

Victor BK2: Ch13

Book 2: Chapter 13: Juggling Spirits

“You’re saying all I need to do is ride for a day to the west?” Tellen asked Victor in the sober light of morning, contemplating the strange cylinder on the mat between them.

“Yes, the way I see it, Belikot saw to it that I learned about this phylactery and then trusted my bull-headed nature to charge after him with it. He’s set up somewhere south of here, probably a strategic location for him, and he knows I’m drawing near because, let’s be honest, it’s obvious that he would be able to sense his phylactery.”

“Not a day’s ride to the south lie the remains of Gel Harra—a crossroads town killed by a plague during the Steppe War.” Tellen frowned. “What will it accomplish for me to lead this death sorcerer away?”

“Well, so far, I’ve been running directly toward him. When he sees the phylactery continue away, toward Gelica, he’ll begin to have doubts: was I coming toward him all this time, or just heading to Gelica? Was I unable to follow the phylactery’s tether to him, after all? Am I going to the city to sell it or have it evaluated? Would he want to risk someone who knew what to do with it getting their hands on it? These thoughts will torment him, forcing him to give chase.”

“And why can’t you just carry it toward Gelica?”

“Well, that’s the second part of the trick. Belikot will be ready for action as he nears the phylactery, but if I’m lying in wait somewhere between the phylactery and him, I can get the element of surprise. Maybe disable him without harming my friend’s body.”

“How will you do so?”

“That’s a good question. I have some collars that the mine uses to control people, but I don’t have a control rod. Honestly, I’d hate to use them, anyway—bad memories. Do your people have a way to disable strong Energy users?”

“It depends on their strength and their will. Some sedatives would work if you could manage to apply them.”

“Her body hasn’t had any racial improvements, and I’m pretty sure Belikot is less than tier three. He’d have gotten his own phylactery out of that dungeon if he were powerful enough. No, I’m sure I can beat him. I just don’t want to hurt my friend in the process. If you have a strong sedative, I’ll try to disable him temporarily and then force it down his throat.”

“Mmhmm, and how will I know you’ve finished your task?”

“I’ll come here and have one of your hunters ride to get you. Also, if someone approaches and it’s not me or one of your hunters, you should haul ass away. That’s why I want you to hold the phylactery, and I’m not just planting it somewhere—in case he tricks me and gets around my ambush.”

“Yes ... ‘haul ass!’” Tellen laughed. “So. I understand your plan, but why would I put my people at risk helping you with this problem?”

“I mean, do you think it’s good to have this pendejo wandering around?”

“It seems this wizard, evil though he may be, has other things to preoccupy him than bothering my people.” Tellen shrugged, lifting his steaming tea to his lips. Victor copied him and took a sip of the pungent, bitter brew.

“Okay, then I could give you something. How about this?” Victor took out the spearhead he’d looted from the guts of the giant tentacle-slug back in the depths. “I’ve seen a lot of your people using spears. This was looted from a very powerful monster.” He held out the spearhead, glinting in the morning light. Tellen took it and examined all of its angles.

“A valuable weapon.” He nodded, looking satisfied. “This is good payment for a day or two of riding. Should you fail, and should this death caster come my way, I will try to evade him, but if things look hopeless, I will throw this phylactery away and leave him to his own devices.” He nodded to the heavy cylinder and its cold, sinister aura.

“That’s enough for me. Thank you, Ban-tok.”

“You’re welcome, warrior.” Tellen held out a hand, and Victor took it, returning the firm but warm grip.

“Can we start soon? I fear for my friend’s mind with each minute that passes.”

“We can start now. Go to the road, Victor, and I’ll talk to my people. When I’m ready, I’ll come gather the phylactery from you.” Tellen stood and held a hand out to help Victor to his feet.

“Thanks. Alright, then. See you in a few minutes.” Victor turned and started walking across the half-mile or so of grassland toward the brown ribbon of the roadway. He’d only gone a few paces past the last tent when he heard footsteps running toward him. He turned to the sound and saw Chandri jogging his way. She smiled as she drew near, offering a short wave.

“Victor! Leaving already?”

“Yeah, I’ve gotta help a friend. Nice camp, though,” he said, gesturing to the tents and campfires arrayed behind her.

“Well, thanks for stopping; it gave us something to talk about last night.” She fell into step with him, and they continued toward the road.

“Sure. You don’t get a lot of visitors?”

