

Victor BK2: Ch28

Book 2: Chapter 28: Preparations

“That’s it, Victor! You got him now!” Edeya yelled from the sidelines. She’d shown up a few hours into his session with Polo and was enthusiastic in her support for him, though it seemed to make Polo want to thrash him even more soundly every time she cheered. Still, Victor appreciated the encouragement and pressed his attack, using everything Polo had deemed “okay for sparring.”

Sovereign Will pumped up his agility, Inspiring Presence guided his axe, and Channel Spirit flooded Lifedrinker and his arms with inspiration-attuned Energy. Polo had told him not to use any rage Energy, saying it would make it harder to learn rather than help. He’d been enthusiastically in favor of Victor using inspiration Energy, though, and it seemed to be paying off—Victor was getting noticeably faster and more graceful in his axe movements as the afternoon stretched on.

“Go! Push him!” Edeya cheered as Victor drove forward, whipping Lifedrinker through the air in glittering silver-gold arcs, her blade sizzling with inspiration Energy as it sliced the wind. Polo backed up, dodging with an economy of movement that left Victor bewildered. As Victor’s fourth cleave in his lightning combo arced dangerously close to his shoulder, the big Vodkin seemed to shrug, and then his colossal axe blade was there, taking the blow in a shower of golden sparks. Still, Polo whistled for him to stop, backing up a step.

“That was the first time I had to block or be cut. You’re learning, novice!”

“Thank you, First Axe,” Victor said, the honorific coming more easily to his tongue after several hours of enforced usage.

“C’mon, don’t stop now!” Edeya called, and Polo grinned, his big, whiskered jowls bouncing with the movement.

“Your vicious little friend is right. Now’s the time to push it!” Polo thrust his axe forward, suddenly smashing the blunt top into Victor’s armored chest, knocking him back a few steps. Victor grinned and lifted Lifedrinker, then renewed his efforts to take a slice out of Polo’s mountainous body.

Polo was an expert instructor, seeming to always be just out of Victor’s reach, yet never so far that Victor gave up. It was like he knew exactly how close to let Victor get, so he’d keep thinking he almost had him. With each narrow miss or parried blow, Victor gained new insights into how the huge Vodkin moved, and he began to subconsciously anticipate the big warrior’s maneuvers.

It was just such a moment when Victor had a true breakthrough, running through a combo, knowing how Polo would respond, and changing up the arc of the final cleave at the last second. Polo’s eyes widened, and, again, he moved his shoulders in an almost shrug, seeming to flip his axe through space somehow, so the big, flat blade was suddenly in front of his neck, catching Lifedrinker’s edge as she arced in a gleaming slice. A shower of hot sparks sizzled around the two combatants, and a System message appeared in Victor’s eyes:

Congratulations! You've learned the skill: Axe Mastery - Advanced.

"Fuck yes!" Victor shouted as sudden understanding flooded into his mind. Suddenly, many of Polo's movements that had seemed like mysterious magic made sense to him, and he knew their counters. What's more, he felt his muscles flex with sudden memories—knowledge of how to flick his blade into parry positions and adjust his momentum a hair's breadth to turn the angle of his attack, catching his opponent off guard. These and a thousand other sparks of insight flooded through his mind and body, and Victor dropped to a knee as he processed all the information.

He was just starting to wrap his head around his new skill level when hundreds of little balls of golden Energy began to form in the air around him. He took a deep breath, bracing himself, and then they surged toward him, bursting like little, golden fireworks as they crashed into him. He held his breath, hoping for another System message, but nothing came, and he sighed, letting out his air in a heavy sigh, "Damn!"

"What?" Edeya asked, having run up to clap him on the shoulder.

"Was hoping I'd get a level off that, but no such luck."

"Hah, the impatience of youth," Polo said, lifting his huge axe and dropping it on the ground with a thud to add inflection to his words. "I think you must have been close to improving your axe skill on your own because I've never seen someone go so quickly from improved to advanced."

"What's your axe skill at, First Axe?" Edeya asked, saving Victor the trouble.

"Legendary, pup. One of only three on this continent. Unless some axe master is hiding out there that doesn't want me to know about it."

