

Victor BK2: Ch29

Book 2: Chapter 29: Totems

Victor sat cross-legged in his dark bedroom, reading through his class refinement options for the hundredth time:

Class refinement option 1: Titanic Warrior - Epic. Pre-requisite: The strong presence of a titanic bloodline originating from an Elder race. You've begun to unlock the secrets of your ancestry. By leveraging your bloodline to form class abilities, you will continue to build on the synergy between your class and your race. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will.

Class refinement option 2: Battle Caller- Epic. Prerequisites: Inspiration affinity. You exemplify excellence on the battlefield, inspiring your comrades and turning the tide with powerful tactical boons. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence, Agility, Unbound.

Class refinement option 3: Spirit Carver - Epic. Prerequisites: Spirit Core, One of several Elder bloodlines. Your mastery of the spirit continues to grow, unlocking ancient abilities that lay dormant in your bloodline. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Unbound.

Class refinement option 4: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.

Victor only had three options, four if you counted the option of not doing anything, but he felt like this decision was the hardest he'd ever faced. He decided to ignore the second option, Battle Caller. He'd already decided a while ago that he liked his current class more than that, so why would he change now? "I guess if I felt like I made a mistake back at level twenty?"

That left two choices, and both tempted Victor for different reasons. The first one, Titanic Warrior, sounded like it was meant to help him continue kicking ass the way he had been. He'd continue to change to be more like his Quinametzin bloodline, even gaining new class abilities that called forth its benefits.

Right now, whenever he cast Berserk, he gained a massive boost because of his Quinametzin blood. He struggled to imagine what it would be like if more of his abilities had a similar synergy. He felt like this option was the obvious, clear "power-up." He felt like if he wanted the best chance of beating Rellia, it was the choice—who would want to fight a Titanic Warrior?

Each time Victor started to reach for that little selection button, though, he paused and reread the description for Spirit Carver. This one had something to do with his bloodline also, and it seemed like it was talking about waking up more abilities from his bloodline, not necessarily just the giant-sized aspect of his ancestors. What could they be? Something to do with his spirit Core, that was clear. "How did I earn this option? Learning to Spirit Walk and advancing my race?" He wasn't sure it had anything at all to do with Spirit Walk if he were being honest.

As he vacillated, he looked at the other factors. Both classes were epic, so they'd be similar in their difficulty to level and increase his attributes an equivalent amount. He liked that he'd still get some unbound points with the Spirit Carver class, though. "Ahh, fuck! Maybe I should just keep Herald of Carnage. It's not like it hasn't been great so far . . ."

He was purposefully not asking Gorz for advice because the spirit in the amulet had only seemed to muddy the waters in the past. On a whim, he picked up Lifedrinker and held her cool metal to his forehead. “What do you think, chica? Titanic Warrior or Spirit Carver?”

At first, nothing happened, but then the axe started to vibrate, and though Victor didn’t hear any words in his head, he kept seeing the image of a heart beating, blood whooshing through thick, wide arteries with each pump. “What the . . . he opened his eyes, but he could still hear the heart beating, and when he closed them, he saw it again. It took him longer than he would ever admit to realize it was his own heart. Lifedrinker was showing him his heart. Why?

As he sat there, axe to his forehead, contemplating his heart, a soft, sibilant whisper drifted into his mind, “Your heart is strong, Victor. Follow it!” Lifedrinker had spoken, and apparently, that was all she had to say on the matter because nothing more was forthcoming from the recalcitrant blade. Still, she’d given him good advice, as far as Victor was concerned. She was basically telling him to go with his feelings, and for some reason, he wanted to pick Spirit Carver.

Victor tried to examine his feelings, tried to figure out what it was about Spirit Carver that called to him, or maybe it was something about Titanic Warrior that was pushing him away. He thought about that, about how he wanted to see himself, and, though he enjoyed the power that came from his Quinametzin bloodline and his Berserk ability, he didn’t know if he wanted to be defined by those things. The idea of a Spirit Carver seemed more nuanced. What even was a Spirit Carver? Would he be shaping his spirit or the spirits of his enemies? Would he be slicing spirits? It seemed kind of ambiguous, and that mystery was intriguing to him.

“Ahh hell,” he said, stretching and cracking his neck. “Gorz, wake up.”

“I’m here, Victor.”

“I have a new class refinement option. Have you ever heard of a Spirit Carver?”

“Let me see,” Gorz paused for a few seconds and then continued, “No, Victor. I have a record of a class called a Flesh Carver, though. It’s an epic class with several known abilities, one of which is the Flesh Carver’s ability to change his or her physical shape.”

“Oh really? Anything else?”

“Another known ability of the Flesh Carver is the ability to craft simulacrum from specially processed tissue taken from conquered enemies.”

“Pinche fuck! That sounds creepy.”