“No, most of the trade wagons or caravans that come through this way want nothing to do with us.”

“Afraid you’re bandits?” Victor guessed.

“How’d you know?” She scowled at him, but he saw she was teasing as her black-stained lips turned up in a grin.

“Hah, well, to be honest, I used to be a pit fighter—not by choice—and there was a girl in my cell from a Shadeni tribe; she said her people got caught raiding a village.”

“Yes, some clans practice the old ways, though it’s perilous to do so close to the cities of the empire. We’re happy to hunt, and if we need to raid, there are lands not far away which aren’t part of Ridonne.” That caught Victor by surprise. So just because they were ostensibly hunters, these people weren’t ashamed to admit raiding outside the empire.

“Old ways? So it’s a tradition?”

“Our people existed for millennia as nomads—hunters and raiders. When we were forced into this world with so many other races, some clans settled, others found different ways to fit in, and still others refuse to bend, though their numbers grow scarce. What about you, Victor? Where are your people?”

“My people aren’t in this world. I was transported here by magic—summoned before I had the strength to resist.”

“That’s ... hard.” She reached up a hand to squeeze his shoulder. “I’d be lost without my clan. I hope you can find people here, Victor, or a way to your home.”

“Thanks, Chandri. Yeah, I try not to think about my family because it brings me down. I’ve met some good people here, though, and I have plans to help some of them that need it.”

“That’s good, Victor. We could all sense your strength. I’m glad that you’re a friend to our clan. The Ban-tok asked me to give you a gift, even though he said he was coming to help you with a task. Perhaps he didn’t want it to seem part of any bargain you made with him,” she said, holding up a large, bulbous brown bottle with a wax-sealed cork. Victor assumed she’d had it in a storage device because her hands had been empty up to that moment.

“What’s this?” he asked, taking the heavy bottle, though he had a good idea of its contents.

“Cheb-cheb! It’s from the Ban-tok’s personal supply—I think it’s a valuable bottle!” They’d just reached the dirt road when Victor put the bottle into his ring and turned to face Chandri.

“That’s awesome! Thanks again; I wish I had something good to give as a gift, but I’ve been living off really bad travel rations and watery wine for the last month or so.”

“A gift requires no payment, Victor. Perhaps you’ll bring something next time you pass through,” she said, smiling. Looking at her face without the distraction of walking, Victor noticed that she had tiny, black tattoos of animals and arrows at the backs of her cheeks, running down her jawline, neck, and back along her hairline.

“What do your tattoos mean, Chandri?”

“The animals are from hunts I’ve participated in, and the arrows are for kills.” Victor noticed she didn’t mention if the kills referred to animals or people.

“Right, cool.” Victor glanced toward the camp and saw that Tellen had started toward them, walking with his roladii following behind on a leather lead.

“You don’t keep track of your kills, Victor?” Chandri asked, bringing his attention back to her.

“Um, no. To be honest, I’ve lost count. Kind of sad, huh? I’m sure if I thought about it, I could figure out how many people there were, but there’s no way I could count the monsters.” Victor shrugged. Chandri’s smile had faded, though, and she took a step back.

“Well, I hope you stop by again, Victor. I should go before Tellen scolds me for shirking my duties. Safe travels!” She turned and started jogging back toward the camp, and Victor watched her retreating figure, wondering if he’d said something stupid again.

“Victor,” Tellen called as he came near, “did Chandri try to talk you into helping her run away?” He laughed, so Victor figured the question wasn’t serious.

“Yeah, but she had second thoughts when I told her about my cooking skills.”

“Oh? Hah!” Tellen laughed, and Victor smiled, resting his hand on Lifedrinker’s head, waiting for him to close the distance. “Well, I think we should move a bit west before separating. I know a good spot for you to lay in ambush. I think your friend won’t want to approach the road this close to my camp, anyway.”

“Yeah, that’s a good point, but, please, he’s not my friend. That motherfucker has caused me a lot of grief.” Victor couldn’t help the growl that entered his voice as he spoke, and Tellen gave him a second, appraising look.

“I don’t envy the creature should you get him out of your friend’s body.”

“Yeah,” Victor grunted, and the two of them started walking westward on the road.

“To that end, I have this sleeping draught. Our clan’s Blood Healer prepared it. She says anyone under tier-four will sleep at least for several hours, given the full dose.”

