

Victor BK2: Ch25

Book 2: Chapter 25: No Going Back

The horned Shadeni didn't seem pleased by Victor's bravado and scowled, looking left to right as if reassuring himself that he was the one pulling off an ambush. He tucked the chain holding the glimmering shard of Victor's Core into his belt, and then his hands were holding a massive black iron maul. He smirked and said, "Bows!"

Victor saw some of the ambushing party lift heavy, flat crossbows and level them at him. He roared, casting Project Spirit, pouring forth a torrent of negatively attuned inspiration Energy. Sickly yellow waves rolled through the cluttered alley, engulfing most of the attackers, with the three crossbowmen at the center. Their eyes widened, and their fingers fumbled, and Victor charged.

As he covered the dozen feet between himself and the central cluster of ap'Horrin's men, Victor cast Inspiring Presence, boosted his agility with Sovereign Will, and then he was among them, capitalizing on their shaken, dismayed state. The leader of the crew seemed least affected by Victor's projected spirit, but even he hesitated for a split second as Victor tore past him, and that was all Victor needed—Lifedrinker fell in three quick, devastating hacks, opening terrible wounds in the crossbowmen, leaving them broken and bleeding as they fell before his onslaught.

By the time he'd finished with the crossbowmen, the horned Shadeni had recovered enough to bring his maul whistling toward Victor's head. Victor's situational awareness had improved a great deal over the course of his many battles, though, and he felt it coming, ducking forward to take the brunt of the blow in the back of his armored shoulder. It hurt and sent him stumbling forward a step, but his size and durability weren't things to be scoffed at, and he mostly shrugged off the blow. He whirled just in time to see Thayla drive her spear through a sword-wielding ambusher's throat.

"Charge him, you cowards!" The black-armored leader shouted, but when he glanced around and realized Thayla was keeping his two remaining minions in check with her long spear, he licked his lips and turned back to Victor, saying, "Come quietly, Victor, and no one else has to die."

Victor could only laugh at the absurdity of the statement. He said, "You come to me with a piece of my Core that was ripped from my guts. You come to me with loaded crossbows, ready to fill me with holes, and now you speak of 'coming quietly?'" He growled and stepped forward, lifting Lifedrinker. "Quit embarrassing yourself." Victor stepped over one of the crossbowmen—a stocky Cadwalli who thrashed weakly as his life's blood pumped out of the ruined stump of his left shoulder where Lifedrinker had sheared away his arm, and continued, "Are you going to lay down your weapon, or do we finish this?"

"You think you can defy ap'Horrin? You think you can defy me, Tazro-dak?" He glanced to his left, where Thayla still danced with the other two ap'Horrin soldiers. "Come, then, you won't find me as soft as those whelps!" Victor hadn't been waiting for an invitation and was already moving to strike as Tazro lifted his maul in an awkward parry attempt. He might be a big Shadeni and have some skill in battle, but he wasn't strong enough to wield that maul with the adroitness necessary to counter Victor's lightning cleave with Lifedrinker.

Tazro drove his maul forward in a thrust, trying to catch Lifedrinker on its broad metal head, but Victor angled his swing with such speed, stepping into the blow, that she ripped through the air under the heavy bludgeon, and her blade peeled away a thick curl of the maul's haft as she tore down its length and into the armored fingers of its wielder. Tazro screamed as several of his digits were severed to fall in a splatter of blood to the dirty alley floor.

"Lifedrinker's not impressed with your armor," Victor said as Tazro dropped his maul with a clatter, unable to hold onto the heavy weapon with only a third of his fingers still intact.

"I yield!" Tazro screamed, holding his hands tightly to his chest, blood pumping out of the ruined gauntlets and down his armored chest piece. Victor glanced at Thayla and saw that she held her spear to one soldier's neck while the other stood back, hands empty, his axe and small shield on the ground in front of him.

"You yield?" Victor asked. "Should I show you mercy? I don't feel like you had much mercy in mind for me."

"I can give you your Core fragment! I can give you a key to ap'Horrin's oubliette, where he has several more! You'll never find your way in without my guidance! I swear—let me live, and I'll take these men and disappear for months until you've settled your business with the lord." He'd fallen to his knees and was doing a fine job of looking pathetic.