"Legendary . . ." Edeya breathed, her eyes unfocusing as she visualized it.

"That's right. I was nearly two decades moving past Epic. I didn't have Inspiration Energy cheating for me, though. You'd be smart to practice with this one," Polo gave Victor a slap on the shoulder. "Assuming Rellia doesn't cut him up in a few days."

"Victor will win. You haven't seen him lose his temper." Edeya reached out and gave Victor's trap a squeeze. "You got this, Victor."

"Thanks, Edeya."

"Rage might help. If you weren't a berserker, I'd tell you to keep your cool, but I've seen what a rager can do—if you're going to win against Rellia, it will be because of your rage. We need to practice more, though—she's going to know about your berserking, and she'll have a plan for it. Trust me—it's all anyone's talking about in the city right now."

“What? Seriously?” Victor stood up and slipped Lifedrinker into her belt loop.

“Well, among certain circles, at least. I’d heard of you even before Lam’s messenger came for me. It’s not often you get a tier four, old, razor beak coming out of retirement to fight some nobody at the Harvest Fest.”

“Is it true Rellia had more kills than Asyr-dak in the Beneset Wars?” Edeya asked, her eyes still distant while she pictured some imaginary battlefield.

“Hah! If you heard that, you can be sure the rumor started with Rellia. Asyr-dak was already a legend before that war even began, and he left this world shortly after. I can assure you that Rellia’s not so much as a shadow to his flame.”

“Left this world?” Victor asked, having no idea who they were even talking about. “As in died?”

“No, lad, he traveled off world, seeking greater challenges. In the scheme of things, Fanwath is new. I don’t know many Energy users at my level, and I’d be considered a novice on some of the older worlds.”

“He just, uh, traveled off world? Like in a spaceship?”

“Through the Settlement Stone, you goof,” Edeya said, rolling her eyes.

“Oh, yeah, right.” Victor nodded, and he supposed he did vaguely remember people talking about how you could pay for teleportation through the Settlement Stones if you had enough money.

“Enough chit-chat. Girl, go stand aside; I’m going to see what Victor can do now.”

“Yes, First Axe!” Edeya said sharply and scurried off to stand by the door.

“Well, lad, I told Lam I’d give you a thorough evaluation, and I can’t do that if I make you hold back all your skills. You ready to show me what you’ve got?”

“Um, yes, First Axe, but do you mean I can use Berserk? I’ve been working on my control while I do it, but I can’t promise I won’t hurt you.”

“Hah! By the Turtle’s beard! I’ll give you one of my old artifacts if you can hurt me. How’s that sound?”

“If you’re sure . . .” Victor said, unslinging Lifedrinker from his belt. He decided not to leap into a rage but to work his way into it like he might in any old fight. He boosted his agility, channeled inspiration-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, and cast Inspiring Presence, then he launched a flurry of attacks, immediately driving Polo back with his much-improved axe skills.

Polo grunted and, in Victor's opinion, struggled to dodge and parry all of his attacks, but only just barely. He avoided most of the attacks with subtle shifts of his shoulders and twists of his hips, but he had to intercede with his huge axe blade a few times, dancing away from Victor's cleaves in showers of sparks and the squeal of metal on metal.

"Well? Come on, boy, let's have it!" Polo growled after a minute or two of dodging and parrying, then he launched an offensive, and Victor was forced back, his turn to dodge and parry as the enormous crescent blade flicked ever closer to his flesh. He saved himself losing a slice of his cheekbone by the barest of margins, and, as he stumbled back, he released his hold on the roiling, surging furnace of his rage-attuned Energy.

Edeya, standing on the edge of the practice floor near the open double doors, saw Victor barely save himself from a cut to his face, and then she felt a vortex of Energy pull at her, standing her hair on its ends and raising the hackles on the back of her neck. Victor's lanky, muscle-corded frame was suddenly limned in blazing red Energy, and then he stepped forward with a barked growl, slapping his foot down with a crash and whipping Lifedrinker through the air at Polo's shoulder. The chop was so savage and fast that Polo barely got his gigantic axe blade up in time to block it. A terrific bell tolled in the air as the two blades clashed, and Polo was sent sliding over the practice floor, reeling from the impact. Then things really went sideways.

