

Victor BK3: Ch14

Book 3: Chapter 14: Spirit Quest

Victor rolled over on his blanket and groaned. He wanted very badly to reach into his ring and pull out a seasoned bowl of rice and chopped meat. “And a whole keg of frosty ale,” he muttered, clenching his fists. Truthfully, he’d stopped feeling “hungry” by the fourth day or so of his fast. He knew his body wanted the nutrients and that he’d make good use of them, but he wasn’t hurting for food. No, the hard part was not drinking anything.

It was his thirteenth day, though, and Victor wouldn’t give up now. Three days ago, Oynalla had instructed him to camp out on the plains, specifically there, half a day’s hike from the clan’s winter encampment, insisting that isolation was part of the process. More than that, she’d said that this was a place of power, a site of great battles and hunts, and she’d cautioned him not to sleep but to sit on his blanket and spend his time contemplating the world, the universe, and himself.

Oynalla had said that cultivating his Energies was a good use of his time, so Victor had spent much of his time doing so. He knew he was on the verge of the “improved” tier—he could feel the potential brimming in his Core, the Energies within pushing against their boundaries like floodwaters cracking a concrete dam.

The days had begun to bleed into each other, and, in all honesty, Victor was only about eighty percent sure that he’d been alone for four days. It could have been three or five, in which case, he was done with his fast and should start the next phase of his spirit quest. He looked at the clay bowl and little clay jars filled with Oynalla’s special incense and wondered if he should start burning it. “Wait . . .” his fuzzy, buzzing mind thought back to what Oynalla had said. “She’d send me a message? She’d come speak to me? I was supposed to wait for the moons . . .”

Victor sighed and flopped backward onto his blanket, his head spinning and little stars bursting in his vision. He knew that he’d probably black out if he stood up suddenly. “What the fuck am I supposed to do? I can’t remember shit!” he yelled up at the pale blue sky and the steel gray clouds drifting through it. There had definitely been something about the moons and waiting for his fifth day. “Or night. It must be night if I’m supposed to wait for the moons.”

His eyes started to grow heavy as his body felt the pull of the planet’s gravity and the warm embrace of his blanket. Groaning again, Victor forced himself to sit up and resolved to be patient. Time seemed to move the fastest when he cultivated, so he decided to work on his Core. In an effort to make the time pass more quickly and to keep things interesting, he began to work on a new rage construct. “Let’s see,” he said, talking to the tall grass that swayed with the cool, northern breeze. “Something from my old life or something from this world?”

Before he could answer himself, a suitable memory popped into his mind. He remembered how he’d found Gorz and the magic ring when he’d been new to Lam’s squad of delvers. Victor reached up to touch Gorz and felt his bare chest. Oynalla had made him give the amulet to her for safekeeping, not wanting him to “ruin his contemplation” by speaking to the conscious artifact. His mind drifted back to the time when he’d felt like he was figuring things out, making some progress, and then he’d foolishly isolated himself where some thugs could find him.

Victor tried to focus on those thugs, tried to remember the names he’d learned, but he couldn’t. His mind kept racing forward to the time after the encounter and how he’d felt when he woke up. He

thought about how angry and frustrated he'd been, partially at the guys who'd robbed and tried to kill him but mostly at himself.

He just kept screwing up—at the time, that was all he could think. Looking back, though, with the weight of the memories he'd built since then, Victor was willing to give himself a bit more grace. He'd been new to Fanwath, bullied, tortured, beaten, and forced to fight and kill over and over. Was it any wonder he hadn't made perfect decisions?

"This isn't helping," Victor chided himself. He was supposed to focus on the rage, focus on its source, and take that way from the memory, purifying it and turning it into a suitable construct for his cultivation. "All right, no self-therapy right now. Think about the rage."

Victor allowed himself to sink into the memory, allowed himself to feel that frustration and anger again, and when he had the feeling right, he zeroed in on it, examined it, tasted it, and savored it. He felt the heat start to build in his pathways, and a savage grin spread on his face as he continued to focus on the feeling, stacking it, compounding it, and slowly building the construct of pure rage that he could use over and over again to cultivate that Energy.