"Thayla, what do you say?"

"I say we have too many people hunting us and wanting us dead to let these blackguards loose. It's not our fault they came after us with murder in their hearts." Victor looked at the bodies in the alley and at Tazro begging on his knees, and the only emotions he could muster were disgust and anger.

Rather than prolong the miserable situation with more discussion, allowing Tazro to sow further doubt, Victor lifted Lifedrinker, stepped forward, and brought her down at an angle into Tazro's neck, just above the black gorget of his armor. She bit deeply, severing his spine in a spray of dark blood, and would have removed his head if her blade hadn't caught in the metal collar due to the downward angle.

Tazro hadn't had a chance to scream or protest, and when Victor heard footsteps running, he turned to see that Thayla had impaled one of the soldiers with her spear, but the other was running down the alley. He yanked Lifedrinker free and charged after him, and in just a few strides, he caught up with the man and cleaved into his shoulder, ripping a terrible wound and sending him crashing into a pile of broken crates.

Victor hurried back to Thayla and Tazro's corpse, feeling like they should make themselves scarce but not wanting to leave behind his Core fragment or any valuable information. Thayla must have had the same thought because she was already rifling through Tazro's belt pouches. She tossed him the chain with the red, pulsing gemstone, and Victor felt his Core throb hungrily when he caught it.

Not wanting to take the time to deal with it just yet, he hung it over his head, tucking it under his armored shirt. A surge of Energy almost knocked him over as he bent to help search the corpse.

Thayla grunted beside him and said, “Level!”

“Nice one,” Victor said, then bent back to the task. “Where the fuck is this guy’s storage device?”

“The fingers!” Thayla said suddenly, looking at the sausage-shaped metal encased digits Victor had severed. They were scattered around the ground, and Victor hurriedly moved to scoop them up.

“You all should get lost,” a high-pitched voice called from off to the left and high up. Victor glanced toward the source of the voice and saw a red-headed Ardeni boy leaning out of a second-story window. “The town watch’ll be coming soon; Matra the Crone went to fetch ‘em when the killin’ started.”

“Thanks, kid,” Victor said, scooping the fingers up and into his pants pocket. “C’mon, Thayla,” he said more quietly, and the two of them hurried away down the alley, wending their way through the maze of narrow streets, putting as much distance as possible between themselves and the scene of the ambush.

“Will you be alright?” Thayla asked after a while when they’d finally worked their way back to one of the main roads.

“What do you mean?” Victor looked at her quizzically.

“Well, it’s different killing someone in combat than outside of it. We executed those men.”

“Yeah, well, they didn’t have good intentions for us. If I start to feel guilty, I’ll remember those crossbows getting ready to punch holes in us, or I’ll remember what ap’Horrin did to me when he had me strapped to a table in his dungeon.”

“Fair enough. I guess you have another task to add to your list, though—if he has more fragments of your Core, he’ll be able to find you again.” Thayla took his elbow and steered him uphill as she spoke.

“Aren’t we going down to the docks? To find your old contact?”

“No, I think we should go lay low for a while. I have this now, anyway.” She lifted up her Heart Finder, which she held tightly in one fist.

“Alright, if you’re sure.” Victor picked up the pace, quickly climbing away from the shambles and into the city proper. He asked Gorz for directions a couple of times but managed to mostly lead the way back to their villa by memory.

He was feeling particularly paranoid, thanks to the ambush in the shambles, but even as he looked around with suspicion at nearly everyone he passed, he couldn't see anything out of the ordinary. Sure, he drew a few looks, but that was probably because of his stature and the fact that he was the only human in the city. In any event, it wasn't long before they were slipping through the villa's gate and then securely locking themselves inside.

Victor moved into the kitchen and pulled the severed digits out of his pocket, dropping them onto the counter. Thankfully, the blood had mostly dried, so he didn't create much of a mess, but it was still a rather grisly affair, trying to shake and prise the flesh from the gauntlet fingers. Thayla helped him, and it was she, on her second attempt, that fished out a fat finger with a golden ring around it.