The explosion of red Energy had happened in an instant, and Victor's attack had taken Edeya's focus for a moment, but as she glanced back at him, she caught her breath and moved toward the door—Victor towered over Polo, his massive, corded muscles stood out like airship cables, and Lifedrinker flicked through the air in one enormous fist, more like a hatchet than a great, bearded axe. Victor roared and launched a rampaging, berserking attack against Polo, swinging Lifedrinker in whipping, arcing cleaves with such force that each time Polo blocked the attacks on the flat of his great axe, he was sent stumbling, only his incredible skill keeping him from being smashed to pieces.

The fury of Victor's attacks was such that it took Polo a dozen heartbeats to finally recover enough poise to attempt to turn the tables, using his own Energy abilities to thwart Victor's onslaught. His blade, still parrying the frenetic, devastating hacks Victor was delivering, began to glow with a deep blue-black Energy. Where he rebuked Victor's hacks, azure barriers hung in the air, stationary shields he could seek cover behind. As the barriers stacked up and Polo found himself able to breathe, he began to launch attacks from behind his fortified Energy shields, landing cuts on Victor's arms and legs and smashing his giant axe into Victor's armor.

None of the blows seemed to bother the massive berserker, though, and Victor only roared and smashed Lifedrinker all the harder into Polo's barriers, utterly shattering each of them in just a few swings. Polo was sweating now, and his eyes began to widen with the strain of his defense. That's when red waves of Energy started to emanate from Victor, wrapping around Polo's Energy barriers and seeping into his body. Polo screamed. He began to froth at the mouth, and his eyes lost all semblance of sanity. He threw his axe aside and charged at Victor, smashing into him like a cannonball. Victor, for his part, laughed like a complete maniac. Edeya turned to the double doors, panic in her eyes, and ran out of the room, shouting for help.

When she returned just a few minutes later with several of Captain Lam's house guards in tow, she found Polo and Victor sitting on the ground, laughing and talking loudly. Polo's dark fur was matted with blood. His heavy bronze-scale armor was ragged, torn at the neck, and hanging loosely over one shoulder. Victor, his pale skin no good at hiding his blood, was an even more disturbing sight—his skin and hair were soaked with a thick sheen of bloody sweat. Worse, there were great smears of blood all over the wooden planks of the practice floor. It looked like a calf had been slaughtered in the room.

Victor saw Edeya come running in with the guards, and he smiled and called out, "Hey, where'd you go? How are we supposed to know who won?"

"You asshole!" she cried, running toward the two sprawled warriors.

"No need for her to testify—of course, I won," Polo said with a deep wet chuckle that turned into a cough halfway through. Victor didn't argue, just leaned back on his bloody palms and watched Polo cough with a raised eyebrow.

"I thought you guys were going to kill each other! Victor, when did you start to grow when you go berserk?"

"Something that happened when I advanced my race in the dungeon." He shrugged, then hoisted himself to his feet using Lifedrinker as a crutch. Looking inward to his Core, he saw that he still had more than half of his rage-attuned Energy to draw on—he must have ended his rage on purpose, which was enough evidence for him that he could hold his own against Polo, regardless of their level disparity.

"That's a hell of a combination with your type of Core, Victor," Polo said. "A bloodline that compliments your rage ability like that . . . by the Bearded Turtle, you'd turn the tide on a battlefield."

"Yeah, I guess I got pretty lucky with my skillset," Victor replied, reaching out to help Polo to his feet. The big Vodkin clasped his fist and allowed him to haul him up with a grunt and a wince.

"I'll be taking the evening off. Meet me here at dawn for more axe work. I have an artifact in mind for you, but it'll take some time to get it to you. I left it with the Second Axe back home," he grunted, turning toward the door.

"Thank you, First Axe," Victor called to his back, and Polo raised a hand to wave acknowledgment and then ponderously trudged toward the double doors. The house guards that Edeya had fetched were still staring at the practice floor and Victor with wan faces, but they jumped when Polo walked by and growled at them.

