

Victor BK2: Ch27

Book 2: Chapter 27: Axe Work

Victor sat in a comfortable leather chair facing the window that overlooked Lam's rear garden. He'd never experienced such comfort in his life. Even back in Tucson, he'd had a small room that barely left room for a folding table next to his twin-sized bed. He remembered sitting in the rickety old folding chair, typing away on his school-provided tablet, trying to get assignments done at the last minute.

It seemed like he was always hot in that bedroom, but no matter the hour, he could count on his abuela to bring him snacks. Sometimes it was a taste of whatever she was cooking, but sometimes it was something just for him—orange slices or a warm tortilla smeared with butter and sugar and cinnamon. “God, but I wish you'd come through that door right now. I could use some advice, Abuelita.”

He didn't know what he expected her to tell him. What could she possibly say about his situation? In just a few days, he'd have to fight for his life against a woman who was supposedly a lot stronger and more deadly than anything he'd encountered so far. First of all, his granny wouldn't like the idea that he was fighting a woman—she was old-fashioned that way, and she didn't know a thing about Energy or levels. Secondly, she'd tell him to get his head straight and do what his coach had taught him. “Yeah, she'd treat this just like a wrestling match.”

The thought of explaining that he was about to fight to the death, and that it wasn't the first time, to his abuela filled him with strange emotions. He felt guilty, he felt alone, and he felt lost. He thought about trying to talk to Thayla, but how could he explain his weird emotions to her? She'd tried to hide her feelings when Victor had insisted on going through with the fight, but he'd seen the shadows in her eyes. He knew she was worried and half expected him to fail. It hurt, seeing that doubt in her expression, but what hurt more was that she didn't say anything—she was free now, and her main concern was getting to her daughter. It drove home how alone he was in this world.

Lam had offered to train with him over the next few days before the fight, and Victor had enthusiastically taken her up on the offer. That was two days ago, though, and the captain had been busy with one meeting after another, making it clear to Victor that his situation was just one of the many irons she had in the fire. What was the deal with Lam, anyway? She'd given him his contract and tried to help him out of his trouble, but was she that much better than the powers he was struggling against? It almost seemed like he was just a pawn in her political games, and Thayla had been right when she brought up the fact that Victor's duel would help her in that regard.

“Don't look a gift horse in the mouth,” Victor said, trying to mimic his abuelo's scratchy old voice with his thick Spanish accent. Lam had taken the time to meet with the Imperial Jurist and then gone to the hearing with the Magistrate, confirming her inside information that Lady ap'Yensha was going to face Victor herself. Lam's contacts had gained a bit more insight into the matter—apparently, the man Victor had killed, her nephew, Bez, while being a colossal fuckup, happened to be a favorite of hers. She felt she had to see his killer destroyed personally. “Lucky me.” Victor sighed and kicked his feet out, staring up at the plaster ceiling of his bedroom.

The Magistrate had scheduled the duel for some sort of Harvest fest and insisted it be fought at his estate in the country. Lam hadn't been surprised—such an event would provide a lot of political clout to the host, and Magistrates were notorious for capitalizing on such opportunities. A knock at his door interrupted his bout of self-pity, and Victor stood up, moving quickly to open it.

He'd hoped it was Thayla, Edeya, or even Captain Lam, and he was sure some of the disappointment showed on his face when he saw that it was one of Lam's household servants holding a sealed envelope. "Apologies for the intrusion, sir, but the Lady has asked that I deliver this envelope to you."

"Uh, thanks," Victor said, taking the thick cardstock.

"Will you be coming down for breakfast, sir, or would you like me to have something brought up?"

"Well, I don't know. I haven't spoken to Lam, er, the Lady yet today."

"Very good; please let Binna know. She's at the station at the end of your hall." Victor knew who Binna was—one of Lam's servants that seemed to be posted at the end of his hallway at all hours of the day and night, waiting for him to need something. He couldn't decide if it was cool having someone ready to help him with anything at a moment's notice or if it was just a way for Lam to keep tabs on him. He supposed it was a bit of both, though he felt guilty, wondering how the girl ever got any rest.