"Bingo!" Victor said when Thayla hissed in excitement. "You do the honors." Victor wasn't sure why he wanted Thayla to bond with the ring and search through it. He supposed part of it was that he wanted to show her that she'd earned his complete trust. She looked at him with an arched eyebrow but didn't say anything, pulling the golden band off the pale, dead finger. While she concentrated on bonding with the dimensional device and then the process of searching through it, Victor scooped up the fingers and their metal casings and went out to the courtyard.

He found a spot under a shrub in the corner and dug a small hole, burying them in the soft soil. By the time he'd finished and returned to the kitchen, Thayla had set out a small collection of items for him to go through. A small stack of documents sat next to a heavy, black key. Next to the key was a large leather sack, and next to the sack was a pile of thin rods that looked very much like amber ore. Thayla looked up at him as he arrived and gestured to the collection, "Everything else is just supplies, clothes—stuff like that."

"Did you read any of the documents yet?" Victor asked.

"No. I was about to, though." She picked up the top page, passed it to Victor, and started reading the next one.

Victor looked at his document and saw that it was a letter from ap'Horrin. He skimmed through it, then read the final paragraph aloud, "Tkelvic is a resource that grows less stable each year, and I cannot count on his abilities to solve every minor problem. The Core fragment he took from your quarry is a boon that you should count yourself very lucky to have. If you lose it or fail to properly make use of it to find your target, you should seek employment elsewhere. House ap'Horrin doesn't have room for incompetence."

Thayla set her document down and said, "This is just a copy of a lease for a skyship. Well, if you take that at face value, it sounds like maybe Tazro was lying about ap'Horrin having more of your Core fragments."

"Yeah, hopefully. In any case, I think I'll need to deal with ap'Horrin sooner or later."

"What kind of name is Tkelvic, anyway?" Thayla asked, picking up the next document.

“I’m pretty sure it’s the tentacled spider dude that tore apart my Core.”

“Tentacled? Spider? Oh, ancestors! Was he a Yovashi?”

“Yovashi?” Victor looked at her quizzically.

“They’re a race of insane cannibalistic monsters. They come from the same origin world as the Ilyathi and Ghelli, but something’s wrong with their minds—when I say they’re insane, I mean it literally. I’ve never heard of one working for someone. In fact, I think any civilized person that was working with a Yovashi would face condemnation.”

“Well, something tells me ap’Horin doesn’t give a shit what other people think.” Victor picked up the last document and glanced over it. It was a requisition for house soldiers and supplies—ap’Horin had authorized quite an expenditure for Tazro’s mission. “You know, they might have really underestimated our ability to fight, but I think the loss of this squad is going to sting ap’Horin a bit. He spent quite a lot on those soldiers and their transport.”

“Good!” Thayla said, putting down her document. “This one is just a recipe for marmalade. What a weird thing to find in a murderous bounty hunter’s storage device!”

“Well, what else do we have here? Are those rods amber ore?”

“They are, though not the purest I’ve seen. The sack is full of attuned Energy beads, at least a few hundred.”

“And the key? Do you think it’s to the ‘oubliette’ that pendejo was talking about?”

“No idea, but it wouldn’t hurt to hang onto it.” Thayla scooped the rods, bag of Energy beads, and key toward Victor.

“You don’t want any of this?”

“He had two sacks of beads, and I kept one. The other stuff, though—you should keep it. They were hunting you, so I say you should keep the spoils. Besides, you’ve been more than fair and generous to me.”

“Eh, we’re a team, chica.” Nevertheless, Victor scooped the items into his storage ring. As he tucked away the sack of beads, a thought occurred to him, and he said, “Hey, Thayla, I never got around to learning how to make these beads. Is it very involved?”

“No, it’s simple as can be, but it takes time and concentration. Want me to show you?”

“Yeah, we have some time to kill, don’t we?”

“Alright, come over to the couch—we might as well get comfortable.” Thayla led the way to the sitting room, and the two of them sat side by side on the wicker couch, which creaked in protest to Victor’s bulk, but held up gamely. “Now watch; this should really be as easy as rum-sugar cookies for someone with your will.” Before Victor could ask about her strange turn of phrase, Thayla held her hands out in front of herself, one with the palm facing up, and the other about four inches above it, palm down.