“Well, make yourselves useful—fetch some staff to clean this mess and replace that cracked plank in the center!”

“That was crazy, Victor,” Edeya said. “I can’t believe you fought Polo Vosh like that. He’s a legend.”

“Well, if I didn’t Berserk, and if my bloodline didn’t turn me into a fucking giant, he would clean the floor with me.”

“True, but that’s like saying, ‘well, if I didn’t use my axe,’ or, ‘well, if I didn’t use Energy abilities.’ You know we aren’t just the sum of our parts, right? Sure, you got lucky with some of your abilities, but you’ve been through a lot to get to where you are. Thayla told me about what you went through in the dungeon.”

She walked toward the exit, Victor in tow, and continued, “Nobody makes it to a high level without some luck. You think Polo Vosh doesn’t have a strong class? You think he didn’t find some artifacts early on that made him tougher than the next Vodkin warrior? You think Rellia ap’Yensha hasn’t leveraged her family’s wealth to help her gain power? Don’t sell yourself short, is all I’m saying, Victor.”

“Huh, thanks, Edeya.” They’d reached the courtyard outside the practice hall, and Victor squinted up between the tall trees at the fading brightness of the pale blue sky. “I’m pretty damn hungry. Wanna hit the kitchens with me?”

“Yeah, I don’t have anything else to do. Captain Lam won’t be back until morning.”

“Where’d she go, anyway?”

“Back to the mine. She’s hired a crew to set up a basecamp at the deep entrance to the dungeon you found.”

“Why not go in from the top? Up near Steampool?”

“I dunno. Knowing Lam, it’s because she wants to keep things secret as long as she can. Trust me, the crew she’s hired probably have no clue why they’re doing what they’re doing.”

“She’s pretty damn smart, isn’t she? Always thinking a few moves ahead.”

“Yep, I’m learning a lot by working with her.”

“Do you,” Victor paused and looked at his friend. She was much healthier and cleaner than when he’d known her in the mine. Her uniform looked sharp, her hair was clean and short, and she sported a brace of pearl-handled knives on a bandolier-style strap. Quite the difference from the scrappy little delver that he’d rescued from a cage. Could he trust her to be honest with him anymore? He pushed on with his question, “Do you think I can fully trust Lam?”

“What? Of course!” Edeya looked at him like he’d sprouted a third eye on his forehead.

“Think about it before you answer so quickly. I’m not saying she isn’t trying to help me, but you know she’s always got plans within plans. Don’t you think she’s probably going to gain something from my fight with Rellia, whether I win or not?” He watched as the gears turned behind Edeya’s eyes. She opened her mouth to speak, closed it, and opened it again.

“Lam will come out on top, no matter what. You’re right. That doesn’t mean she doesn’t want you to succeed, though. I’ve heard her talk about how much she wants you to win. She won’t betray you, Victor.”

“All right, thanks, Edeya.” They continued into the kitchens, where Victor performed like a paid act, eating more than any single person had a right to do in one sitting. He polished off a full loaf of bread, slices of cold, left-over steak, a bowl of fruit, and when he didn’t seem to be slowing down, a platter of cheese, cured meats, crackers, and some sort of thick, fruity jam. Edeya picked at his food, here and there, laughing at his bottomless stomach. When he finally seemed to be slowing down, she gestured toward the doors leading into the manor proper.

“You should go clean up and then do some cultivating. If you can hit thirty, you might gain a new skill or two with your class refinement. I’m sure Rellia has intel about your berserking, but she won’t know what sort of refinement you’ll get—it could make all the difference.”

“Yeah, I must be getting close, don’t you think? I’ll try to level my Core again, and hopefully, that’ll do it.”

“I have no idea how close you are—Lam’s the only person I’ve spent any time with that’s higher than tier two. I’ve heard that it gets slower and slower to level as you gain power, though. It makes sense, I suppose; each level requires more Energy to improve your attributes and build up your pathways to handle the surges of your skills. You’re lucky you’ve improved your race so much. If I ever want to see tier three, I’ll need quite a few racial advancements to handle all that Energy.”

“Yeah, Thayla told me something similar. All right, well, I’m going to head to my room, Edeya. Thanks for hanging out with me today. See you in the morning?”

