“Thank you, Ren!”

“Yeah, that’s pretty cool,” Victor added. He stood, and Thayla followed him as he moved to the door, pulling the rickety thing open. “I’ll be sure to send business your way, Ren. Thanks for the help.”

“Hush now! Don’t send any unwanted attention my way!” The Vodkin said, stepping forward and poking Victor in the ribs with her thin, claw-tipped finger.

“Oh, all right. We’ll keep this between us!” Victor gave her an exaggerated wink, and she huffed, pushing him further out, toward Thayla and closing the door behind him. Thayla laughed and smiled brightly, tucking the Heart Finder into her storage ring. “Well, that put you in a good mood!”

“Of course! I learned two things—my daughter isn’t far away, and you love me! Hah, even if it’s like a sister, I can use all the love I can get in this world.”

“Come on, just cause that crazy witch made me think about you, my mom, and my abuelita? That doesn’t mean anything much.” Victor looked around the alley, noting that the drunken Shadeni were gone. It seemed awfully quiet. How long had they been in the witch’s house?

“Oh, hush! You basically admitted as much the other day when you were drunk,” Thayla said, her spirits too high to notice that something was troubling Victor.

Thayla was lifting a finger to poke him in the chest when Victor stepped forward, ripping Lifedrinker from the ring at his belt. Several figures had stepped out from behind broken crates, barrels, and dilapidated buildings. They all wore livery Victor was intimately familiar with—the soldiers that had chained him to a rotating table so a tentacled demon could fuck around with his Core had worn the same—dark maroon with a silver sun and three half-moons at the breast. These were Lord ap’Horrin’s men.

“Took us a while to track you down, Victor,” said one of the men, a tall Shadeni with long, red horns and heavy black armor. “Lucky for us, Tkelvic took a piece of your Core as a souvenir.” He held up a faintly glimmering red gem that dangled from a chain on his wrist. Victor had been counting while he edged in front of Thayla—there were seven of them, including the talkative asshole.

“Only seven? That dickhead, ap’Horrin, must not like you guys.” Victor channeled a surge of rage-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, and she blazed with a red nimbus. “Well? You gonna stand around holding your nuts all night, or are we going to fight?”