“Just because the word ‘carver’ is shared between the two classes doesn’t mean they’ll share anything in common. It’s a rather broadly defined term.”

“Gah,” Victor shook his head, wanting to slap himself for asking Gorz. As he’d feared, the spirit had, indeed, muddied the waters. One thing was clear, something was pulling him either away from Titanic Warrior or toward Spirit Carver, and Lifedrinker had encouraged him to go with his heart. He liked

Lifedrinker, and she'd never let him down, so he decided to go for it. Pushing aside his doubts and worries, Victor flipped to the correct menu item in his System UI, and then he selected the "accept" option for Spirit Carver.

Congratulations! You have refined your class: Spirit Carver. Class spell gained: Manifest Spirit - Basic. Class spell gained: Shape Spirit - Basic.

Manifest Spirit - Basic: With a tremendous effort of will, you can split off a shard of your spirit for a short while, allowing it to take form as a construct of Energy. Your spirit shard will retain the driving impetus you impart upon it for the duration of its existence, acting autonomously to fulfill that motivation. Your manifested spirit shard will return to you should it be destroyed or at the end of the spell's duration. Energy cost: 500. Cooldown: Medium.

Shape Spirit - Basic: You are able to impart your will upon your spirit, molding it to take the shape of a totemic beast or object that has special meaning to you. The first time you cast this spell, you will experience a Spirit Walk, during which you will encounter totems and make a selection for your shaping spell. Energy cost: 1000. Cooldown: Long.

"That's pretty fucking badass," Victor said, reading the descriptions for his new spells. He hopped to his feet, excited to figure out his new abilities but unsure where to begin. It seemed like he needed to cast Shape Spirit before he could cast Manifest Spirit. No, that was wrong—it didn't seem that way; it was that way. He knew instinctively that he needed to complete the Shape Spirit spell before he could first manifest his spirit. "Which means I'll need to do a Spirit Walk, and I'll be helpless.

Victor pulled out his watch and looked at the time—three in the morning. He strode to the door of his suite and walked into the hallway, padding through the dim corridor to the station where Binna had been biding her time, waiting for the moment he'd need her. Just as he'd hoped, she was there, leaning back in her chair, a towel rolled up behind her head so she could rest it against the wall with her eyes closed. "Binna," Victor hissed in a hoarse whisper, louder than he meant to.

Her eyes snapped open, and she flailed her arms, nearly falling backward in her chair. As the feet of the chair settled and she straightened up, she said, "Gemstones! I'm sorry I was dozing, Mr. Sandoval! Did you need something?"

"Yes, I need you to fetch Edeya and bring her to my room. Tell her it's very important, but don't let anyone else know, okay?"

"You can count on me, Mr. Sandoval!" Binna said, jumping up and snapping a stiff salute before scurrying away down the hallway. Victor chuckled, then went back to his room to wait for Edeya. It wasn't long before there was a tap at his door, and he opened it to find Edeya, two house guards, and Binna standing in the hallway, bright glow lamps hanging from the guard's necks and all but Binna brandishing weapons.

"Damn, Binna. I said to keep it quiet!"

“She tried! I insisted on bringing my guards—too much talk of sabotage in the hallways,” Edeya said, peering through the doorway as though to see if someone was hiding behind Victor.

“Sabotage? I haven’t heard anything!”

“You’ve been busy. Anyway, is everything all right?”

“Yes, dammit, I just needed your help with something. You guys can head back to your, I dunno, stations,” Victor said to the guards and Binna, then he stood back from the door so that Edeya could come in. She gave her two guards a pointed look, then nodded and stepped inside, closing the door behind her.

“They’re not going anywhere, are they?”

“No. Sorry, but my training is very explicit about situations like this.”

“Damn, Edeya! I just needed someone to watch my back while I cast a spell.”

Victor sighed and moved past Edeya to throw the bolt on his door. “I was half tempted to try it alone, but the thought of me sitting here, a helpless vegetable, kind of creeped me out.”

“Well, look at it this way: now you have me to watch your back, and I have some guards to watch mine. What kind of spell are you going to cast? Why will you become a vegetable?” Edeya loosened the collar of her uniform and produced a spear from some storage device, sheathing her pearl-handled knife.

“It’s a kind of spirit walk. My spirit will be leaving my body for a while, and that means I’ll be a sitting duck. Um, it means I won’t be able to fight anything or even move. I need you to keep my body safe. You good with that, chica?”

“Yes, of course. I’m not promising I won’t draw something on you, you know, as a reminder to stop calling me girl!” She pulled a chair out from the table, turned it toward the center of the room, and continued, “I’ll watch you carefully, don’t worry.” She sat down, her spear planted on the floor before her, pointing up.

“Why the urgency, by the way? I was in the middle of quite a nice dream when your servant started tapping on my door.”