"Right, thanks," Victor said, pushing his door closed and opening the envelope. A handwritten note was within:

Victor,

I'm sorry I've been so busy with meetings and arrangements. I promised you some sparring time and intend to make good on it. I'm called away again, but I've sent word to one of my old adventuring friends. Polo Vosh is a great warrior who has spent the years since we delved into dungeons building his strength. He owes me a favor or two, and I've called him to collect: He'll be here this afternoon to train with you.

Thayla has borrowed my driver and coach to collect her daughter. She wanted to talk to you, but I think it's best you keep your head focused on your fight. She's safe, and they'll be back well before Harvest Fest.

-Lam

"What the fuck?" Victor threw the note and its envelope on the table that sat inside the door of his suite, irritated but not sure why. He supposed he had wanted to be there to see Thayla reunited with her daughter, but he couldn't really blame her for not wanting to wait until his situation with the duel was done. Then there was the business of Lam's old friend. Who was Polo Vosh, and why

was Lam so damn busy all the time? Was she going back to the mines? Was she trying to make some political moves before the fight?

“Too many questions,” he sighed. He supposed he should be grateful—Lam didn’t have to find him someone to practice with. She didn’t have to do anything. Hopefully, she was right about her friend, and he’d be able to teach Victor a thing or two.

Victor opened the door and walked down the hallway to the servant’s station. Sure enough, Binna was there, and the strange little Bogoli jumped to her feet at his approach. She was only about four feet tall, had a shock of long white hair that grew down the center of her scalp, and painted her face and scalp a dark shade of blue with weird silvery designs on her cheeks and forehead. Victor couldn’t tell if the designs were the same every day or if she painted something different based on circumstances he wasn’t aware of. “Hi, Binna. I’m going down to breakfast.”

“Excellent, Mr. Sandoval. I’ll see that your room is cleaned while you’re out.”

“Alright,” Victor said with a wave. He’d given up trying to get the Bogoli to relax, and there was no way she’d be talked out of straightening his suite. He’d tried on the first day, but it seemed almost to cause her physical discomfort not to do her job. Victor made his way through the hallways and down the stairs to the dining hall adjacent to the manor’s kitchens. None of the place settings were out, and no one sat at the long, polished tables. Victor walked through into the kitchens, and there he was met with a more appropriate level of bustle.

Pots simmered and steamed on the big stovetops, and the long wooden picnic-style table that sat along the far wall near the windows was occupied by several staff members eating their morning meal. Victor approached, and one of the cooks, a portly Ardeni woman with curly gray hair, said, “Victor! I was wondering if I’d gotten too much bacon out today—was afraid I wouldn’t be seeing you!”

“No, Mrs. ap’Edda, I’m here, and I’m hungry as ever,” Victor laughed and walked through the steamy room to the table, sitting on the bench with his back to the windows so he could watch the cooks bustling around the kitchen—he found their activities endlessly fascinating. He loved the kitchens. He loved the smell of them. He loved the carefree fun the cooks had while they worked, and, of course, he loved the taste of the food they kept giving him.

The kitchen almost always smelled like fresh bread, but during breakfast time, the scent of bacon was the prevailing odor. Victor waited patiently, but it was only a few minutes before the first plate of food was set before him—fresh buttered bread sprinkled with herbed salt. Victor thanked the cook, a sweaty Shadeni man who grunted and returned to his mixing bowl as Victor began to wolf down the warm, delicious treat. By the time he’d finished a piece of bread, another cook had brought over a plate of bacon, and before he could get far into that, yet another deposited some scrambled eggs in front of him.

He knew that if he stayed at that table, they’d keep bringing him food, so he ate quickly and made a show of getting up and waving as he moved out of the kitchens and into the gardens that flanked the

windows. Lam's home had beautiful grounds, and Victor had spent much of the last two days exploring the gardens and groves. He'd kept hoping Lam would find him, take him to her gymnasium, and spar with him, but he found himself left to his own devices, and, though he knew he should be trying to get stronger somehow, he found the slow exploration of the grounds therapeutic.

