

Victor BK3: Ch11

Book 3: Chapter 11: Monster or Hero

Victor sat on a flat, stone block in the middle of the ruined courtyard, watching the dark clouds as they alternately obscured and revealed the enormous ringed moon and her little round sister. Outwardly, he looked relaxed and vulnerable, but he was quite alert. He'd boosted his agility with Sovereign Will and had Inspiring Presence primed in his pathways, and, though his body seemed reclined, leaning back, bracing on his left hand, his right hand rested on Lifedrinker's haft, and he held his core tense, ready to spring.

Tellen had tried to talk him out of his plan, tried to get him to hunker down for the night and then flee with Chandri, making haste on Thistle's swift hooves. The other hunters, those who could rouse themselves to consciousness, had remained silent, though, and Victor could see the desperate hope in their eyes. Chandri had only wished him luck on his hunt, and it had been her confidence and, strangely, pride in him that had really solidified Victor's determination to stand watch alone—to face the demon that had so tormented Tellen and his hunters.

Sitting in the dark, waiting for the monster to come, Victor wondered at the lack of fear in his chest. He felt ready, almost pumped, as he would be before a big match. He had some nervous energy that was difficult to mask, but he didn't feel fear or trepidation. He felt damn good, in fact, like he was doing something he was meant for.

The way Victor saw it, if he was growing into some kind of killing machine, a monster of sorts, then wasn't it right and good that he spent his efforts fighting other monsters? Shouldn't he defend the people he cared about? It was very fucking easy to put himself out in this dark courtyard, waiting for a bloody fight to the death, when he imagined Tellen or Chandri getting cut to pieces like the hunters this "demon" had already slain.

Every now and then, if he let it, his mind would start to wonder at the surreal nature of his situation. Just a week ago, he'd been sitting in a massive bathtub, enjoying the fancy soaps that Captain Lam had provided. Now he was dirty from days of travel, sitting on a hard stone in the moonlight, waiting for this world's version of Grendel.

Was part of the reason he was out here waiting because he'd rather think of himself as someone like Beowulf than a monster like Grendel? Beowulf had been a badass, that was sure, and he didn't take any shit, but he also was a hero—a man who fought the monsters weaker men couldn't face.

Victor momentarily recalled his crisis of conscience back when he and Thayla had killed the soldiers sent by ap'Horrin. He remembered how Lifedrinker had spoken to him, brought him back to himself, and helped him see that he wasn't wholly to blame. He was a wolf, and those that hunt wolves need to fear the fang. "Isn't that what you said, chica?" He gently caressed the warm wood of the axe haft with his thumb, and he was sure she vibrated gently in response.

A loose bit of stone fell from the high crumbling walls, and Victor ceased his introspection to listen and feel, trying to surmise if it had been the wind or gravity finally winning an ages-long battle or if something had disturbed the stone. Nothing else stirred, and his gut told him it wasn't anything to worry about. Victor had begun to trust his gut more and more, and he wondered if it was a product of his attributes, Class, or even his bloodline—whatever it was, he felt more connected to his instincts.

Instincts—could they be responsible for his quick acceptance of Oynalla’s quest? He hadn’t argued, hadn’t sought different solutions, hadn’t expressed any concern for his or Chandri’s well-being. He’d simply accepted her vision at face value and gone along. He didn’t feel used, though. He’d wanted to go. His gut had said, “Let’s hurry and help Tellen as fast as fucking possible.” Should he feel used if his own wishes coincided with what other people wanted him to do? “I don’t think so,” he said, “especially if I like those people.”

He wasn’t worried about being quiet and didn’t want to seem like he was waiting for a fight, so he figured talking to himself was A-OK. His mind drifted back to when he’d brought Thistle into the hall with the hunters and begun to head back out. He remembered how Tellen had gripped his wrist and thanked him, having given up on talking Victor out of his “mad” plan. He remembered how Tellen had walked away, leaving him with Chandri for a moment, and then he remembered her hug and how it had been different from any hug he’d ever gotten from Thayla.

She’d folded into him, her arms under his, and her fingers had gently caressed his back when she’d said, speaking into his chest, “I can feel your heart; it thumps like a mighty drum. Ancestors pity the creature that tries to take you tonight, Victor. When you bring its head back to us, I’ll help you mark this hunt with ink.” Though he’d stood several paces away, Victor had seen Tellen’s look of concern—the way he shook his head slightly in dismay, and he knew that Chandri was alone in her confidence. She’d never seen the “demon,” after all.