He could feel her channeling Energy before he saw it, but soon there were two thin streams of red-gold Energy tentatively snaking out of her palms to meet in the air between them. Her face was rigid with concentration as she slowly folded her two streams around each other, rolling them tightly with each fold. After just a few moments, the ball of red-gold Energy snapped into a tiny bead. “This is the smallest form of Energy bead. They’re quick to make and are often used for minor transactions. We want a real Energy bead, though, so I’ll keep going.”

“That’s cool,” Victor said, leaning close to watch her weave more Energy around the tiny bead. As the minutes stretched into an hour, the process began to lose its novelty, though, and he said, “Madre! How long does this take?”

“I’m about halfway done, I think. Some people can do it faster, but most people are considerably slower. I’ve got a higher than normal will, too, thanks to the courage attunement you gave me and the advice Oynalla gave me—I’ve been increasing my will at every opportunity.”

“Huh,” Victor said, sitting back with a sigh.

“If you’re that bored, get started on your own bead!” Thayla said, nudging his leg with her knee while she continued to work.

“Alright!” Victor mimicked her posture and started trickling out some rage-attuned Energy through each of his hands. Using his will, he forced the threads together, tightly binding them and rolling them together. It seemed pretty easy, so he broadened the threads, pushing out more than double the amount of Energy. Almost immediately, the tiny version of his bead snapped into being, and he smiled, continuing to wrap his Energy threads around it, building layer upon layer of Energy into the nascent bead. “If I finish before you, you have to make dinner!”

“Oh? Cock-sure aren’t you?” Thayla laughed, though, and he saw her narrow her eyes in renewed concentration.

As it turned out, Thayla finished her bead before Victor, but only just barely. When she finished, she laughed victoriously and held her gleaming red-gold bead out in front of Victor’s face, taunting him. “Hey! Let me finish, at least! Sheesh, I can’t even see with that right in my face!”

“Well, it looks like you’re making dinner. You know, I don’t think I’ve ever seen you cook, Victor!”

“Well, I’m not much of a cook,” Victor said, trying to refocus on his task. “My abuela always had beans and tortillas; if I wanted food outside of meal time, that’s what I ate.” He wrapped a final layer around his bead and sighed happily as the bead flashed and solidified—a balefully pulsing red ball. “You know, that sounds pretty damn good. They have tortillas in this world?”

“Tortillas? Describe them.”

“They’re usually made from flour or corn. I guess it’s like soft, flat bread. Really thin, like this,” Victor held his finger and thumb close together to indicate the thickness. “About the size of a plate. We usually eat them with eggs and potatoes or, like I said, refries.”

“Refries?”

“Uh, a kind of beans. Refried beans.”

“It doesn’t sound like it would be hard to make something like that. Someone with some cooking talent could probably do it based on your description, and then you could help them refine it by tasting. I’m not your girl, though—I can make a stew or grill some meat, but I don’t know anything about baking bread.” Thayla shrugged.

“No worries. I guess I’ll just add tortillas to my list of things to figure out, huh?” Victor stood and went to the kitchen, looking in the cold-cabinet. It was pretty well stocked with eggs, lots of vegetables, and even some thickly cut bacon. “How’s breakfast for dinner sound? Scrambled eggs and bacon?”

“If I weren’t so hungry, I’d tease you for your unoriginal ideas, but at this point, I’ll take it.” Thayla sat at the kitchen counter and prepared to watch him cook their meal. Victor smiled and got to work. While he cooked, they joked and shared memories of favorite meals, and, even though Victor wasn’t very talented with a skillet, the food was good. Thayla had encouraged him to add some greens to the scramble, and he’d diced some funny little purple-orange peppers into the mix after sampling their heat—they were a bit milder than jalapenos.