“Thank you, Tellen,” Victor said, tucking the small glass bottle into his ring.

They walked for a while in silence, and then Tellen started filling the void with stories of hunts. He had a story for every sort of game animal, and Victor laughed as he spun one outlandish tale after another. Tellen had just finished recounting how his father had made him hide in a blind, covered in cooked entrails, to lure out a particularly skittish scavenger called a gythalii when he stopped walking, gestured to the left, and said, “This is it.”

Victor saw more grasslands over gentle hills and shrugged, saying, “I don’t see it.”

“No, you wouldn’t. If you go much further south, though, there’s a narrow, high-walled gorge splitting the plains for a dozen miles. If your enemy is coming from the south, toward this road, they’ll need to skirt this way unless they can fly.”

“Alright, sounds good. You ready?” Victor took Thayla’s skull out of the satchel, tied it to his belt, and then handed the bag, with nothing but the phylactery inside, over to Tellen.

“Aye, a few hard days in the saddle is nothing new to me, or Hukka, here.” He reached up and patted the roladii’s thick gray skin just under its mane of feathers.

“Those are some cool mounts, that’s for sure,” Victor nodded. “Alright, just head west on the road for half a day or so, then keep your eyes peeled. Don’t let this asshole sneak up on you!”

“I’ve not been ambushed since I was a child. Fear not, Victor.” He slung the satchel over his shoulder and then smoothly mounted the roladii. He waved and clicked his tongue, and soon he was just a blur of dust in the distance.

“Alright, Gorz. I need you to wake up and keep alert for a while. Can you do that?”

“Yes, Victor, I did listen to your conversation with Tellen and assumed I’d need to be on high alert soon.”

“I’m guessing you can still see the tether as long as I stay between the phylactery and Belikot, right?”

“Yes, it’s steadily stretching away to the southwest from here and then disappears into the distance, parallel to the road.”

“Perfect.” Victor moved off the road to the south, climbed the first rolling hill, and then dug through his ring for one of the bronze spears he’d looted in the dungeon. Using the spear and bolstering his strength with Sovereign Will, he started to dig into the dirt between clumps of tall, yellow grass. With each scrape of the spear, he pulled away significant troughs of soil, his muscles more than a match for the loose, soft ground. Soon he had a trench dug with a loose pile of dirt around it. He put the spear away, then went to the far side of the hill and started pulling up clumps of grass, carrying them back to his trench and piling them around it, obscuring the hole and the loose, dark soil.

When he finished, Victor dropped into his trench and said, “Alright, Gorz. Keep me updated on the tether every two minutes, and be sure to let me know if you see any Energy signatures coming my way.”

“I will. Thank you for the clear instructions. It will help me stay focused on the physical world.”

Victor nodded, unsure if Gorz could see such communication but not in the mood to speak more. Sitting in his hole, he closed his eyes and listened with every fiber of his being. He primarily heard the wind rustling through the grass, but he heard bird calls now and then, and, very occasionally, he heard the thump and scurry of little animals running through the grass. He sat like that, lost in the whisper of the wind for hours, and the sun was well past noon when Gorz said, “Victor! The tether has shifted! The thread leading away to the south has moved northward.”

“Oh, sweet!” Victor said, suddenly aware of the weight he’d been carrying, worrying that his plan was fatally flawed by some aspect he hadn’t thought of. “I think Belikot is on the move. Keep alert!”

Gorz notified Victor several more times throughout the afternoon as the line of death Energy moved this way or that. As the sun started to sink toward the horizon, he said the tether was beginning to grow thicker, as if its source was drawing nearer. As the sun began to sink beneath the western horizon, Gorz said, “Victor, I’m sensing twenty or more weak Energy signatures. They’re reminiscent of the ghouls you slew in the dungeon and are coming along the road at a rapid pace.”

“No sign of Belikot?” Victor thought.

“No, the tether continues beyond the signatures. Perhaps they’re moving at a faster pace than Belikot can maintain.”

“Right.” Victor stayed still, slowly drawing a deep breath and holding it. It wasn’t long before he heard the ghouls’ grunting wheeze and scrabbling steps as they

ran by on the dirt road. They didn't pause as they went by, and Victor didn't move, not wanting to lose his advantage of surprise.

The ghouls were gone about ten minutes when Gorz practically shrieked in his mind, "Victor! I see the end of the tether and Belikot's death-attuned Energy! He's coming up the road, moving right down the middle of it!"