Another clatter of stones, this one from the wall near the broken gateway, brought Victor back to the present. His thoughts of Chandri’s gentle touch and how her body felt so warm as it pressed against his snapped away as though someone had thrown iced water over his head. He feigned a wide yawn, making noise to signal his boredom like he used to do when his abuela made him play old board games. Using the act of stretching as cover, he took a glance around the courtyard, and his fist tightened on Lifedrinker’s haft when he saw a dark shadow slipping purposefully through the gap in the walls.

Victor braced himself, every muscle primed to move, and waited, trying to stay still and look like a victim. “C’mon, you pinche monstruo feo!” he hissed under his breath. Suddenly the hairs on the back of his neck stood up, and he knew it was time to move. He erupted into motion, veritably flying into the air, simultaneously casting Inspiring Presence and whipping Lifedrinker in a flat arc at the space behind the stone on which he’d been reclining.

As the spell took effect, the shadows fell away from the courtyard, and the moons’ light, even obscured by the clouds, seemed more luminescent and sanguine. As Lifedrinker’s razor-sharp, gleaming edge ripped through the air, Victor’s teeth bared in a feral grin of amusement when he saw she was cutting straight for the shoulder of his quarry. “Gotcha, asshole!”

The “demon” was certainly deserving of the moniker the hunters had given it. Victor’s Grendel was bipedal and tall, with long, lanky limbs covered in knobby, gray flesh. The creature’s head was hairless and adorned with a ring of short black horns that almost looked like a crown. Of its face, Victor only had time to notice angular, gleaming orange eyes and wicked, sharp teeth in jaws wide open, ready to bite. As his axe crunched into the monster’s shoulder, and Victor felt the reverberation all the way up to his elbows, like he’d struck a steel beam, he noticed that the “monster” was wearing a sleek, black jumper with a broad, silvery belt.

“This prey has a tooth, hmm?” it hissed as Lifedrinker rebounded, and Victor sidestepped, moving like an enormous ballet dancer, hunched and ready. He held his center of gravity low and trained his eyes on the creature’s waist. He brought Lifedrinker into a two-handed grip and cast Channel Spirit, flooding her with rage-attuned Energy, granting her a red, furious nimbus.

The monster’s voice reminded Victor of a hacksaw cutting tin, and as he circled it, he saw that its long fingers weren’t as long as he thought—four-inch claws tipped the six digits on each of its wide, splayed hands. They gleamed in the moonlight, and Victor knew they weren’t natural but weapons this being had grafted to itself.

“You can speak, fucker?” he growled, ready for the deadly speed this thing had shown the hunters. They’d barely been able to describe the monster as bipedal with razor-sharp claws, unable to get a good look at it as it ripped through them, blending with the shadows.

“The simple creature wonders if I can speak?” A low chuckle followed the grating words, and then it was gone, disappearing from Victor’s sight, and a bloom of pain erupted on his thigh. Five long, deep gashes had opened on his right thigh as if by magic. He hadn’t even seen the creature’s attack. The low, grating chuckle continued, this time from behind him, and Victor whirled to face his attacker. His leg moved just fine, and he had a disturbing thought as blood soaked his pants and ran into his boot: had this “demon” avoided crippling him to draw out his suffering?

The hunters had told him how fast the monster was. They’d told him how they couldn’t strike it, let alone avoid its claws, but something had stood out to Victor when they’d described their encounters. Each time it came around to kill or maim, it was a flurry—a lightning attack of cuts and stabs that seemed to come from nowhere. The creature would laugh and roar, and in a matter of seconds, it was gone, leaving them bleeding and despairing.

When Victor heard their accounts, he’d had a suspicion, one born of experience fighting fast people. What if the “demon” couldn’t maintain such speed? What if he could outlast it? If there was anything he was good at, it was soaking up damage. Realizing he was no match for the monster’s quickness, even boosting his agility, Victor redirected his Sovereign Will to his vitality. He smiled as the attribute jumped to nearly two hundred, and the pain in his leg immediately started to dull.

“What’s your deal?” he asked the creature, watching as it circled him. One of its long arms dragged the razored claws along the stone in a show of red sparks. He hoped to stall the next attack, giving his vitality a chance to close up his leg wound. He knew he could hit the monster, having done so once, but it would take some luck, and he’d need to catch it off guard.

“My deal? I hunt. I sharpen my skills. Why do you kill?” Its chuckle echoed in the darkness as it once again disappeared from Victor’s view, and, as he braced

himself for another strike, Victor cast Dauntless Radiance, sending a surge of courage-attuned Energy into the air around him, and just as the rings of his armor on his left shoulder clanged and burst apart, a bright, golden light filled the air. Victor stumbled forward at the impact, and he knew the claws had cut more than his armor when his left arm protested and wouldn't properly move when he tried to whip Lifedrinker around in another cutting arc.