Victor walked through the herb gardens near the kitchens until he came to a stone fountain with a built-in bench around the water. He sat there, letting his mind wander for a while. Of course, his thoughts kept returning to the fight. For some reason, he couldn't seem to muster the emotions everyone, including himself, thought he should have. He didn't feel fearful or even nervous. He knew, abstractly, that this woman, Rellia ap'Yensha, was powerful. He was pretty sure the dungeon lord he'd fought had been tier four, and she was supposed to be tier five or almost so—no one was really sure. Still, he couldn't seem to grasp the predicament he was in properly.

So, she was tough. That just meant he'd have to go all out, right? How could a person, regardless of their level, be more dangerous than a massive, undead snake with acidic fangs? The dungeon lord had turned the very shadows against him, driving fear before it. How could any person be more of a challenge than that? He knew he was being stupid—Energy made all logic moot, but that didn't mean he could suddenly conceptualize what he was going to be up against.

Lam, Thayla, and Edeya had all encouraged him to keep cultivating while waiting for the fight. Thayla thought there was a good chance he could make it to level thirty through cultivation. He supposed she was probably right—he'd been twenty-nine for a while now and hadn't leveled his Core in quite some time. He'd worked on it half-heartedly but resolved to spend some hours on it tonight. Only needing to sleep a few hours a day really had a way of adding time to his plate.

"Gorz," he said suddenly, "Did you say Reevus's master was something like tier six?"

"Reevus often boasted that his master was tier seven, though it's possible he was exaggerating to inflate his own importance."

"So, what's the difference between a tier four and a tier seven in terms of power? Is it like the difference between a tier one and a tier three?"

"It's hard to quantify, Victor. Many factors can create a huge disparity between people of the same rank. One factor is the rarity of a person's class. If you reach tier seven with an epic or legendary class, your raw attribute scores would be much higher than someone who leveled so high with a simple basic or advanced class. Energy affinity can play a role in a person's overall power, as can racial advancements and skill mastery. Don't underestimate the importance of artifacts, either. Your axe is an extraordinary item, and you're much stronger with it than you would be with a typical artificed weapon."

"Really? Do you think Lam regrets giving Lifedrinker to me?"

“No, I don’t think so. The odds of heartsilver gaining consciousness are very low. Your relationship with Lifedrinker is rather unique—when I review the conversation Lam had with you about the axe, it seems she had given up long ago in her attempts to awaken the weapon.”

“She definitely looks better than when Lam gave her to me.” Victor reached down and loosened the axe at his belt, lifting it out into his hands. “How about it, beautiful? Feel like talking to me today?” He’d tried every day since he’d heard her voice in his head to get her to speak again, but so far, she’d been quiet, though her handle felt warm, and she buzzed more than ever in his grip, so he knew she was alright. He pushed her cold metal against his forehead and felt her vibrate, but no words were forthcoming. “Don’t worry; I know you’ll speak when you’re ready.”

Victor spent the morning walking around the grounds, visiting with the manor's staff, and basically just killing time, waiting for something to happen. It felt like there was an amorphous weight hanging over his head but that he couldn’t do anything about it, which was sort of true—the Harvest Gala and his duel were marching toward him, and no matter what actions he took, he’d be facing Rellia ap’Yensha in just a few days. He supposed he could make a run for it or beg the Captain to petition the Magistrate to put off the duel, but he’d already refused such actions, and nothing had changed between then and now. There was no way he would live out his life in this new world, always on the run, looking over his shoulder.

He was saved from his own inaction and boredom by the arrival of Lam’s old adventuring friend. It was Binna who tracked Victor down in the dimly lit grove of nut trees at the back of Lam’s property. Victor saw her running up and down the irrigation ditches, and he watched her for a while, wondering why the little white-gloved figure was in such a tizzy before it dawned on him that she might be looking for him. He stood out from behind the big tree he’d been poking around, collecting fallen nuts, and called out, “Binna?”

“Mister Sandoval!” She called breathlessly, running down the row toward him. “You have a visitor! He’s waiting at the gymnasium!”

