

## Victor BK2: Ch26

Book 2: Chapter 26: The Price of Freedom

“There she is!” Victor said, pointing down the street toward the little cafe tables outside the bakery. Sure enough, Lam was sitting at one, sipping at a mug of something steamy. She was impressive, as always, with her wings dropping glittering motes behind her, even at rest. Her attire was notably different here in the city than she wore down in the mines—sleek black leggings, a loosely-buttoned, red, silky blouse, and a gleaming, silver diadem resting among her platinum curls.

“Edeya’s with her,” Thayla said, and Victor saw that it was true, though he might not have recognized the younger Ghelli. She sat to Lam’s right wearing polished leather armor studded with steel knobs and with a black and gold tabard hanging from a rod jutting up behind her left shoulder.

“What’s on that tabard? A broken crown and some feathers?”

“I think it’s Lam’s sigil. Hah, she’s flying Lam’s banner wherever they go!” Thayla snorted and started walking down the street, and Victor matched her pace. Lam met their eyes before they were within a hundred feet, and she smiled and waved. They hurried over, and Lam gestured to two chairs at the table, but not before Edeya could squeal and leap to her feet, grabbing first Thayla and then Victor into a tight hug.

“Damn, you’ve gotten stronger, chica!”

“Oh, not that again! You might have grown even more beast-like, but don’t think I won’t give you a thrashing if you keep calling me girl!”

“Right, sorry, sorry,” Victor laughed.

“Should we move somewhere more private, Lam?” Thayla asked, looking around nervously.

“That won’t be necessary. You won’t need to hide anymore, in fact. Sit down, and I’ll explain some things. Order some food first if you want. This revashi root tea is exceptional, and I’m finding it quite stimulating.”

“I’ll sit first; I’m eager to hear what you have to say,” Victor said, pulling out a chair and sitting in it, to the sounds of metal creaking and straining.

“Trees, Victor! I remember I used to tower over you—I think we’d be on a level now.”

“He’s so much thicker than you, though, Captain! I could barely put my arm around his trunk!” Edeya laughed.

“I literally just got here, and you’re attacking me!” Victor feigned dismay, holding a hand toward Edeya, palm out.

“Don’t let him fool you—he wants you to think he’s being melodramatic, but he’s truly quite sensitive. Don’t beat up on him so much, Edeya,” Thayla said, also laughing wickedly.

“Enough, enough!” Lam said, clearing her throat. “Do you want to know why you don’t have to hurry back to your hidey-hole or not?” Thayla and Victor both nodded, and Lam smiled and began her story. “Well, when you reached out with my stone, I knew that Edeya and I could catch the next consortium airship to Gelica, but I had a day to kill before it left. While we were waiting, I had one of my more brilliant ideas—I went to the mine administration office and looked up your contracts. Yes, you’d killed a member of the ap’Yensha family, and they were hunting you down, but they never bothered to snatch up your contracts. When I asked about them, the administrative clerks looked through their files, and sure enough, they were still there. They hadn’t even marked you deceased! Victor, I bought your contract for a ridiculously low price, and Thayla, yours wasn’t much more.”

“What? You bought our contracts?” Thayla asked. “Are we off the hook?”

“You are! Victor’s going to have to jump through a few more hoops, but I managed to secure your indemnification, Thayla.”

“Hoops?” Victor asked, frowning.

“Nothing of my doing, I’m afraid. Lady ap’Yensha has a claim against you because the scries of your brutal slaying of her nephew were rather clear. Thayla didn’t have a physical role in it, so when I made the claim on her contract, ap’Yensha dropped their grievance against her—for a small donation, of course. I couldn’t get them to do the same for you, Victor, but I did come up with a solution: a duel.”

“What?” Victor asked.

“A duel?” Thayla said at the same time.

“Oh, come now! You act like this is a bad thing—if I told you yesterday that you could be done with this whole mess for the price of one more fight, wouldn’t you have jumped at the chance?”

Victor and Thayla gave each other long, measured looks, and then Victor said, “Yeah, of course. Thayla’s good, though? Even if I lose?”