Still, the red-gold glow of his spell filled him with confidence, and he shrugged off the injury, knowing his body could take it. As he circled, scanning for any sign of his elusive enemy, he said, "I can tell you I don't hunt down people weaker than I am. I don't torment people and butcher them as they cower. How does that sharpen your skills? Sounds like a fucking puta move to me!"

"Interesting Energy, prey," the grating voice echoed out of the shadows, seeming to come from all the corners of the courtyard at once. "You make my cultivation difficult. Shall I just finish you and feed upon those cowering within that ruin?"

"You have a name, fucker?" The words of the creature had sparked some understanding in Victor. None of the hunters had mentioned it "feeding" on them. If Victor's courage-attuned Energy made its "feeding" difficult, perhaps it hungered for their fear or despair, or something else the courage nullified.

"You wish to know who slew you? Jikrak is my name, and you shouldn't despair at a death by my hand—one day, this weakling world will call me lord. You are but one of my early victims." Victor finally laid eyes on him as he spoke, standing just outside the light of his spell, lurking in the darker shadows near the gateway. Victor smiled grimly and primed his next spell, staring at the dark figure, focusing on the glint of his shimmering, metallic belt—the only bright spot in the shadows.

"Jikrak, huh? So you aren't from this world? Got chased out by stronger guys?" Victor taunted, switching his vitality boost to agility and loosening his grip on Lifedrinker, though he still held her in front of himself.

"Yes, prey, I think I'll end you quickly. You're no good to feast upon," Jikrak said sharply, his grinding, sharp voice ripping through the night. Victor stared at that glinting metallic belt, and as soon as he saw it wink out of existence, he whirled, casting Project Spirit, launching a wave of sickly, yellow-black, twisted inspiration-attuned Energy into the darkness. Each time Jikrak had struck him, it had been from his flank, and Victor knew the cone of his Project Spirit was wide enough to catch him, especially as he backpedaled, widening its arc of influence.

The unusual spell knocked Jikrak off-guard, pulling him out of whatever ability allowed him to move so fast. His falter was brief but long enough for Victor to release Lifedrinker and reach out to grab the wrist attached to the long claws that ripped into his armored belly. As the claws punched home, barely slowed by his armor, Victor grasped the monster's knobby, rough appendage with both hands and bore down with all his might, squeezing as if his life depended on it. It did, after all.

Jikrak fought back against the disorienting effect of Victor's projection, and in just seconds, Victor felt the monster's will assert itself. As Victor wrestled with the creature's surprisingly prodigious strength, barely able to hold onto the wrist with both hands, Jikrak started to slash at him with the other hand. He ripped long deep ribbons in Victor's arm and tore long grooves in his side, sending chunks of black enamel and shattered metal rings flying with each terrible gash. As blood soaked Victor's arm and hands, he felt the monster begin to slip free.

"Fuck this!" Victor growled in furious agony. Forgetting about his plan to try to outlast the creature's speed, he cast Berserk. Victor had been waiting, saving his ace for when he had the monster on the ropes, or at least had ahold of it. He'd wanted to be sure he didn't cast the spell too early and burn up all his rage-attuned Energy while the monster avoided contact with him.

So many plans had been in his mind—how he might use his coyotes to surround the creature or chase it down if he caused it to flee, how he would try to win this fight without berserk entirely, winning with a clever plan and raw skill. Those thoughts went out of his mind, though, as he felt Jikrak start to slip out of his grip.

When the spell triggered, and rage started to flood out of his Core and into his pathways, Victor urged it out, pushing it with his will. When the red fury washed over his vision and the pain of his ribboned flesh faded to just an itch, he laughed and bore down on the monster's wrist. His fingers, larger and longer and horribly strong, squeezed that thin gray appendage until he felt the satisfying crunch of bones faltering and shattering under the pressure.

As he grew and healed, and his mad laughter turned into a roar that echoed off the walls, shaking rubble loose all around them, Jikrak's confident slashing attacks turned to panicked thrashing. Victor's voice, deep, loud, and inexorable like waves grinding against the shore, rumbled from his chest as he said, "Am I prey now, manling? What fool are you to challenge the Quinametzin?" His eyes were red with fury, and he hunched over the thrashing panicked Jikrak, his shoulders and neck hulking and bunched with thick cables of muscle.