While they ate, Thayla encouraged Victor to try absorbing his Core fragment. He’d almost forgotten about the little red gem, and he had an idea which he quickly dismissed, that he was subconsciously blocking out the whole fight scene in the alley. He pulled the fragment out from under his armored shirt, and, again, he felt his Core throb hungrily, so he went with it; he reached out to the Energy in the red gem and pulled it toward his Core. It flowed into him effortlessly, and he felt the red, blazing sun of his rage Energy throb and pulse heavily. When he looked at his status sheet, he saw that he’d leveled his Core from Base five to Base six.

“What happened?” Thayla asked, seeing the grin on his face.

“My Core leveled. I guess that piece was bigger than it looked.”

After the two of them ate, they checked the locks on the windows and doors and called it a night. Victor cast Tether Spirit before he went to sleep, and though he remembered having dreams, they must have been relatively mild because, by the time he stood up from bed and pulled on his pants, he'd forgotten them. He stumbled groggily into his bathroom and decided to take a bath. He set his clothes and armor on the counter next to the sink, leaned Lifedrinker against the tub, and started running the water.

As he stood there, waiting for the water to fill, and his eyes fell on his axe again, he remembered how he'd chopped her silvery edge into Tazro's neck while the man had been on his knees, begging for his life. Suddenly the whole thing seemed surreal, like it hadn't really happened—like it couldn't have happened. He felt an unpleasant surge of saliva and swallowed it down, and then nausea gripped him, and he hurried to the toilet, where he vomited his guts out.

What had he become? Could he still be the same kid from Tucson? He glanced at his reflection in the mirror, his face red and lips flecked with spittle from heaving. “I'm a fucking monster,” he said when he took in his thick neck, ropy muscles, and massive stature. “I'm a fucking monster that executes people on their knees.” He felt dizzy, and vertigo began to grip him, so he grabbed the side of the tub and sank down, naked, to the tile floor.

He sat there, mind reeling, unable to reconcile his current reality with the life he remembered before he'd been summoned to Fanwath. One thought kept coming to him: he could never go home. His family wouldn't even recognize him. How could he ever explain to them what had happened to him? How could he ever explain the things he'd done or the changes he'd gone through? “Is this real?” The question seemed simplistic, but the more he thought about his situation, about how people were hunting him and he was killing people in the streets, the more he found it implausible.

As he sat there, shaking and confused, his eyes fell on Lifedrinker, and he reached out a hand to her haft and pulled her close. Her wooden, living handle was warm and seemed to pulse softly under his fingers, and he found himself saying, “It's not your fault, chica. All you ever do is try to help.”

He rested Lifedrinker's cool, silver-streaked, black metal against his forehead, and he felt a buzzing sensation where they touched. Then a strange, ethereal voice sounded in his mind, “Not your fault, Victor.” His eyes bulged wide, and he pulled her away from his head, staring at the axe, and, through all his distress, a slow smile spread on his lips.

“Are you talking to me, lovely?” The axe vibrated softly in his hands, and he pulled the metal against his forehead again.

“Not your fault! Those that hunt wolves must beware the fang!” The ethereal, feminine voice rang in his head again, but this time with a sense of finality, and Victor somehow understood that she couldn't speak much without rest, at least not yet. Victor felt tears start to pool in his eyes, and he wiped at them furiously. He didn't know why his axe's approval meant so much to him, but it did, and she'd made a good point: this was a dangerous world, and Tazro had meant to

kill him. His master had already done something to him that he'd thought was worse than death. It was no time to be pulling punches.

“Thank you, chica,” he said, clambering to his feet and leaning her against the tub again. “Time to get cleaned up.”

After his bath, Victor still avoided looking at himself in the mirror. He might be able to justify his actions, and Thayla and Lifedrinker might approve of him, but he still felt raw, and seeing his huge, manly physique just drove home the point that there was no going back for him. He'd never be plain old Victor Sandoval again. No, he was a berserker, a warrior, a killer with the blood of titans in his veins. “If I can't go back, then I need to go forward, and I need to make it worth something,” he said, shrugging into his armored shirt. He picked up Lifedrinker, gave her warm haft a loving stroke, and slipped her into the ring at his belt.

Victor strode out of his room and called out, “Thayla! We've got a day before Lam gets here! Let's do some shopping—I need more clothes.”