Victor lost himself in his hunt for rage-attuned Energy, and when he finally pushed the surging flood of scorching red Energy back into his Core, he opened his eyes to twilight. "One more night." His mind felt clearer, and he knew he needed to make it through the night and one more day before he was supposed to burn Oynalla's incense. It seemed unfathomable that he hadn't had a drop of liquid in thirteen days and had been awake for four.

Everything seemed surreal, even his thoughts, and when he looked out over the grass and saw glimmering translucent animals grazing, running, even flying in the purple twilight sky, he wasn't surprised. "Hello, spirits," he said. He watched two glimmering, long-tailed birds swoop and dive, seeming to perform an elaborate dance in the air. He realized he was smiling when his cheeks began to ache, and he closed his eyes, savoring the buzzing high he felt. "Well, how about a new inspiration construct?" he asked himself, deciding he needed to do something before he slipped into a warm, comfortable slumber.

Once again, Victor focused on his time on Fanwath, and when he thought about inspiration, his mind drifted to the time when Polo Vosh was pushing him to improve his axe skill. He remembered how Polo's movements had seemed like magic, how he'd just barely twitch his huge, furry body to avoid a tremendous, arcing cleave from Victor. He thought about how Polo had been able to make it feel like he was getting close, make it feel like there was a chance he might hit him. Polo was a great axe fighter and an even greater instructor, and Victor felt there was much about him to be inspired by.

As always, Victor's time building and cultivating his new inspiration construct was easier than when he worked on his rage. He gained rage Energy more quickly, thanks to his affinity, but the process was painful and exhausting, whereas focusing on his inspiration construct was almost like meditation—it felt renewing and left his mind clear and focused.

When Victor's pathways were full of bursting with inspiration Energy, he gathered it up and pulled it into his Core, and before he'd pulled half of it in, he felt the dam start to break—his Core was on the verge of advancing. Straining, sweat beading on his forehead, Victor pulled and pushed with his will, forcing the Energy into his Core.

When it happened, it wasn't the painful explosion that he'd subconsciously feared. It was more like wearing a belt two notches too small and then quickly loosening it. His Core pulsed and stretched, flaring brightly, and then the twin suns of his Energy attunements settled into their new, larger, improved orbs, and Victor knew that they had the density required to grow a hundred-fold beyond what they were now. His cultivation to an Advanced Core would be a long journey.

Just to confirm what he already knew, he looked at the section of his status page that described his Core and Energy:

Core:

Spirit Class - Improved 1

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

2839/2839

Victor opened his eyes, pleased with himself, and saw that the sun was hanging high above his head. He'd spent the entire night and morning working through that inspiration construct. "Fucking hell," he said, grinning, though it hurt his dry lips. His tongue felt thick and swollen in his mouth, and he realized his Energy-rich body was finally starting to feel the effects of his deprivations.

Though his body might be struggling, Victor's mind was clear. Spending eighteen hours building his inspiration Energy had done wonders for his mental focus. He looked around the plain, at the swaying grass, at the colorful bugs crawling on the stems and the flying insects that buzzed or glided around, and he breathed deeply of the cool breeze. There was a hint of something colder in the air, and he knew winter was truly upon them. He supposed he was lucky Oynalla hadn't made him wait for a snowstorm to sit out in the elements.

Victor meditated and cultivated for the rest of the day. Time moved strangely now that he was truly at the end of his wakeful vigil—sometimes the sun refused to move in the sky, and sometimes he'd close his eyes to gaze upon his Core, opening them to see the sun had dipped markedly toward the horizon.

When it finally sank below the curve of the grasslands and the sisters' light fell upon him, Victor suddenly remembered, with perfect clarity, Oynalla's instructions. It was almost like he heard her voice speaking into his ear, "On the evening of your fifth day, carefully mix the two powders I've given you. Ignite them with a touch of your Energy. When you've breathed deeply of their smoke, then you should quickly cast Spirit Walk."