“Well, I just leveled and gained a refinement that might give me an edge in my duel. I don’t want to waste time figuring it out. Speaking of which,” Victor concentrated on his status page and saw that he had ten points to distribute. He stacked them into will, figuring it was more important than ever, what with both his new class skills mentioning it.

With his will up over two hundred thirty, Victor’s maximum Energy level was more than 2400.

While that number seemed high to him, he knew it was far more than it seemed; his regeneration

rate was growing steadily with his will score. These days, when he cast one of his bigger spells, like Berserk or Inspiring Presence, his Energy levels had nearly recovered before their duration ran out.

“What are you doing?” Edeya asked, scowling at him from her impromptu guard post.

“Sorry, I had some attribute points to spend. All right, here goes. Don’t let someone come and slit my throat, Edeya!” Victor sat down on the rug at the center of the room and closed his eyes, taking several deep breaths to steady himself. When he felt calm, and the only sounds in his ears were his own heartbeat and Edeya’s quiet breathing, he instinctively cast Shape Spirit. He felt Energy pour out of his Core, both inspiration and rage-attuned. It flooded his pathways, and then he felt himself lift away from the ground, and when he opened his eyes, he was standing on the Spirit Plane.

Things seemed slightly different than the last time he’d walked on the Spirit Plane. The sky and stars were brighter, but there were trees and undergrowth around him, not just grasslands stretching as far as he could see. The trees were tall and thin, with silvery trunks and great canopies of shimmering silver-purple leaves. The undergrowth took on myriad shapes and twilight colors, from blue with orange highlights to deep purple, darker than the shadows under the leaves. Victor felt his bare toes sink into the rich, soft soil, and when he looked down at himself, he saw that he was naked.

His unclothed state felt perfectly natural for some reason, and he didn’t bother trying to examine that feeling. Instead, he stretched, enjoying the rich Energy in the air and how his body buzzed with potential. Not sure what pulled him, he started walking in a seemingly random direction, moving between the trees and plant life like he belonged there, silent and comfortable. He reached out a hand and drew his fingers along the bole of a mighty tree, smiling at the tingle of electricity that tickled his fingertips.

When he came around the tree and walked into a small clearing, he saw a stump with a silvery axe embedded in the top of it. He smiled at the weapon, no, in this case, a tool. It was familiar and called to him, but he didn’t think it was the right choice for him. He had an axe with a strong spirit; why would he try to shape his own spirit shard into such a thing? He walked by the stump, still smiling at the feelings the axe had evoked but happy to carry on.

Victor walked through the twilight woods for a while, and soon he came to a downward slope, and he heard the babbling of a stream traversing stones and roots. As he stepped out from the tree line and saw the silvery water splashing along its stony bed, his heart felt calmed by the sight and sound of it.

He followed the ribbon of water with his eyes, and then he saw a great, black shape splashing in its shallows. A colossal bear waded in the water, and Victor’s heart started beating faster when he saw its mighty, bulging shoulders and snout snuffling and dipping beneath the surface. He ducked behind a nearby tree and watched the massive beast, awed by how it imposed its physical presence on its surroundings.

Something about the bear called to Victor, but he shook his head. No, he admired the bear and thought it was a remarkable creature, but he didn’t feel drawn to it. He was like that bear, standing

out in his surroundings, an imposing figure, especially when he went berserk, but did that mean he could only identify with a similar totem? Victor shook his head and wandered up the river away from the great beast, listening to the songs of the wind through the trees and the river's counterpoint.

He came to realize he was following a narrow game trail and that it was leading him uphill, away from the river. Victor leaned into the climb, his lungs pumping like bellows, and soon he stepped out of the woods and into a narrow canyon, devoid of trees but with thorny scrubs growing along its sides.

Victor looked up into the endless expanse of stars that shimmered over the Spirit Plane, and his eyes began to mist at the potential that lay up there. He was so small, his struggles such a tiny part of the tapestry—the enormity of it almost overwhelmed him. Sometime later, a distant sound brought him back to himself, and he realized he'd sat down on a smooth boulder.

Victor shook his head and focused on the sound, and a smile spread on his face. Now, these were familiar voices! The yipping cries of coyotes were echoing up the canyon, and Victor stood, stalking down the dry riverbed under the blanket of stars. When he rounded the corner and saw the pack darting all around, some up on the high canyon walls, others down in the sand, and still more playfully nipping and growling as they romped through the scrub, he broke into a laugh of pure joy.

Coyotes had sung him to sleep countless nights at his abuela's house, and Victor knew they were tricksters and scavengers, but he also knew they valued their pack and survived situations that would prove the ruination of greater beasts. They were brave and resourceful, and Victor admired their tenacity.