"Alright, chill. I'm going to let him get past. Keep an eye on him, and say something if he stops or turns."

Gorz was silent, which Victor took to mean nothing was going wrong, and he watched the road, holding his breath, peering between stalks of grass. He ran over his plan a hundred times, imagining how he would move, what he would do first, and how he would react given any scenario he could imagine. At last, after holding his breath for several minutes, he saw the tall, lithe silhouette that had to belong to Thayla's body. She was walking, but, as Victor watched, she broke into a jog for a short while and started walking again. Belikot was pushing her body hard, trying to hurry, but Victor knew she had to be exhausted. "You mother fucker," he whispered soundlessly.

Soon, Belikot had walk-run past his position, and Victor channeled his Sovereign Will boost into agility, effortlessly and noiselessly hopping out of his hole. He could see Thayla's shadowy outline moving away down the road, and, as he started to stalk through the grass, he cast Inspiring Presence. The twilight of early evening suddenly glowed with potential—the stars were bright, the moons vibrant and encouraging, and the shadows fled the roadway and Thayla's body. She walked forward, clear as day, and Victor saw her ripped clothes, muddy boots, and the way her braids had come loose and grown tattered.

Concentrating on being quiet, he found the spots on the road free of loose gravel and moved like a ghost through the space between him and Belikot. Victor found joy in perfectly placing his feet and silently slipping through the night, and when he saw Thayla's head start to turn, it was a trivial effort to concentrate and push some inspiration-attuned Energy out with Project Spirit. Of course, the spell twisted the Energy, causing despair and doubt in Belikot. He felt the death caster's will struggle with his spell, but Victor just doubled down with his prodigious attribute and crushed the resistance, and Belikot turned away, trying to move into a faster run.

Victor was on him in a flash, snaking an arm around Thayla's neck in a chokehold, falling back, and wrapping his legs around her legs and waist, pinning her in place. Belikot, in Thayla's body, gasped and thrashed, and Victor felt his cold death Energy begin to surge. Victor grunted and bore down with his will, pushing inspiration Energy into his pathways until he veritably hummed with it. All the while, he worked with his free hand to pop the cork out of his sleeping potion, and, as Thayla's body writhed and twisted, he got ready to pour it into her mouth.

He knew that if he held her long enough, she'd eventually choke out. Even enhanced by Energy, people needed to breathe, but he feared Belikot would work some sort of spell given enough time. As soon as his free hand was ready with the potion, Victor let go of her neck and grabbed her jaw with his hand, driving his powerful thumb and fingers into her cheeks, forcing her lips apart. Then, he dumped the potion into her mouth and slapped his hand over her lips. He felt terrible, being so rough with Thayla's body, but as her legs bucked and kicked, he felt a slight twinge of pleasure, knowing it was Belikot who was panicking in her mind.

When Thayla's body fell limp, Victor slid out from beneath her, pulled the mine employee's shackles from his ring, and bound Thayla's feet and hands behind her back. Then he took a scrap of leather, rolled it up, and stuffed it in her mouth. He used another scrap to tie around her head, holding it in place. He'd just finished when Gorz screamed, "Victor! The ghouls' Energy signatures are coming back this way!"

"Thanks for being so alert, Gorz." Victor smiled, still under the influence of inspiration, and hoisted Lifedrinker into his hands. Standing over Thayla's body, he waited for the monsters. They slinked down the street, surely thinking they had the benefit of the obscurement of shadows, but Victor saw them from a long way off. Even without inspiration, he felt he'd have seen them coming, what with the bright moons and the stars. They lurched and dragged their limbs, and Victor knew these ghouls were subpar creations compared to those in the dungeon.

The undead creatures launched themselves at him with no thought of strategy, coming singly, in pairs, and, in one case, a trio. Lifedrinker met them all and tore them asunder with ease. Victor moved so quickly with his agility boosted, and he was at such a level disparity with the monsters that the fight felt more like swinging his axe at targets than actually fighting. When nothing but twitching body parts and broken corpses lay around him, he stooped, hoisted Thayla's body to his shoulder, and started to jog toward the Shadeni hunter camp, a thin stream of conquered Energy chasing him into the night.