“Thayla’s good. Here,” Lam produced two sheets of paper, both marked upon with several different inks and seals, but Victor recognized his contract right

away due to all the crossed-out lines and scribbles. “My gift to you both. Victor, after you win your duel, you’ll be free. You won’t have to worry about the mine coming after you, even the ap’Yenshas—I secured their guarantee, witnessed by the ap’Bale representative. If you don’t remember, the ap’Bale’s are rather hostile to ap’Yensha, and they’ll see that no repercussions come your way after your victory.”

“Shit! Congrats, Thayla!”

“It doesn’t feel right,” Thayla said, taking her contract and glancing at it, then back to Victor with worried eyes. “Duel’s aren’t anything to scoff at, and ap’Yensha will have a stable of champions to pick from!”

“Hah! You know the rules—whoever fights Victor will have to be in the same tier as him. What level are you, Victor?”

“Twenty-nine.”

“Gods! He’s a natural ringer—I can feel your aura from here, Victor. A tier four would struggle with you. I pity whatever jumped up dandy they put against you.”

“Really? So as long as I’m tier two, they have to pick a tier two to fight me?”

“Those are the rules for champions; she’s right,” Thayla said. “It’s the same rule if you initiate a legal duel—you can’t fight someone lower than your own tier.”

“Of course I’m right! If Lady ap’Yensha wants you dead, then she’s got to find someone your tier to fight you. Now that you have my legal backing, she can’t send bounty hunters after you, at least not if she doesn’t want the whole empire to come down on her. I’ve been building my influence, and I owe you both for a large portion of my wealth. I pay my debts,” Lam smiled and winked at Edeya, and the girl giggled. He wondered what inside joke he was missing.

“So what’s next? When’s the duel?” Victor asked, taking up his contract and stowing it into his storage ring. “Thanks for giving me my contract, by the way, Lam.”

“You’re welcome, Victor,” Lam smiled at him warmly, then continued, “Tomorrow we have a meeting with a Jurist. After we make our case and you indicate your willingness to fight to defend your innocence, the Jurist will go before a Magistrate and plead our case. We’ll be there, but only to watch at that point. Once that’s done, and ap’Yensha does the same, you’ll find out who your opponent will be and when the bout will take place. The Imperial Magistrate will most likely want to use your duel as an excuse for a gala of some sort.”

“Huh. All right. Well, Thayla and I rented a villa nearby—do you guys want to stay with us?”

“No, you’ll need to come to my estate. If you’re going to be under my care, we better look the part, right?” Victor and Thayla couldn’t argue with that, so after they all ate some breakfast, they went by Yasha’s shop to turn in their keys to the villa.

The young woman was disappointed that she couldn’t sell them any more time in the comfortable home, but she was pleased when they didn’t ask for any of their rental fee back. Lam softened the blow of their leaving by offering to tell her friends about the rental, and they parted ways on friendly enough terms. Lam’s home wasn’t in the city proper but north of the walls in a park-like setting of green meadows and wooded copses cleared of underbrush, giving them a manicured feel.

“It took me twenty-four years to get my hands on a place in these woods,” Lam said as they strolled down a cobbled lane between tall, arching bows.

“Why? Wouldn’t you rather be inside the walls?”

“Oh, just because we went out a gate doesn’t mean we aren’t inside the walls—there’s another wall about ten miles further north. You should know that, Thayla; I thought you did work in Gelica before you, um, retired.”

“I guess I never got around to these estates,” Thayla shrugged.

“Anyway, they’re very exclusive, and the families that own them are old. They don’t sell—I had to wait for Lord ap’Vebra to make a particularly bad investment, and then I had to give him an out that was too good to be true. It was a purchase decades in the planning.” Victor and Thayla looked at each other, and Victor guessed Thayla was thinking the same as he was: this side of Lam was wildly different from the fortune seeker in the mines.

“Captain Lam’s been building her influence, you guys. You can’t get into politics if you don’t play all the aspects of the game,” Edeya said, scoffing at their shared glance.

“Why do you want to be in politics, Lam,” Victor asked.

