

Victor BK2: Ch19

Book 2: Chapter 19: A Lot to Learn

Victor painstakingly twisted his braid of inspiration Energy into the last loop of the spell pattern. Suddenly the whole thing—all the coils, and whorls, all the twists, and branches—seemed to solidify and glow with bright, white-gold Energy, and then a System message appeared:

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Spirit Walk - Basic.

Spirit Walk - Basic: Prerequisite: any spirit-based Energy affinity. Using the fundamental, primal nature of your Energy, you send forth and sustain your soul on its essential plane of existence. The duration of this spell is dependent on your Energy stores, and no protections are granted to your soul or your physical being. Energy Cost: Minimum 50 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.

When Victor wiped away the message, and his eyes fell on his surroundings, he was startled to realize that he was standing in a strange, gray-lit twilight. He, Oynalla, and Thayla stood in a peculiar echo of the plains, with nothing but grass and starlit sky for as far as he could see in any direction. Thayla was smiling hugely, and she shimmered with faint, golden luminescence. She laughed, and her voice seemed to echo out of a deep chasm, coming oddly to Victor's ears.

He turned his gaze to Oynalla and was startled to see she wasn't an old woman any longer. She was still diminutive, but her skin was smooth, and her eyes were bright, glowing with warm, pink Energy. She laughed along with Thayla, and her old woman cackle was gone, replaced by a rich, smooth, mirthful sound that brought joy to Victor's heart.

"Oynalla, you're beautiful!" Thayla said.

"Of course! Wasn't I always?" she asked, still laughing.

"This is weird as hell," Victor said, looking around them and flexing his mouth as his words came to his ears, sounding like a different person spoke them.

"This is the spirit plane, and, yes, things are different here. Remnants of things made by people rarely have an echo here, so you see the world as it would be if we hadn't built upon it. No roads, no tents, and even if you stood in the middle of Gelica, only a few things would stand out of the rich, soft grass."

"I feel a cold tugging in my chest," Thayla said, suddenly putting a hand over her heart.

"You don't have enough spirit Energy to keep this spell going long, child. Let's all return—you've seen enough for your first walk, and now you know the spell. More practice will come easily. Just concentrate on the spell and end it, as you would a simple light spell." Thayla nodded, closing her eyes, and then she was gone.

"You have to watch over her, warrior. She's vulnerable while her death Energy so heavily outweighs her spirit Energy. Help her cultivate her courage. Protect

her, and keep the temptation of her other side at bay until she's grown stronger. Promise me!" Oynalla reached out, and her smooth, strong hands bit into Victor's wrists, where she grasped him.

"I promise, Oynalla. I want her to be safe just as much as you do."

"Good, good. Alright, warrior, let's join her. End your spell." She still held Victor's wrists while she spoke, and he nodded, closed his eyes, and concentrated on his Spirit Walk spell, willing it to end. Suddenly the cool, still air was replaced by the heat of a campfire and smoke, and the sound of camp life crashed in, banishing the silence of the spirit plane.

"That was incredible, wasn't it?" Thayla asked, smiling at him as he rapidly blinked, waving the smoke away from his face.

"Hah, you've barely scratched at the wonder of spirit walking. A good start, though, daughter. A good start." Oynalla laughed and stood, shakily leaning on her walking stick. "Now, this old woman needs some sleep. You two should also sleep, and you're welcome in my home. The dawn will bring the start of a long journey for you."

She didn't wait for them to respond, ducking into her tent, a breathy chuckle accompanying her progress. Victor looked at Thayla as the canvas flaps fell closed and said, "Yeah, it was incredible." He moved a little closer to her and said in a low voice, "Do you know how to cultivate spirit Energy?"

"Oynalla was talking to me about it before you woke up the other day. Something about focusing on the emotion that gives you the same feeling as your affinity and then drawing from the Energy it produces somehow? It seems complicated! For my old Core, I just drew the Energy in the world around me into my pathways and slowly built it up, pushing it into my Core."

"Well, lucky for me, I never learned any other way. When I just had rage-attuned Energy, I learned to focus on the memories that caused me the most anger, and then I'd examine the memory, breaking it down until I'd taken the essence of rage from it, sort of a construct that was separate from the emotion. I could study it, creating a feedback loop of rage that coursed through me, through my pathways, and into my Core. It wasn't pleasant coming up with those constructs, but I think it kind of helped me. I learned a lot about myself in those weeks."