“Of course. See you then, Victor.” She smiled and waved as he scooted back the bench and stood.

On his way back to his room, he saw that Binna was sitting at her station, and he stopped to say, “Binna, I’m going to spend the evening cultivating. Please make sure no one, well, no one other than Lam or Thayla or Edeya, bothers me. I mean, I won’t need any maid service or food or anything, okay?”

“Understood, Mr. Sandoval.” Binna bowed, managing to look like she’d just received an important quest.

Victor went into his rooms, noting that they were clean and that his bed had been made. It crossed his mind that he could get used to that kind of service, and he instantly felt guilty. He wasn’t sure why, but the idea of people having to go around cleaning up his mess filled him with a desire to get his shit together. Maybe it was his abuela talking, but he felt like he should be able to make his own bed.

He went around the two rooms, closed all the blinds, then sat in the middle of the bedroom’s carpet and looked at his attribute points, not wanting to waste any time:

Strength:

127

Vitality:

90

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

203

Points Available:

10

He wasn’t sure why he hadn’t spent his available points yet. He supposed that, on some level, he’d wanted to get some advice, and he’d been hoping to have more one-on-one time with Lam. He could have asked Polo Vosh about it, but they’d been so busy with actual sparring that Victor hadn’t thought about it. Now he was about to try to push his way into another level, and he felt like he should distribute his available points first. What if it made a difference with regard to his class refinement?

One thing was certain: he’d learned that none of his attributes were pointless. Even intelligence seemed to play a factor in how he performed in combat. He’d learned that all of his physical attributes were related in one way or another, but he seemed to be doing fine, balancing them. So far, his lower dexterity hadn’t negatively impacted his strength. Even when he cast Berserk and his

Titanic Rage kicked in, pushing his strength up around five hundred, he hadn't noticed a problem. "Would I notice when I'm raging out, though?" he asked the shadows in the room.

Victor couldn't deny that his high will had served him very well. It helped him to avoid fear, avoid mind control, and allowed him to dominate others with his Project Spirit ability. More than that, he could boost his other attributes with it. "Fuck it," he said, pushing ten points into will.n/o/vel/b//in dot c//om

He hadn't tried to make any new constructs for rage in a very long time, and he didn't know if he wanted to. He decided to stick with what worked, going through his cultivation cycle several times, working through each of the rage constructs he'd made so long ago, sitting in the cage at the Wagon Wheel. Like always, they worked, allowing him to cycle red, pulsing rage through his pathways and slowly build its intensity as he pushed it along until he felt his body was brimming, vibrating with the fury. Then he slowly pulled it back, compressing it into his Core. Each time he did it, he could see the red, throbbing heart of his rage attunement get just a little brighter.

When the disparity between his rage Core and his inspiration Core became apparent, he switched, cultivating the inspiration constructs he'd made while hiding away deep in the crevices of the Greatbone Mine. The discomfort and irritation that had lingered with his rage cultivation faded away, and he built up the white-gold Energy of inspiration in his pathways, over and over, filling himself to bursting and then pulling it in, pushing it into the shimmering sun of his inspiration attunement.

The hours faded away as he continued to cultivate. When his inspiration Energy was built up to the equivalent of his rage Energy, he started again, running through the whole process for each of his attunements dozens of times.

When he felt the click of his two attunements breaching some sort of invisible barrier, he knew that if he looked away from his Core, he'd see the System message telling him his Core had leveled. He didn't look right away, though, hoping that he'd have messages waiting to tell him that the growth of his Core had been enough to edge him over the threshold of level thirty. He sat there for several minutes, staring at his Core, at the two orbiting suns of his attunements, and waited, steadying himself.

Finally, utterly calm, his heart barely beating, Victor opened his eyes and looked out, away from his Core, and read what the System had to say:

Congratulations! Your Spirit-class Core has advanced to: Base-Seven.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 30 Herald of Carnage, gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

Level 30 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Human Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 40. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.

"Fuck yes!" Victor hissed between his teeth. "Time to see what kind of surprise I can pull out for Lady ap'Yensha!"