“Oh, shit, Binna. I’m sorry you had to hunt me down. Thanks! I’ll head over there right now.” The poor Bogoli leaned over her knees, breathing deeply, her dark makeup running in rivulets of sweat down onto her white robes. Victor tried to think of a way to make her take a break but couldn’t think of anything clever. He decided just to try being direct, “Binna, will you please go and take a break? I insist. I know the way to the gymnasium, and I won’t need your services until tonight. I’ll look for you near my quarters around dinner time.”

“Yes, sir. I will await you near your quarters.” She sounded relieved, and Victor waved cheerfully to her, hurrying off through the grove toward the big rectangular building that housed Lam’s practice facilities.

When he strolled through the garden path and up the cobbled lane to the building, he saw a dark-furred Vodkin leaning against the structure. He was huge, dwarfing even Ponda from the Wagon Wheel, and probably a hundred pounds heavier than Victor. He wore an armored vest, bronze-colored and scaled, and a massive axe handle jutted over his shoulder. When he saw Victor approaching, he stepped forward, his thick slabs of muscle rippling with his leonine movements. Victor had never seen a Vodkin that didn't boast a layer of blubber, but there was nothing blubbery about Polo Vosh.

"Victor?" His voice rumbled over the cobbles, and Victor nodded, waving as he came closer. Polo held out a hand, and Victor reached out to shake it. The meaty paw was easily a match for his own grip, and, as often happened with competitive men, Victor found himself straining to respond to the Vodkin's tight grip—he imagined they could have smashed walnuts to dust between their palms as they both squeezed.

"Polo, I guess?" Victor asked, noting that, up close, he could see flecks of gold in the Vodkin's big black eyes. His dark fur was longer along the center of his head, running down his back almost like a mane, and when the big warrior smiled, he saw that he had three long canines but was missing the one on the lower left of his mouth.

"Right! Good grip, lad. Now, come inside, I've only got a few days to work with you, and Lam tells me you need to learn a lot when it comes to axe work."

"What? Really? I thought my axe fighting was getting pretty good!" Victor self-consciously put his hand on Lifedrinker's metal head.

"Oh? What's your skill up to? Advanced?"

"Um, improved."

"And you're fighting the old raptor? By the Bearded Turtle, boy! We've got work to do!" Polo turned and walked through the archway into the gymnasium, and Victor followed after, worrying about his ability with an axe for the first time. When Polo pushed the interior doors open and stepped onto the practice floor, he looked around at the liveried house guards practicing, some dozen different bouts going on around the wide, open space, and he let loose a bellow that bounced off the walls and rattled the high windows, "Clear out! Lam's orders! Anyone still here in thirty seconds better be ready to fight me!"

His order had the desired effect—weapons were lowered, and though there were some grumbles, one look at the enormous Vodkin got people moving, and soon Victor and Polo Vosh stood alone in the big gymnasium. "Alright, unlimber that pretty axe of yours, and we'll see what you've got," he rumbled, reaching up and unhooking his own weapon from his shoulder. Victor admired the weapon, from its polished, dark wood haft to the massive crescent blade. The blade had to be the size of a forty-five-pound plate at his old school's weight room. Lifedrinker looked positively petite in comparison.

Victor pulled her out of the loop at his belt, held her crossways in front of himself, and asked, “Should I use any abilities?”

“Not yet, Berserker! Let’s just see what kind of axe work you can do.” Polo whipped his massive weapon through the air, thick curtains of air chasing the blade in a whoosh as it cleaved the space in front of him. “Just try to cut me—don’t hold back.”

Victor did as he was told, leaping forward and swinging Lifedrinker at the huge target the Vodkin presented, but was stunned to find nothing but air every time his blade cut toward the big man. Polo seemed hardly to move, but still, his body, his clothes, his armor, and his axe were never where they appeared to be when Victor launched his assaults. He’d been afraid to give his swings everything he had when he started, holding back slightly for fear of hurting Lam’s friend. Still, as he continued to miss and his frustration mounted, Victor put everything he had into the attacks, even feinting and switching up the direction of his cleaves midswing.

Nothing worked, though, and after a solid five minutes of hacking with all his might and Polo seeming to slip through the air like a seal in water, he lowered his blade, leaning on the axe haft and panting.