This was a totem that he could take into his heart. This was a totem he had a connection to. He stared at the romping pack, and one of them turned her silvery muzzle toward him, making eye contact. Victor felt the coyote imprint somewhere on his soul, and then the Spirit Plane faded away, and he opened his eyes to see Edeya pacing back and forth in front of him, her spear held ready.

"Was I out long?" His voice cracked hoarsely.

"Yes!" Edeya whirled around at the sound of his voice. "I was starting to get worried! You were barely breathing and completely ignored me when I tried to wake you! Lam came back, and we have to leave today."

"What? Lam was here? What about Thayla?"

"No, Captain Lam sent word to my quarters, and one of my guards brought the message here. I didn't open the door because I promised I'd keep you safe, and it all seemed suspicious to me! I haven't heard anything about Thayla."

"Well, shit. Thanks. What time is it, anyway?" Victor stood, groaning at how his knees and ankles seemed to be stuck in their bent positions.

"It's after seven. Let's get breakfast and then find out what's going on, hmm?" Edeya moved over to the door and tapped a foot in agitation.

“Alright, chill.” Victor arched his back, stretching out stiff muscles, and then pulled each knee to his chest. “My spell was a success, in case you were wondering.”

“That’s good. Don’t tell me what it did, and that goes for everyone. Rellia is looking for information about your skills, and I’m pretty sure the idiot house guards were telling everyone in town about your fight with Polo Vosh yesterday.”

“Fuck, seriously?” Victor hadn’t even thought about that. Not many people had known about his bloodline’s effect on his raging. He stopped at that thought and laughed, “I don’t think anyone, but you and Polo saw me berserk, right? I mean, the guards didn’t get to the gym until Polo and I were already done, sitting on the floor. What are they telling everyone? That we fought and made a mess?”

“Hopefully,” Edeya said, nodding. “Hopefully, Polo kept quiet, too. I’m sure he did—he’s no idiot.”

They’d been walking while they spoke, Edeya’s two guards following a few paces behind, and they arrived at the kitchens just a few minutes later. While they ate, and Victor impressed the cooks yet again, Edeya sent one of her guards to find Captain Lam. They were just finishing up when he returned, red-faced from the exertion of hurrying, and announced that Lam was waiting for them in the front parlor. Victor didn’t know the difference between the front parlor or any other parlor, and he certainly didn’t know the way, but he just wiped the bacon grease off his face and followed Edeya.

A short while later, they walked into a well-lit room with high windows and several comfortable seating arrangements. Captain Lam was sitting with her legs crossed, reading from a sheaf of papers, and when they walked in, she beckoned them over, gesturing to nearby chairs. “Victor, I hope things have been going okay while I was gone. I spoke with Polo this morning—you impressed him.”

“He’s a pretty cool guy. I learned a lot from him in just a day. Do you think I can practice with him some more?”

“That had been my plan, but the fates conspire against us. No, not the fates—Rellia ap’Yensha. She’s spread some rumors that you’re going to back out of the fight. In fact, word around town is that you’ve already fled the city. Magistrate Thiv-dak has sent his clerk here with soldiers to transport you to his manor. He intends to keep you under lock and key, so you don’t ruin his Harvest Fest gala.”

“So, if I wanted out of this, I’m screwed, huh?”

“At this point, yes. We could have bargained for a reprieve a few days ago, but the magistrate has a lot of political clout invested in this gala now. Rellia’s been leveraging her return from ‘retirement’ as well. A lot of pieces are moving in the shadows, and I’m afraid your fight has become a fulcrum point.”

“It’s fine. I wasn’t going to back out, anyway. Well, where is this asshole? I might as well get going. Oh, hey, what about Thayla? Any word?”

“Thayla has successfully retrieved her daughter and is enroute. I’ll see that she knows where you’re going. Edeya and some of my house guards will go with you today.”

“I will?” Edeya raised an eyebrow, and when Victor looked at her, she smiled and said, “Of course, I will. You think we’d let you go sit in some cell without a friendly face nearby?”

Lam chuckled, then looked around the parlor at the nearby guards and said, “Leave the room and close the doors.” To their credit, the guards moved quickly when Lam spoke, vacating the room and closing the heavy doors behind them. “Did you manage to reach level thirty, Victor?” Lam asked as soon as they were alone.

“Yes. Last night,” Victor replied, not elaborating.

“Learn anything new? Anything that might help you surprise Rellia?”

“Yeah,” Victor paused and narrowed his eyes. “Are you trying to decide if you should bet on me or not?”

“I’ve already ‘bet’ quite a lot on you, Victor. I’m trying to decide how thorough my contingencies need to be.”

“Well, listen, Captain: I know I’m way under this bruja’s level, but I’m not going to go down easy. My skills are like a fucking cheat mode in this world, and anyone who thinks I’m going out without a big pinche mess, better think again.” Victor squeezed his two hands into fists, so tight that his knuckles popped. “I’ll do my best, all right?”