“We’ve spoken about how important it is to keep gaining in power, haven’t we, Victor? I think it might have been in regard to me helping Edeya or maybe not helping her enough for your taste, hmm? Well, when you get near tier five, like me, you’ll find that raw power increases come slowly. Very slowly. You start to look for other ways to grow your power base, like accumulating wealth. You know I’ve done that, as well, yes? Well, one thing you do with wealth is to increase your political clout. So, you see, there are three ways I’m still working to gain strength—literal power, through levels and artifacts, accumulating wealth, and gaining political influence.”

“How much will Victor winning his duel help you politically?” Thayla asked suddenly.

“Oh, very good, Thayla! You caught me—I’m not altruistic. I stand to gain something from helping you and Victor. Is that what you want to hear? Roots! Don’t be so difficult!”

“It’s fine,” Victor said, reaching out and putting a hand on Thayla’s shoulder. “Right, Thayla? We’re grateful, Lam; don’t sweat it.”

“Yeah, of course. I’m sorry, I’m still in shock, I think. I’m free, with the axe off my neck, but still, I’m worried about Victor. These lords are vindictive—I can’t imagine it’s going to go as smoothly as we all hope.”

“We’ll see what the Jurist has to say tomorrow,” Lam said. “Let it go for now, though—I haven’t been home for a while, and I’d like to enjoy a day here before all the business. Here we are!” She gestured down the lane, and Victor saw that an ivy-covered gate had come into view with a stone guardhouse built into the wall at one end. As they approached, a soldier came out of the guardhouse wearing a livery that matched the banner Edeya had been flying for Lam—black pants, a gold top, and a surcoat emblazoned with a broken, silver crown over a clutch of black feathers.

“Lady Lam, welcome home!” He said, bowing deeply and then moving to open the gate.

Thayla looked at Victor and mouthed, “Lady Lam?” He shrugged and followed Lam and Edeya through the gate, then up the cobbled road that bent to the left and climbed a gentle hill. When they came around the bend, Lam’s estate came into view, and suddenly Victor realized he’d been vastly underestimating the captain’s wealth.

The manor and grounds covered the entire hilltop, and it wasn’t a small hill. Hedgerows bordered the cobbled road, and Victor could see manicured gardens falling away to the right and left, but directly ahead was the manor, and it looked big enough to house hundreds of people. The central building was several stories high. The wings were long, with imposing, peaked roofs covered with ceramic tile. Ivy grew along the building’s walls, and tall arched windows gleamed and glittered in the sunlight, painting the picture of an idyllic, stately old manor in the woods—a place for ancient bloodlines to gather and contemplate their rulership of the world.

As Lam and the trio of her former mine workers strode up the lane to the front door, a dull horn could be heard from within the structure, and then a flurry of activity began to take place—shutters were thrown open all over the building, the front door opened, and uniformed staff came pouring out to line up in a double row. The men and women that worked in Lam’s manor fidgeted and stole glances at her as she approached, awaiting her inspection.

“Qué es esto?” Victor said softly, utterly flabbergasted by the show of wealth and power.

“I know . . .” Thayla said, also looking around wide-eyed, as the four of them started up the final stretch of the drive to the front door, and the servants arrayed bowed deeply to Captain Lam. When they came to the short flight of steps leading to the front door, and the gray-haired old Ardeni with perfectly trimmed mustaches bowed, Lam smiled and cleared her throat.

“Thank you, everyone. It’s good to be home. Darn, see that my guests are given quarters in the east wing and that Edeya, here, is given the Adjutant’s rooms near my suite.”

“Of course, ma’am,” the gray Ardeni said. “Follow me, please,” he said to Victor and Thayla. Edeya looked at Lam with a questioning look, and when Lam nodded, she followed along. They shadowed the Seneschal into the house, and Victor marveled at the home, both because of its impressive construction and because of the rich appointments, from masterwork furniture to ancient, precious artifacts. Had Lam been plumbing the depths of Greatbone so that she could fill this manor with rare discoveries?

“You seem different, Edeya,” Thayla said as they followed Darn deeper into the manor.

“I am different! I’ve been through a lot of training, and Lam’s given me a lot of responsibility. I wish I could be carefree and silly, guys, but the captain has a lot going on right now, and I’m in charge of keeping track of a lot of meetings and strategies. I did miss you guys, though! I’m so happy you’re alive and well.”