“Did I say to stop?” Polo growled. Victor’s face reddened, and he lifted his blade, trying again, charging forward and thrusting out with Lifedrinker’s metal head, trying to catch the Vodkin by surprise. He might as well have written out his plan ahead of time for all the effect it had. Polo simply danced back, gauging the extent of Victor’s reach down to the millimeter.

“All right, now, if you have some way to do it, let’s see you move faster. Use Energy.”

“Right,” Victor said, casting Sovereign Will and boosting his agility. Suddenly his liquid attacks became more like the flickers of a snake’s tongue, and Lifedrinker ripped through the air, carving toward Polo with deadly grace. Polo’s eyes widened, and for the first time, he seemed to have to concentrate a little on Victor’s weapon to dodge it. Still, he did dodge it, and though Victor came closer with each swing, and Polo had to interpose his own axe between Lifedrinker and his flesh a few times, Victor still never managed to touch the man’s armor, let alone his skin.

Anyone watching the exchange might have been impressed by the speed with which the two giant men moved. They certainly would have been leery of the whip-crack slices in the air that the axes made as they went through their motions. It was clear that Victor had raw talent and speed but lacked refinement. On the other hand, Polo was a master of economy, only moving the absolute minimum amount to avoid cuts or to place his weapon into a perfect parry. Victor might have wondered what the difference between a skilled axe fighter and a master of the axe was before this session, but he wouldn’t wonder that anymore—Polo’s skill made it very clear that Victor had a lot left to learn.

“At least you have some stamina,” Polo said, finally making the effort to pin Victor’s axe to the ground with his huge crescent blade. “Take a breather.”

“Do you mind me asking what tier you’re in, Polo?”

“While we’re on the practice field, you’ll call me First Axe. I earned the title at Storm Garden when I trained the Queen’s Honor Guard. Clear?”

“Yes,” Victor paused, took a deep breath, then finished, “First Axe.”

“Good. I’m tier-five, lad. It’s why the Captain asked me to come to help you. She’s a great fighter but hasn’t touched the axe in decades. She was never much good with one, truth be told. I think I recognize that blade, though. That isn’t Lifedrinker, is it?” He nodded to the gleaming edge of heartsilver, resting on the springy practice flooring.

“Yeah, this is Lifedrinker. Captain Lam gave her to me a while back, but she’s grown a bit since then.”

“And you got her a new handle? Or did Lam do that?”

“No, that was me.” Victor saw the big Vodkin scowl, and he cleared his throat and added, “Um, First Axe.”

“What about those heartsilver veins? Is she waking up?”

“Yes, First Axe. She even spoke to me the other night.”

“Really? You know how many new warriors buy heartsilver weapons hoping to wake them up?”

“Um, no, First Axe.” Victor was starting to feel kind of stupid saying the Vodkin’s title with each sentence, but it seemed to be what the huge warrior wanted.

“If I had a bead for every youngster that wasted his savings on an inert heartsilver weapon, I’d be a very rich Vodkin. Well, I’m rich anyway, but I’d be even richer! Hah. I think I’ve seen two actually conscious heartsilver weapons in all my days. You’ve got quite a treasure there, lad, and an axe, no less! At least it’s not some frilly, snooty sword. Hah, the captain must be green with envy! She did everything to wake that axe up back in the day! Spoke to it for hours and hours, slaughtered hundreds, no thousands of monsters, letting it drink its full. She even fought with it in the Benneset War.”

“Guess I got lucky,” Victor shrugged. “First Axe.”

“Well, you must have a strong spirit. Something that struck a harmony within Lifedrinker. Let’s see if we can keep you alive to finish your work with her, hmm? You’re going to need more skill to face Rellia.”

“You think I can improve enough in just a few days?”

“You can improve. Enough? I don’t know. You forgot to call me First Axe, which means you’re out of warnings. Next time, I’ll exact payment! Now get that axe up and get ready to defend yourself!” Polo Vosh grinned, his missing canine conspicuous in the ferocity of his expression. Victor lifted Lifedrinker and watched, with every fiber of his being, trying to figure out how a man so huge and heavy could move so damn gracefully.