Jikrak's ineffectual stabs and clawing cuts were nothing more than an annoyance as he continued to stab and hack at Victor's shoulder. Irritated that the little man hadn't answered, Victor released Jikrak's shattered wrist with one hand and snatched the attacking arm by the biceps, lifting Jikrak into the air, so he was forced to look him in the face. "Am I prey?" he roared again, just an inch from the orange, predator eyes of the "demon."

Jikrak didn't answer, but Victor saw his eyes gloss over as he tried to concentrate, and then the flesh under his mighty fingers started to turn slippery, and it felt like Jikrak was falling through his grip, as though he were turning to air. A glint of triumph appeared in his enemy's eyes.

When he felt his insolent attacker start to slip away, the rage in Victor's mind surged to new heights, and he lost, momentarily, his cognizance. In a blind madness, he lifted Jikrak above his head and smashed him to the stone ground with enough force to liquefy an ordinary creature. Jikrak had been in the midst of some sort of spell, making himself incorporeal, and when Victor madly threw him down, his semi-solid body sank into the stone, leaving him half in and half out of the flagstones.

The impact had ruined Jikrak's concentration, spoiling his spell, and as the horror of his demise registered, Jikrak's orange eyes bulged out, and he opened his mouth, but only blood cascaded

forth, no words. Victor roared in mad triumph and grabbed onto Jikrak's head, pulling with all his might and ripping it away from his stuck-fast body. He threw it against the wall with a wet splatter, dislodging more rubble, then he looked up at the night sky and screamed his victory to the stars.

Victor dimly remembered leaping up the jumbled stones to the top of the ruined wall of the keep and pacing over the crumbled battlements roaring and howling at the moons, brandishing Lifedrinker. His shouts were inarticulate, but they were loud and full of challenge, and it became clear to him later, when he thought of that night, that the Quinametzin in him had been challenging anything within earshot to come to try him, daring any creature, be it man or monster, to set foot in his domain.

He opened his eyes to warm sunlight and found himself still atop the wall, nestled between two fallen crenellations. Even in his disorientation, Victor had a feeling of swelling pride, left over from his gigantic alter-ego, no doubt, and he grinned as he sat up. He looked at Lifedrinker, present, as usual, in one of his hands, and memories of his battle came rushing back. "Sorry, chica. I'll make sure you get more action in the next fight."

He saw that a System message was blinking in his peripheral vision, and he pulled it into view:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 32 Spirit Carver and gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 16 attribute points to allocate.

"Goddamn, I didn't snap out of it when I got the Energy from killing that fucker?" Victor shook his head, amazed at how long he'd stayed enraged and how much of it was a blur. It was almost like his rages from the old days, but not entirely. He remembered speaking while Berserk and how furious he'd felt when that creepy asshole started to slip away. No, he'd been in control for most of it—it had just lasted a lot longer. "Why do I have sixteen points . . ."

Victor slapped himself on the head. He hadn't spent any points when he'd last leveled. He'd hardly looked at his status sheet, either. Had he looked at it at all? The last time he could remember was before he fought Rellia—he wondered if he'd subconsciously avoided it for some reason. Before he could find a reason to put it off again, he pulled up his mental and physical attributes:

Core:

Spirit Class - Base 7

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

2539/2539

Strength:

135

Vitality:

110

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:

253

Points Available:

16

Victor almost dumped his sixteen points into agility right then, remembering how fast Jikrak had been, he stopped, though, another thought occurring to him. Jikrak might have been fast like that because of magic. He might have even been teleporting or something. No matter Victor's agility, he wouldn't be able to move faster than that. If that were the case, he should maybe put his points into will, as he had been doing, or into intelligence. "No wonder I didn't do anything yet," he muttered.

As he wished for some good advice or a training manual of some sort, he thought of Gorz and shook his head. Gorz usually left him more frustrated than before he'd asked for help—he wanted guidance, not impartial information. Then he thought of Oynalla and smiled; if anyone might tell him what to do, the old woman was a good candidate.

"I'll be going back there now, anyway," he said, and then he heard, off in the distance, a high-pitched, scratchy voice calling out his name. "What the fuck?" He stood and looked out over the morning landscape. The shelf the old keep was built on lay before him, and, standing at the head of the trail leading down to the canyon floor, Chandri stood. She cupped her hands to her mouth and, again, called his name.

"Victor!" Her voice echoed down into the canyon. Before he could answer, Victor heard a noise behind him, and he turned to see two hunters poking around in the rubble of the courtyard, turning over stones as though they might find him buried.