“Excuse me, Miss Edeya, the Adjutant’s quarters are up these stairs and down the central hallway. Your quarters are right before the captain’s.”

“All right. That’s me, then, Victor and Thayla! I’ll see you tomorrow for our meeting with the Jurist.”

“Okay, Edeya. See you tomorrow.” Victor watched his old friend climb up the stairs and had to admit Thayla was right—Edeya had changed quite a bit. She was taller, stronger, and more sure in her movements, and that uniform with the weird banner sticking up over her shoulder definitely made her seem more . . . impressive somehow.

“Now, if you’ll follow me, I’ll lead you to your quarters. Do you mind if I ask your names? It will make tending to your needs much easier while you’re here,” Darn said, continuing down the wide hallway.

“I’m Victor, and this is Thayla. Darn, are we allowed to explore the grounds a bit after you show us our rooms? It’s awfully early to shut ourselves away until tomorrow.”

“Of course. Perhaps you’d like to visit the captain’s gymnasium? She has sparring fields and obstacle courses that many of the local nobles come to practice upon.”

“Yeah, that sounds cool.” Victor saw Thayla’s pointed stare and corrected himself, “That sounds great; thanks, Darn.”

“Of course, sir.” Darn led them into the east wing of Lam’s manor and showed them each to a separate suite. The rooms were nice, with comfortable furniture and plush appointments, but nothing otherworldly. After they’d both seen their rooms, Darn led them into the gardens and then into a large rectangular building with very high walls and a bank of windows near the roof that allowed in the late morning sun. Inside, the floor was very much like a basketball gym—pale wooden planks and rows of wooden bleachers built against the long walls.

“Sparring?” Thayla asked.

“That’s right, Miss Thayla. Do you see those double doors?” He paused to make sure they saw the doors he indicated. “Through those doors, you’ll find a staircase leading down, and then you’ll be in a similar room beneath this one. That’s where the obstacles course is.”

“Alright, we’ve got it from here, Darn.”

“Are you certain you can find your way back to your quarters?”

“Yes, we’re good.” Victor nodded. He probably would have struggled to find their rooms again, but Gorz would have no trouble.

“Simply flag down any servants you see if you need anything. They all know how to find me.” Darn bowed low, sweeping one hand almost to the floor, then he turned and strode away.

“I mean, do you feel like practicing? I was just thinking we’d be bored sitting in our rooms all afternoon,” Victor said to Thayla as the little gray-haired man walked away.

“Not really, to be honest. Let’s check out the obstacle course, though.” Thayla started toward the double doors, and Victor followed after. The stairs down were similarly clad in pale wooden planks, and when they came out on the lower level, Victor saw that the big, rectangular room was filled with things that reminded him a great deal of wrestling practice. He saw a peg board built into one wall that was clearly meant to be climbed upward and then sideways. He figured he could

do it, but it would be hard—there were nearly a hundred holes going up and just as many to the sides. He imagined trying to climb that many holes back in his old body, and he snorted in laughter.

“What?” Thayla asked.

“The peg boards. That shit would be hard without some monster stats.”

“What do you do with them?” Thayla looked at the wall covered with boards drilled with holes.

“You hold those wooden pegs and jam them into the holes, pulling yourself up to the next set of holes. It’s like climbing a rope and doing pull-ups at once.”

“Oh, I see.” Thayla nodded, looking around at some of the other things in the room—swinging ropes, walls, pits, contraptions you had to crawl through, others you had to balance upon. A slow smile began to spread on her face, “Let’s try some of these out!”

“Haha, all right!” Victor laughed, and that’s what they did, spending most of the afternoon putting Lam’s obstacle course through its paces. A few other people came in to work out on the course while they were there, but they all kept to themselves, though they frequently cast annoyed glares at Thayla and Victor as they taunted and laughed at each other, attempting one obstacle or another.