Victor remembered asking her about the risk of performing a Spirit Walk while alone, and she'd laughed, saying the spirits in this place were strong, and few things would dare their ire by interfering. Then she'd cackled and said, "Some risk is part of the process. What good is a quest with no danger?"

"Fair enough," he muttered, his lips barely moving and his voice a hoarse whisper. He pulled the ceramic bowl closer and pulled the cork from the first little

jar. The pink powder within reminded his nose of a spice he might smell in his abuela's kitchen. If someone asked him which spice, he'd struggle to put a finger on it, but that didn't matter, he reckoned, pouring the jar into the bowl. The second jar contained a brown powder with larger granules, and when he mixed it into the bowl, the smell that arose was something like ashes and cedar, and it tickled the back of his throat, threatening to pull forth a sneeze.

"Let's get things moving," Victor said, putting a finger into the mixture and pushing out a stream of rage-attuned Energy. He wasn't sure why he chose rage, perhaps because he was most familiar with it; perhaps he'd just randomly selected it. In any case, the hot, red Energy surged through his pathway into the powder, and suddenly, it was flaring with red flames, reminding Victor of a road flare his abuelo had sparked to life when his old truck had broken down.

Thick, colorful smoke rose from the flaring bowl, and worried that he'd miss his chance, Victor quickly leaned over it and breathed deeply. His vision instantly went dark, and he swore he saw fireworks exploding in the blackness. His mind started to slip away from the present, and Victor, clinging to his wits with a surge of will, immediately cast Spirit Walk.

As always, his surroundings changed, but things were very different this time. He stood on the Spirit Plane, that much was sure, but he was surrounded by a host of spirits. They'd made a circle around him, and though they didn't crowd close, Victor felt rather uneasy. Some of the spirits flared brightly with Energy, their auras overshadowing the dimmer spirits around them.

The spirits weren't all people. Some were animals—creatures like bears, antlered deer-like beasts, a huge boar, and myriad smaller things that looked like rodents or rabbits. Still, most of the spirits looked like Shadeni, with a few Ardeni and even a Cadwalli that sat nearby, smoking an ethereal pipe. Victor looked around the circle of spirits and said, "Hello."

"Warrior." Victor was surprised that it wasn't one of the Shadeni spirits that spoke to him but the massive boar, its tusks bobbing up and down as its lower jaw moved to accommodate the deep, rumbling voice coming from its chest.

"I've been called that, yes. My name is Victor." For the first time, Victor realized he was holding Lifedrinker. She was limned with a red glow, and he wondered when he'd decided to channel Energy into her. He slipped her haft into the loop at his belt and carefully held his hands at his sides, empty.

"You seek a quest?" the rumbling voice of the boar asked.

"I do."

"Why would those such as we aid an outsider? A mad berserker?" This time one of the Shadeni spoke, and Victor had to squint against the flare of his aura. The ghostly figure had long braids dressed with polished bones and teeth, and his ribbed, bone vest hung down over a belt sporting two ivory-hafted hatchets.

“I’m not mad, friend,” Victor said, carefully choosing the word “friend.” He’d almost said, “dude,” and admired his quick mental edit. “I’m a friend to the clan that hunts these lands. Tellen and Oynalla consider me family, and I’m not a stranger to the Spirit Plane. I seek to better myself so that I might aid my friends and continue my battles against evil.” He’d have liked to take credit for that answer, but Oynalla had rehearsed with him the types of things he should say to the spirits. His words were true, though, and he didn’t feel dishonest, simply grateful that he’d had a friend help him polish up his words.

“This one may be full to bursting with rage, but that’s only half his story,” a great bear, his fur dark but speckled with silvery hairs, lying with his chin on his paws, rumbled. He sounded similar to the boar, but the power that accompanied the rumble of his voice was undeniable—here was a creature that was strong and wise, someone to listen to and give deference. Victor wasn’t alone in that understanding. The spirits near the bear turned to him and backed away a step. “Well, Warrior, show us your other side; call forth your companions.”