He covered the ground much faster than when he and Tellen had strolled to his ambush site. Soon the campfires came into view, and he cut through the grassland toward them, braced for the inevitable challenge from the watch. He didn't have to wait long before a husky voice shouted, "Stop! Who comes running?" Victor slowed, put Lifedrinker into his belt loop, then held up his free hand, his other still holding onto Thayla.

"Victor! I was here last night! Someone needs to ride toward Gelica to get your Ban-tok. Did he tell you to expect me?"

"Yes, Victor. Come forward," the voice said, and Victor kept walking. A shadow rose from behind a clump of grass, and Victor recognized one of the men that had been sitting around Tellen's fire the night before.

"Was your mission successful, then?" he asked, eyeing Thayla's unconscious form.

"Yes, but I might need help dealing with her. There's an evil spirit inside her. I, um, I didn't plan this far ahead."

"A spirit? Come, let's see Oynalla—she's our Spirit Caster."

"Oh, you guys have a spirit caster?"

"Of course," the man snorted and turned to walk toward the camp. He waved his hand into the shadows, and Victor figured he was signaling other watchers.

They'd only gone a few steps when he heard the sound of a roladii running away toward the road.

"That the rider going to get Tellen?"

"Aye." The man wasn't talkative, and he silently led Victor into the camp and past several tents before stopping before a small, blue canvas one with an eye painted on the flap in yellow dye. "Oynalla," he called, though not loudly.

"Send them in," a dry, rough woman's voice replied. The man shrugged and gestured to the flap. Victor nodded and pulled it aside, ducking through the opening, carefully squatting low enough to get Thayla through. The tent was small, maybe ten feet across, and he immediately faced a woman sitting on piled furs. She nodded to the hides to her left, and Victor carefully lifted Thayla from his shoulder and laid her down. "And you too, warrior. Sit before me."

The tent smelled of incense and spices, and Victor saw a small pot bubbling on a brass stove, seemingly powered by Energy. When he sat in front of her, Victor still towered over the woman, driving home just how small she was. She had braided gray hair, and her red skin was folded with hundreds of wrinkles and marked by dozens of old, faded tattoos. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Of course! I felt you coming all the way from the road. Such a strong spirit Core. I'm not sure what you want from me—I can't match your strength."

"Oh, um, it's my friend, she..."

"Oh, this one with the death Core? What can I do for one such as this?"

"She's not in there. She's in this skull." Victor untied Thayla's skull and set it on the fur in front of him. "A spirit that had been in this skull switched places with her."

"Oh! Aha! Yes, now I feel her in there—so very weak! So, you need to push him out of her and let her go back in! You have more than enough strength for the task, but I can guide you."

"Really? There's not some ritual or spell I need?" Victor studied the old woman, wondering what her role in the hunter community was. What attunements did she have?

"No. This is a matter of will. Your friend was displaced because she came into contact with the skull and the spirit's will was stronger than hers. You'll have to aid her. Give her some strength, and then push against this invading spirit. Drive it forth so that she can move back in."

"What about his phylactery? I was under the impression I'd need it to force him to leave."

“Oh, a phylactery, hmm? Well, that’s neither here nor there. Indeed the spirit will want it, and perhaps you could use it as leverage, but this can be done without it. I’d caution you not to let the spirit gain control of the phylactery when you’re done.”

“Right. Okay, where do I begin?”

“Begin by giving me a gift!” the old woman cackled, and Victor couldn’t tell if she was joking or just a touch insane. He decided not to risk offending her, so he reached into his ring and looked through his treasure. He found a particularly lovely red gemstone and took it out, holding it in his palm toward the woman. “Oh? A ruby for me? Good boy!” She snatched it, and it was gone in a flash. “Now! Wake up your friend and give her some Energy!”

“Alright,” Victor said. He put his hand on the skull and channeled some inspiration-attuned Energy into it, much more than he had given Thayla before.

“Victor! Thank you! That feels wonderful,” Thayla said in his head. “Where are we? How are things going? Did you find the phylactery?”

“Yeah, Thayla. Not only that, but I got your body. We’re going to get you back into it now. Are you ready to fight for it?”

“Yes! What do I need to do, Victor?”

“Just wait, and I’ll give you instructions. This woman, Oynalla, is helping.” Victor pointed the skull’s eyes at Oynalla, and the older woman cackled again.

“I’m ready, Victor! Just tell me what to do,” Thayla said again, her voice earnest and excited.

“She’s ready,” Victor said to Oynalla.