"It sounds hard, Victor. What about your inspiration attunement?" Thayla leaned close, copying Victor's hushed tone.

"That was really different—it was like my introspection about inspiration helped me deal with my current reality. I was new to the mines, and my Core was all fucked up, so I was pretty down. I stumbled on inspiration almost by accident

when I started to examine how I felt about Captain Lam. On the surface, I thought she was beautiful, but I was also terrified and in awe of her. I didn't focus on that, though. A certain image kept coming to my mind: Lam gliding down out of the darkness to smash into the beetle horde." Victor paused to gather his thoughts, looking up at the stars.

"I remembered how I'd been pretty sure we were goners. I was on my last shreds of Energy, and my body was exhausted, and then Lam came out of nowhere, crashing into the center of the horde, and I felt like I had to respond; I had to keep trying as long as she was fighting. You know what I mean? I was inspired."

"So after you realized that, what then? You started making mental constructs about inspiration and focused on them to cultivate?"

"Exactly! I started thinking about people I admired and how they made me feel—coaches, other athletes, friends I made in the pits, but, yeah, Lam was the key."

"This is really helpful, Victor. Oynalla tried to explain this to me, but now it's all starting to make sense." Thayla nodded, her eyes unfocused like she was picturing something.

"You have any ideas for what you might think about to cultivate courage?"

"Oh," Thayla smiled, sitting up and refocusing on Victor, "I have a few ideas." She reached out, squeezed Victor's hand with both of hers, and continued, "I'm going to work on it for a while. You can turn in if you're tired."

"Not a chance. I'll work on my cultivation drills for a while too. Let me know if you have any more questions." Victor sat back, took up his lotus position, and began gathering Energy into his pathways, using the drill he taught himself so long ago. He started with rage, and when he felt exhausted and spent, he turned to inspiration which felt like a vacation after the strain of confronting the demons in his memories, most of which were reflections of himself.

It didn't come as a surprise when he opened his eyes and saw the glimmer of pale light on the eastern horizon. He'd made good progress with his cultivation, and with his improved racial status and high vitality, he felt quite rested, even though he hadn't slept at all. He was happy to see that, at some point, Thayla had curled up on the woven rug and was sound asleep near the now-cold fire pit. Victor yawned and stood, stretching his arms up into the sky to the accompaniment of pops and cracks from his neck and spine.

"Awake already, warrior?" Oynalla pushed aside her tent flap and stepped out into the dim light, her breath puffing out in a small cloud. The pre-dawn chill was

more biting than he remembered it, and Victor, not for the first time, wondered what the seasons were like in this part of the world.

“Yeah,” he said, “Oynalla, is summer almost over? What’s winter like around here? Any snow?”

“Oh, autumn is upon us, warrior. You should know this, hah! Snow will find us, aye, but we’ve a cozy winter camp south and west of here, and I think you and Thayla will come to us there. You to visit, and Thayla to stay with her daughter. I’ve had a good sleep on this, and that’s how it should go. Do you understand me?” Victor looked at Thayla’s peaceful, sleeping face, and he nodded. She deserved a break, and he’d make sure he got her back to Oynalla.

“Yeah. Didn’t you say something about moving to your autumn camp? Is that on the way to your winter camp?”

“Clever warrior! Yes, it is. Don’t worry about finding us. Oynalla will look for you in the spirit realm and give you guidance. On the first day of each week, I’ll wait for you at midnight—walk your spirit to me, and I can help you.”

“Alright, thanks, Oynalla. I’ll tell Thayla.”

“I heard,” Thayla said, grunting as she pushed herself up to a sitting position. “I have to pee. Get the fire going, Victor! I’ll be back in a minute.”

“Hey, I was about to go . . .” he trailed off as she hurried away. “Oh well. Oynalla, do you have some wood?”

“Yes, boy. Sit down, sit down. Who do you think starts my fire every day? I don’t need a traveling warrior to help me with that.”

When Thayla returned, Victor took his turn at the latrines, and when he returned to Oynalla’s tent, Tellen was sitting across from Thayla, and they were eating some sort of porridge that Oynalla was stirring in a pot. She handed Victor a bowl when he sat down, and he ate it, listening to the conversation already in progress. The warm cereal wasn’t sweet like he’d guessed, but rather buttery and salty, and it felt good in his stomach.

“Yes, our autumn camp is closer to Gelica than this one, but the winter camp is a bit further. Both are southwest of here, and the winter camp is near the Blue Deep—a forest that stretches for a thousand miles. We hunt rich game on its edges during the coldest months and never fear hunger.”