Their fun was cut short sometime toward evening, though, when Seneschal Darn made a reappearance and called for them to come down from their ropes to speak with him. Victor and Thayla, still feeling quite competitive, raced down to him, and Victor cheated, using Sovereign Will to boost his agility. He laughed as he basically fell down the rope and then tore over the ground, leaping a high wall to slide to a stop in front of Darn. Thayla, a good thirty seconds behind him, laughed breathlessly as she careened into him, and the two of them fell to the ground in a fit.

“Please! Sir and Madam! Lady Lam needs to see you both urgently! There’s been a development.” Those words seemed to sober Victor and Thayla rather quickly, as the smiles fell from their faces and Victor straightened up, brushing his clothes smooth.

“What kind of development?” Thayla asked.

“Please follow me to the east parlor. The lady will explain everything.”

The east parlor turned out to be a comfortable room with a fully stocked and staffed bar, a dozen couches, an alcove full of bookcases, and a small ivory-colored stage where a weird instrument that looked like a sideways piano sat, unplayed. Lam was pacing back and forth in front of a pudgy Shadeni man with thick, swooping horns that sprouted out of his forehead and curved backward over his ears. When Lam saw Victor and Thayla come in behind Darn, she said, “Good, thank you,

Darn! Now hurry and make that delivery. I need to know what magistrate our case will come before.”

“Yes, Lady,” Darn said with a bow, turning to hurry back the way they’d come. Lam looked at Victor and frowned, then sighed. She started to speak, then glanced at the thick Shadeni and shook her head as if not sure what words to use. She glared at him again, then motioned for Victor and Thayla to sit on the couch nearby.

“Victor, I think I’ve made a huge mistake.”

“No, Lady!” the Shadeni said, aghast.

“Yes! No arse-licking right now, Chal-dak. You sit there and be quiet while I explain things to Victor and Thayla.”

“Yes, Lady,” the red-faced man said, self-consciously preening one of his long, thick horns.

“Victor, you remember how we discussed the rules for choosing champions?”

“Yeah, it was only a few hours ago—champions have to be the same tier or lower.”

“Right, and the rule for challenging someone?”

“You can’t challenge someone that’s a lower tier.”

“Right. Well, I really erred when it came to evaluating Lady ap’Yensha’s sanity.” Lam lifted her diadem with one finger and rubbed at the red line on her forehead where it had been sitting.

“What do you mean, Lam?” Thayla asked, her face looking strangely blanched.

“Lady ap’Yensha isn’t using a champion.”

“So, what?” Victor asked. “She’s fighting me herself?”

“Exactly.”

“Well, how’s that a problem?”

“She’s high tier-four, Victor.”

“But, how? You just said she can’t challenge someone who’s lower tier . . .”

“She didn’t challenge,” Thayla said, her voice hushed.

“Exactly,” Lam said. Her affect seemed off, and it took Victor a minute to realize it was because she was refusing to make eye contact with him.

“What do you mean?” Victor wasn’t trying to act dense, but he still wasn’t getting it.

“When I bought your contract, Victor, you became my ward, so to speak. I became your agent. I issued the challenge on your behalf, assuming the lady would shy away from a direct conflict—I was sure she’d pick a champion. She hasn’t fought in person in half a century.”

“Huh. Well, this kinda sucks, I guess. Almost tier five, you say? Chingado . . .”

“I’ve got Darn looking into the magistrate that will be seeing our case. I’ll find a way to get you out of this, Victor.”

“No,” Victor said, smiling at Lam and then turning to Thayla, making sure the smile was still in place. “I gotta do this, Lam. I have to beat this bruja so she’ll get off my ass, and I can move on to bigger and better things. I’m sick of this problem plaguing me. I don’t want to deal with more assassins or bounty hunters. I want to finish this.”

“Victor, there will be other opportunities if we just bide our time. Hear me on this: I haven’t seen Lady ap’Yensha fight, but there are stories from the Beneset War—I’m not sure I could beat her.”

“Well,” Victor said, standing up to his full height and resting his hand on Lifedrinker’s head. He took a very deep breath and slowly blew it out his nose, looking at Lam right in the eyes, and then he said, “She may be a tough, dangerous woman, but I’m the descendent of Quinametzin giants, and I can promise you, she’s never met a mother fucker like me.”