Victor knew what the bear meant, and he immediately cast Manifest Spirit, fueling the spell with inspiration-attuned Energy. Silver-white forms shimmered into existence around him, his pack forming a loose circle within the greater circle of other spirits. They sat and regarded the host with that discerning, intelligent gaze that canines sometimes affected.

“Good,” the bear rumbled. “This one is strong with spirit, balanced and rich. Who among you can scoff at rage? Who among you wouldn’t howl at inspiration? His spirit is thoroughly cleansed and plain to see! I can read the deeds of this warrior writ large on his soul. Can any of you deny that he’s brought evil low? That he’s tasted the love and gratitude of many? I will grant you a quest, warrior. Will any others?” The bear still hadn’t lifted his head from his paws, lying on his stomach the entire time he spoke, but his voice rumbled and echoed over the plains, and Victor felt himself straightening with pride as the great spirit spoke about him.

“I have a quest for this warrior,” another Shadeni spirit spoke up, a woman sitting with crossed legs, a long, glimmering knife in one hand.

“I will offer this warrior a quest,” said the boar, digging at the ground and nodding his ponderous head.

“We have a quest for the warrior,” said a small rabbit-like animal, and Victor saw that it had several more of its kind clustered close behind it.

After several moments of silence, the bear’s voice rumbled again, “Good. I will offer guidance toward a new affinity, warrior. What rewards will you others offer?”

“I can tell the warrior where my family hid an artifact,” said the Shadeni woman.

“I will teach the warrior how to charge like I did when I lived!” the boar growled, digging his hooves into the soil once again.

“We will teach the warrior a new way to manifest his spirit,” the little rabbit creature said, its voice squeaking almost comically.

“You’ve heard the offers, warrior. Make a choice—which of us will you aid?”

Victor didn’t hesitate; he looked at the enormous bear and said, “I will aid you, Great One.”

“It is good,” the bear rumbled. “Leave me to speak with this warrior now. Go back to your business, spirits of the plain.” There were some grumbles and sighs, but the gathered spirits began to disperse, walking away into the grass and fading into the misty twilight, even as Victor tried to keep them focused in his view. “Are you sure you want me to uncover another spirit affinity, Warrior? You’ll need to work that much harder to build the strength of the ones you have.”

“I’m sure, Great One, though only if you think it worthwhile. Oynalla wasn’t sure I had a strong connection to another attunement.” Victor watched the bear’s head, wondering if he’d ever move, and then he realized he was presuming a lot by calling him a bear. The creature was ursine in shape, but long, bony tines mingled with his dark, silver-speckled fur, and his canines protruded along his muzzle, longer and more curved than any bear’s on Earth. The great creature must have sensed Victor’s scrutiny because he finally opened his eyes, the bright red orbs boring into him.

“Oynalla is a great friend of the spirits here, but she sees little of what my gaze reveals. You have at least two more affinities rivaling what you’ve already uncovered. The one I guide you to will depend on how you solve my quest.”

Victor started to ask what the quest was, but he held his tongue—the bear would come around to it when it was ready. Instead, he copied his coyotes and looked at the great spirit, waiting for it to speak.

“The reward I offer you is great, but the risk is commensurate. I can read on your spirit that you won’t shy from danger, so I’ll tell you plainly. My offspring’s offspring still wander this world, warrior. One such, a great male named Bitterpaw, has become tainted by an artifact of great evil. He is beyond redemption, warrior, and I need you to find him and put him down. The artifact, a necklace of teeth that he wears like a trophy on his wrist, must be destroyed.”

“Oh, this quest isn’t in the Spirit Plane?” Victor wasn’t sure why he’d thought the entire quest would be completed during his Spirit Walk.

“No, Warrior. Will you accept my quest? It will weigh heavily upon you until you’ve completed it.” The bear ponderously stood, and he towered over Victor on all fours. He must have weighed ten thousand pounds when he was alive, and Victor hoped his descendent wasn’t that large. Victor also hoped he’d be

able to find Bitterpaw without too much trouble, not wanting to be caught up in this quest for too long, but he didn't want to back down now.