“I’ve heard of the Blue Deep!” Thayla said. “Isn’t there a Ghelli city there?”

“Oh, aye. Twilight Home, they call it, but it’s hundreds of miles from our camp.”

They talked for a while more about Tellen’s plans, but soon it was time for Oynalla to pack her tent, and several youngsters from the clan came to help her. Victor and Thayla started to feel like they were in the way, so they gathered their things, and while Victor shook Tellen’s hand and promised

to visit again, Thayla hugged Oynalla. He couldn't hear what she said into the old woman's ear, but both of them had tears in their eyes when they parted.

"And you, warrior. You remember what I told you. Take care," she turned, without any laughter, and ducked into her tent.

"Thank you, Tellen," Thayla said, "We'll see you again soon, I hope."

"I'd offer you mounts, but we've lost some of our best riding roladii in the last months to boyii hounds, and I don't think you'd enjoy trying to ride the stubborn draft bulls we've got, even the ones you brought in."

"Yeah, I don't even know how to ride, to be honest," Victor said. "I suppose I should learn sometime, but I'm good with walking for now."

"We'll be fine," Thayla said, "Thanks anyway, Tellen." After yet another handshake and goodbye, Victor and Thayla finally began to walk over the grassland toward the road, angling to the west.

"How many days to Gelica?" Victor asked, even though he'd heard it mentioned several times that it was a four or five-day trip.

"At this pace? Five days, I bet." Thayla said.

"Well, I'm happy to go faster! How long do you think you can keep up with me?" Victor laughed, starting into a jog.

"Ugh! No, Victor! It's too early for a run. Let's walk for a while!" Thayla yelled after him. He laughed and relented, and they walked along the road, steadily putting miles between themselves and the hunters' camp as the sun climbed the eastern sky. They didn't talk much, but their silence was comfortable, and they both seemed to be in good spirits. Sometime past mid-morning, Thayla said, "Victor did you sleep last night?"

"Nah, but I made some good progress on my Core. I think I'm near the next rank. Honestly, I feel just as rested from cultivating all night as I used to feel sleeping five or six hours before school."

"You went to a school?"

"Yeah, hah! I know I don't act like it, but in my world, pretty much everyone attends school up to a point."

"Some towns and cities here are like that, but in most of the bigger cities, it's just the wealthy that send their children to school. The rest of us learn from family and then through apprenticeships."

“Well, what about you? I mean, last night; did you make any progress with your courage affinity?”

“Yes!” Thayla said passionately. “Victor, it was so amazing! I did like you said: I searched my memories for emotion and then really got into them, relived them, and then made ‘constructs’ out of them. It took me a long time to come up with the first one, but then it got easier and easier. I have seven good courage constructs now, and when I’m done cycling through them all, I feel so exhausted but so good. Do you know what I mean?”

“I know exactly what you mean. When I go through my rage constructs, I feel utterly spent. My inspiration constructs don’t do that, though; I feel the work I’m doing, pushing the Energy through my pathways, but mentally I feel damn good when I’m done.”

“I wonder how long ‘til my Core levels,” Thayla said, kicking a round stone off the road to bounce and tumble through the yellow grass.

“Can’t you feel it? I feel a pressure building and a sense that I’m going to break through.”

“Yes, I think I know what you mean, but it’s very different from my other Core. You know my old pearl Core. I never had any experience cultivating when I just had the death Energy, either.”

“Well, that’s a good thing. You want your courage Energy to outweigh your death Energy, right?”

“Yes,” Thayla said, nodding.

“So it’s good you never built it up, then. You gained a lot from that dungeon orb, but I think you’ll build up your courage side quickly, then you can stop worrying about what that death Energy will do to you.”

“I know the Old Mother asked you to watch out for me. I feel kind of stupid—when we first fled the mine, I thought I’d be the one looking out for you.”

“Eh, we look out for each other, right?” Victor shrugged. Thayla opened her mouth to say something but then held up a hand, pointing down the road. Victor followed the line of her finger and saw, far down the dirt-colored ribbon, near the horizon, a tiny black dot under a faint puff of dust that hung in the pale blue sky. “A rider?”

“I think it’s a wagon,” Thayla said, squinting.