“Good! You’ll be the bridge, Victor. You’re Core and pathways are used to channeling spirit Energy, yes?”

“Yeah, I’d say so.”

“Good! So, to protect your friend’s spirit from the malignant spirit in her body, you’ll pull her from the skull to rest in your pathways. Then, you can pull the other spirit out and push it into the skull. Be sure to keep them apart in your pathways.”

“You want me to take them into me?” Victor’s eyes had grown wide, and his voice strained.

“Oh, come, boy. You’ve got a powerful will, or you wouldn’t have such a brilliant Core of spirit Energy. Show that death caster what a spirit caster can do!”

“Alright, hold on.” Victor straightened his back, took a few steady breaths, and cast Heroic Heart. He wasn’t sure he shouldn’t go with Inspiring Presence, but he wanted the confidence and resilience of courage-attuned Energy coursing through him at that moment. As the hot, red-gold Energy flooded out of his chest into the rest of him, a smile spread on his lips, and the old woman cackled, watching him.

“That’s it, boy! That death trickster will flee before you!” The woman’s words bolstered his confidence even more, and Victor slapped his palm on the skull, reaching out with his senses for the spirit within. When he felt the cool tickle of Thayla’s spirit, he suddenly could smell her and feel her like she was in the room with him.

“Come on, mija; come with me. I’ll keep him off you,” he said aloud.

“Victor?” Thayla said in his mind.

“Trust me. Come out of the skull; I have to hold onto you for a minute.” He tugged at the Energy of Thayla’s spirit again, and he felt her let go and start to flow into his pathway. He smiled and stopped pulling at her when she was resting in the pathways of his right hand. There was more than enough space for her. The old woman had been right about that—the amount of Energy he could channel dwarfed Thayla’s little signature. Victor smiled and opened his eyes, looking at Oynalla. “Got her.”

“Good! The skull is a vessel designed to hold a spirit. Pull the one from your friend’s body and put it in there. He’ll resist, but you’re stronger, aren’t you?”

“Damn right,” Victor said, resting his left hand on Thayla’s breastbone and reaching forth with his mind. With red-gold courage flowing through his pathways, Victor reached out, feeling for some sort of spirit Energy in Thayla’s body. He immediately felt her pathways, small and narrow compared to his, and, lurking like a miasmatic fog, he felt the cold, slippery presence of Belikot. “Come out, fucker!” he growled and latched onto him with his will, tugging him toward the bridge between his hand and Thayla’s chest.

“Fool! I knew I should have dropped feeders down after you!”

“Quiet!” Victor growled and pulled, ripping the spirit toward him. Thayla’s body was utterly motionless, still under the soporific effects of the potion. Belikot railed and screamed in Victor’s mind, but it was ineffectual, and Victor relentlessly pulled. When the first part of the cold, slippery Energy entered Victor’s pathways, he cringed, feeling like he’d just stuck his hand into a latrine, but he doggedly kept on, pulling and tugging, until every last scrap of the spirit was resting in his left arm.

When he'd finished the extraction, he felt Belikot make a mad rush along his pathway, trying to charge into his mind, and Victor laughed. With Heroic Heart active and his will at nearly two hundred, Victor yanked the spirit back down to his hand and held it pinned there, pressing it into a ball and squeezing with all his might. The spirit thrashed and quailed, and, remembering all the problems Belikot had caused and the hell he'd put Thayla through, Victor relished in its throes.

"Careful, Spirit Warrior!" the old woman suddenly said. "Don't destroy the spirit within yourself unless you want to absorb some aspects of it." Oynalla's words brought Victor back to himself, and he stopped crushing Belkot's spirit. The last thing he wanted was to absorb some element of this asshole. Sighing heavily, he put his hand on the skull and pushed Belikot into its artificial pathways. As soon as the eyes flared with blue flames, Victor snatched the skull into his dimensional ring.

Oynalla cackled again, "Oh child! So cruel! Existence in a dimensional container will drive any spirit mad!"

"Good. Fuck that guy," Victor said, then he put his other hand on Thayla's chest and gently nudged her spirit out and into her body, pushing her forth and urging her toward the place where he instinctively knew her spirit should dwell, up the pathway deep into her skull. Thayla's breathing quickened momentarily, then steadied. Her face relaxed, and Victor knew she was where she was supposed to be—now he just had to wait for her to wake up.