"I'll accept your quest, Great Bear," he said, hoping he wasn't insulting the creature by calling it a bear.

He needn't have worried, though—the bear nodded and stepped closer, lowering his enormous head so it was just in front of Victor's. "Good, Victor. You'll find my troublesome offspring a week's journey west of the old witch's camp. If you're faster and run more like a bear, you'll find him sooner. He leaves death and destruction in his wake, and it's good that you go to face him because he'd find your friends sooner or later. Now, rest your hand upon my brow."

Victor reached his right hand up to rest on the bear's massive, bony head. His fur was rough, and Victor was sure he could feel stiff spines of bone hiding among the hairs. Still, he pressed his hand down until his palm was flat on the great brow, and then a message appeared in his vision:

Thunderbite, the Elder Spinebear, has offered you a Quest: Hunt down the bear known as Bitterpaw, best him in combat, and destroy the toothed amulet that has corrupted his spirit. Reward: Thunderbite will guide you to a new spirit affinity. Warning: This Quest is a binding Energy contract—failure to work toward the goal will result in a loss of Energy affinity. Accept? Yes/No.

"Is that what you meant when you said the quest would weigh heavily on me? I'll lose Energy affinity if I don't work toward it?"

"Yes, Warrior. One should not enter into a bargain with Great Spirits lightly."

For a moment, Victor was tempted to touch the "no" option, leave the Spirit Plane, and forget about this whole business. He could return to camp, eat until he passed out, and then have a relaxing winter with his friends. "Or I could stop being a chicken-shit," Victor muttered and touched the "yes" option.

"I like the color of your spirit, Victor. This will not be an easy task—Bitterpaw will be a challenging opponent for you, and I would encourage you to fight him alone. It would be wise, should you bring a hunting party, to keep them away when you do battle. I predict the melee will be furious and deadly, and those lacking true strength will be cut like so much grass before the scythe."

"All right, um, Thunderbite. Will I need to come to find you when I'm finished?"

"If you walk the Spirit Plane from anywhere on these grasslands, we will find each other. Good luck, Warrior." Thunderbite turned, then, and began to lumber away, his great shoulders and hips rolling with each ponderous step.

"See you soon," Victor said, watching the bear go, and though he never blinked or unfocused his gaze, in just a few seconds, the bear was gone, and Victor was alone on the twilight Spirit Plane, nothing but shimmering grasslands illuminated by bright stars in every direction. Victor reached inside himself and canceled his

Spirit Walk, and when he woke, he found himself sprawled on his back, the sun high in the sky and shining directly into his eyes.

“Gah,” Victor said, rolling feebly to his side. He felt drained and weak, his head buzzing and foggy. He closed his eyes, concentrating, and reached into his storage ring, pulling out a bowl of hot noodles, vegetables, and meat he’d bought back in Gelica. He set it on the blanket next to him, then pulled out a keg of fresh water and a tankard. Victor struggled to a sitting position, looked around the empty, sunny plains, and said, “Thanks for not letting anyone kill me, spirits.”

He spent an hour eating and drinking. He remembered seeing in a VR that someone who’d been starving shouldn’t overdo it with food or drink, but his body told him a different story, and though he started out slow, he ended up wolfing down more food than he could have eaten in a week in his old life. He figured admonishments like that weren’t meant for level thirty-two descendants of Quinamentzin.

When he’d eaten and drunk his fill, Victor stood, shook out his blanket, and stowed it away. He turned toward Tellen’s camp and started hiking in that direction. He felt a certain urgency to begin work on his quest, but he felt like there was time to stop by the camp to let Oynalla and the others know what he was up to.

Victor felt a certain tingle in his gut, and when he thought about it, walking over the grasslands, he realized he was excited. “I’m on a fucking quest!” he said, grinning. “I need to fight an insane bear, and then his great-grandpa is going to teach me some shit!” He laughed at the craziness of it all, and then he started jogging—no sense wasting time.