“You’ve got good eyes,” Victor held a hand to his brow, squinting, trying to see what was coming. As he watched, the black dot slowly grew and resolved into the shape of a dark brown wagon being pulled by a large, black animal. “Yeah,

you're right." He looked around and saw nothing but grassy plains on either side of the road. "No point hiding, even if we could."

"No, I don't think it's a threat. That's a bundii pulling that wagon—they're strong but slow."

"Bundii? Is it like a big roladii?"

"Not exactly. They're more like birds. I think they are birds—they have dark feathers and taloned feet, but they can't fly. They're huge and strong; one of them can pull as much as three or four roladii."

"Why don't people make enchanted wagons?"

"You mean self-propelling wagons?" When Victor nodded, she continued, "In the cities, you'll see coaches and some wagons that run on Energy, but the enchantments are expensive and difficult for people with low affinity to keep powered up and running."

"Makes sense." They kept walking toward the approaching wagon, and as it drew nearer and nearer, Victor started to make out its details. It was tall, made from dark wood and dull gray metal, and he frowned when he realized there were bars built into the wood. The driver was a Cadwalli, one with long, spiraling horns coming out the sides of his head. "Do all Cadwalli grow horns eventually? I don't remember noticing them."

"No, it depends on their bloodlines and how far they've advanced their race. Looking at his clothes and that wagon, I'd say this is an old, wealthy Cadwalli, indeed." Thayla said, and Victor noticed she was leaning on her spear, holding it like a walking stick.

"You think we're in for trouble?" He loosened Lifedrinker in her loop.

"I don't know," she said with a shrug. The wagon was only about fifty yards distant now, and Victor could see the driver staring at them. He wore a dusty yellow jacket over a blue shirt, and an oversized crossbow with a complicated firing mechanism was mounted next to his seat. The Cadwalli didn't reach for it, but it was menacing, nonetheless. Victor and Thayla stood to the side of the road, and the man waved as he came a bit closer.

"Hail, travelers!" he called out. Thayla lifted a hand to wave, but Victor just watched as the wagon rolled closer, then stopped a good twenty yards away. "How's the road ahead?" The Cadwalli had a gruff, deep voice, and Victor saw he was stouter and taller than other Cadwalli he'd met, much larger than Vullu and even Fenlale. His hands glittered with gold and silver rings, and when he shifted in his seat, Victor noticed a brace of pearl-handled knives under the flap of his dusty coat.

“Road’s fine,” Thayla said. Victor nodded and started walking toward the wagon. “Where you headed?” he heard himself ask, almost like he was observing things from outside his body.

“Greatbone,” the driver said.

“Quite a wagon and beast,” Victor said, stopping a few feet from the giant bird. It looked very much like an overgrown ostrich. Its bulbous black eyes regarded him placidly before it dipped its head into the feed bag attached to the complicated yoke it wore.

“Thank you, stranger. This is Gzantha,” the driver gestured to his enormous bird. “She’s my pride and joy.”

“What you hauling?” Victor started walking around the side of the bird, and he noticed the driver shift toward the crossbow.

“Criminals. Now, how about you stop acting so threatening, hmm?”

“Criminals?” Victor stopped, still a few feet from the front of the wagon and off to the side of the bird. He glanced back at Thayla, and she met his gaze evenly. He had the impression she was going to follow his lead. “I’ve heard that before. I suppose you’re selling them to the mining consortium?”

“No, I don’t traffic slaves. I’m selling these criminals’ contracts.”

“Now that really sounds familiar.” Victor backed up a few steps so he could see the side of the wagon. It was built very solidly, with small, barred windows spaced evenly on what appeared to be two separate decks. “You mind if I look at the contracts?”

“Who are you, stranger, to ask such a thing? Are you an imperial official? If so, I’d like a look at your seal of office.”

“I’m a concerned citizen. I’ve heard innocent people are being sold into the mines.”

“My name is Karth, and I’m a legitimate broker. Mark that name, stranger; I’ll not have my reputation impugned!”

“Alright, Karth. We’re not saying differently, but would you mind letting us see those contracts? For our peace of mind? It’s just us out here, and we’re not criminals.” Thayla had come up behind him and spoke soothingly to the driver, clearly trying to diffuse things before they got worse. “My name’s Sala, and this is my friend Thengal,” she continued, and Victor smiled and nodded. It was

smart, he supposed, to use fake names since this guy was heading to Greatbone.

“Your friend has a dangerous look, and I don’t like the tone he’s taking,” Karth said, straightening his jacket and frowning down at Victor.