"Hey!" he yelled. "I'm up here!" He waved an arm at Chandri when she whirled around.

"Victor!" she shrieked in glee, charging back toward the crumbled gatehouse. Victor laughed and started clambering down from the wall, using the broken stones and loose mortar for hand and foot holds. When he reached the bottom,

Chandri was waiting, and the hunters had gathered as well, with Tellen at their center. Chandri smashed into him as soon as he'd put both feet on the ground and squeezed him around the waist. He hugged her back, his grin spreading from ear to ear.

"Hey, you guys act like I was missing or something! I was just taking a little snooze up there." Chandri pulled back and laughed, turning to her father with a wild grin of her own.

"I told you, Tellen!" She caught herself using his name and followed up with, "I knew he could win, father!" The hunters didn't wait for Tellen's response but crowded forward to clap Victor on the shoulders and back. Victor's shredded ringmail vest jangled and clinked, and the hunter's faces lit up with smiles, the dark clouds behind their eyes all but gone—their death sentence had been lifted, and the gloom of their perceived curse was banished with the morning sun.

"While we listened to your battle, we feared you were dead. We thought more than one monster came to the fray because long into the night, a great beast howled and roared," Tellen said, eyeing Victor. "Was it not allied with the demon?"

"Uh, no. It definitely wasn't allied with the demon," Victor sighed, shaking his head. "The other monster was me. When I go berserk, sometimes I let myself go too far."

Chandri stepped closer and grabbed his forearm with both her hands, looking at his face. "You're no monster, Victor."

"Thanks, Chandri," Victor mustered a smile and nodded.

"We found the creature's head against the wall, Victor, and his remnants are here, mixed with the stones. I don't know how you did it, but thank you. By rights, you should examine this corpse for treasure!" Tellen said, and as he backed up, pointing to the bloody mess of Jikrak's body, he continued, "I owe you my life, but more importantly, these others are safe thanks to you. I hope you'll return to the camp for a while, Victor. I'd like to find a way to reward you."

"I'll go to your camp, Tellen, of course. I want to spend some time learning from Oynalla. You don't owe me anything, though. If I didn't help my friends when I could, then what kind of asshole would I be?" Victor looked down at Chandri and winked, then moved through the small crowd to look down at Jikrak's body.

It was mostly intact, and Victor wasn't surprised, judging by how tough the bastard had been. His flesh had even rebuffed Lifedrinker, after all, though he hadn't yet charged her with Energy. It said a lot about the strength of his Titanic Rage ability that he was able to crush the creature's bones and pull his head off, he supposed. "Huh, I guess his strong flesh wasn't a match for more than five hundred strength," he said, kneeling to examine the corpse.

He heard whispered conversations among the hunters as he started to try to shift the body. It wouldn't move much, and he saw that the left arm and both feet were fully embedded in the stones of the courtyard, so he reached over and picked up the other arm, stiff now in death, and examined the fingers. "One ring," he said. He pulled off the solid black band, careful not to slice himself on the long, metallic claws protruding from the gray, knobby fingers. He tucked it into a pocket, then examined the rest of the exposed body.

"That weird-ass black jumper isn't my style, but that belt looks interesting."

"What about his finger claws?" Tellen asked.

"I don't want those fucking things. You guys can cut them off if you want," Victor said as he tugged at the belt, unbuckling the silvery, metallic strap and lifting it up to inspect. It was crafted from some sort of metallic thread and felt heavy and dense. Energy emanated from it in palpable waves. Victor was about to trickle some Energy into it to see what it might do, but he stopped, looking around at Chandri and the four hunters leaning on each other for support with weary lines around their eyes, despite their joy. They'd come out at dawn to hunt for him, and he was busy going through his loot.

"Hey, why don't we pile some rocks on top of this asshole and then go make some breakfast? I'm starving, and you all look like you haven't eaten anything good in a month. I have some delicious shit in my storage ring."

Chandri laughed at his words and said, "Yes! And I'll help you with your ink-trophy!"

Tellen must have seen the disturbed look on his face because he also laughed and said, "It won't hurt much, Victor. Chandri's not gentle, but she's quick." He clapped Victor on the back and added, "Could you please cut those fingers off with your axe, though? I'd like to make trophies of those blades. Only six of my band survived this hunt, and I think it's fate that this demon had six fingers."

"Only six?" Victor glanced back toward the barricaded hall and realized Tellen had lost more hunters to their injuries than he'd thought. "All right, this skin is tough, but I should be able to get through it. Someone put a board under that hand and pull those fingers out straight."