“Sorry, Karth. I’m not a bandit, alright? Like I said, though, we’ve had some bad dudes bringing captured people with fake contracts to sell at the mine.”

“Do you work for the mine, then?” Karth still looked skeptical, but he leaned away from his big crossbow.

“No, we’re out of Steampool Vale. You been there?” Victor asked.

“Once. I usually just head back to Gelica from the mine, though.” He sighed heavily, then produced a leather-bound sheaf of papers. “I have eighteen passengers, and all of their contracts are in order.” He held the binder out toward Thayla. Thayla, smiling, strode forward to take it, giving the bird a wide berth. Victor watched closely, but Karth didn’t do anything threatening, and when Thayla backed away with the contracts, he sat back on his seat and proceeded to file his long, black nails with something that glinted silvery in the bright sun.

Thayla brought the papers over to Victor and started flipping through the contracts. None were as shoddy and full of stricken through lines as Victor’s old contract. Many of them were bordered with runes, and Thayla said, “Some of these are binding Energy contracts. Those are expensive, and I see official seals on most of them—imperial prisons.” She spoke softly and faced away from Karth while Victor kept an eye on the man.

Victor backed up a few steps, and Thayla followed. In little more than a whisper, he asked her, “Does it say how old the prisoners are? I hate the idea of letting this guy deliver eighteen more victims to the mine, but are we ready to go to war with the mine right now?”

“A few of the contracts mention ages. I don’t see any kids, but some only mention names, crimes, and places of origin. And, no, I don’t think we’re ready to go to war. We’re supposed to be coming up with a plan to get the mining consortium to forget about us, remember?”

“Yeah,” Victor thought about her words. Thayla was trying to get free of trouble so she could get her daughter—it wouldn’t be right for him to start making new enemies for her. He took the sheaf of contracts and walked toward Karth, “Hey, I don’t see any problems here, but let me ask you: do you have any kids in that wagon? I mean, young people screwed over by circumstance? I’m not going to steal from you, but if you do, I’ll buy their contracts.”

Karth’s face went from a scowl to something more like a smile at Victor’s words, and he said, “Lad, I’m coming from Spiral Rock Penitentiary. People don’t get sent there if they haven’t been mixed up in some bad stuff. You hear how quiet they’re being? That’s because my wagon is artificed for strength and to silence the occupants—for my protection!” Karth was the first stranger to call Victor

a ‘lad’ or a ‘kid’ in a while, and it made him wonder how old the man was. If he’d advanced his race a lot, he could be ancient and still look young and healthy, at least according to what people had told Victor.

“Alright, Karth. Thanks for humoring us.” Victor stepped back next to Thayla and watched as the wagon driver clicked his tongue and the great bird started pulling the huge, creaking wagon down the road. “Eighteen more victims for the mine. I feel like shit not doing something.” Victor spat into the dusty road.

“We can’t afford the trouble right now, Victor. If you’re going to help people caught up in this system, you shouldn’t start with those kinds, anyway. People like Edeya I could stick my neck out for, but those in that wagon? Just glancing through the contracts, I saw murder, rape, ensorcellment, really vile stuff.”

“Alright, Thayla.” Victor sighed and started walking, and she fell into pace beside him. He was frustrated, mainly because he knew the contracts could be full of lies, but he had no way of discerning or proving them. “Let’s pick up the pace a while, eh? I need to run off some steam.” Victor started down the road at a jog, gradually increasing his pace, and Thayla followed without a word.

He really wanted to do something about the legal system in this world, or at least in Ridonne, but Victor had to admit that he really didn’t know shit. What the fuck was ensorcellment? Did people convicted of terrible crimes deserve to work in a place like Greatbone?

He ran harder, pushing to a sprint and leaving Thayla in the dust. He knew for damn sure that injustice was happening—he was a prime example. He slowed, and while he waited for Thayla, he said, “I need to learn more, though. I need to learn about this empire, I need to learn about the laws and prisons, and I need to learn about the corruption. Gorz, will you start making a list of the shit I need to learn? I’m going to lose track.”

“Yes, Victor. I will begin a list. Would you like me to populate it with my own observations?”

“Haha, fuck you, Gorz.” Victor laughed at the cheeky amulet, and Thayla smiled as she caught up to him.

“Feeling better?”

“I guess, but Gorz just reminded me that I have a lot to learn.”

“Well, that’s true, but we all knew that, right?”

“Chingado! Both of you?”