

Victor BK3: Ch15

Book 3: Chapter 15: Westward

When Victor jogged into the Shadeni camp, he was greeted by the hunters on watch with friendly waves and shouts of welcome. He truly had become like family to some of the hunters over the months, especially after he and Chandri had returned, triumphant, from their hunt for Tellen. He entered the longhouse, as he'd learned the clan called the rectangular, turf-covered buildings, where Oynalla and Tellen had taken up residence and, blinking away the stinging cook smoke that hung in the air, looked around the dim interior.

Most of the smoke came from the two open hearths at the center of the building, and though they had chimneys, some smoke invariably hung in the air. Quite a few clan folk were busy in the main hall, cooking, scraping hides, stitching leather, and any number of other small tasks, but he didn't see Thayla or Oynalla, so he moved to the wooden steps at the far end of the long, low-ceilinged space.

Several people greeted him as he walked past their benches or workspaces, and he smiled and returned the greeting. Victor had learned almost everyone's names, at least the ones that lived in this particular longhouse—thirty or more clan members called this building their home. He descended one level to where Oynalla, Tellen, and their immediate family members, which seemed to include Thayla and Deyni, had rooms.

The second floor was less smoky. Light being provided by glow lamps and the absence of cookfires helped that cause. Though the construction was rough, all the timbers were solid, and no dirt was present on the wooden planks of the hallway. Victor followed it until he came to Oynalla's quarters, and when he saw the beaded curtains were pulled open, he stepped into the area where the Old Mother spent most of her days—a small, square room piled with furs and blankets with an Energy-driven tea kettle on a low wooden table as its centerpiece.

Oynalla was sitting, facing the doorway, reading from a small, red, leather-bound journal, as she often did in the afternoons, steeping some very pungent-smelling tea. Thayla and Deyni weren't present, so Victor was subjected to Oynalla's full attention as he stepped through the low archway, rattling some beads with his passage. "Ha!" she crowed. "I can see from your grinning, greasy face that you've had some success!"

"Greasy?" Victor asked, rubbing at his chin and mouth. He'd eaten some little sausages while jogging back to camp. Was that what she meant?

"Yes, only a successful hunt could spur such an appetite. Had you failed, you'd be depriving yourself out of guilt and self-loathing." She laughed, and Victor couldn't tell how much she was messing with him and how much she'd hit the nail on the head.

"Well," he said, trying to take some wind out of her sails. "It wasn't really a success yet. I got a quest, but now I have to complete it."

She regarded him for a moment, closing one eye and squinting at him, her crow's feet piling atop each other. "A dangerous one, is it?"

“I’m not really sure. I have to kill a bear that’s gone insane or something. I got the quest from a huge bear that said the one I have to hunt is his descendent. Why could some of the animal spirits speak to me? I mean, animals don’t speak outside the Spirit Plane, do they?”

“Few animals gain the means to speak, even on the Spirit Plane, Victor. I know the bear you speak of, and he’s a great, old, powerful spirit. He evolved many times during his mortal existence and has lingered around Fanwath far longer than most spirits do. Were there other creatures that spoke to you?”

“Yeah, um, a boar, a rabbit, er feyris, and some Shadeni spirits. I mean, there were like a hundred spirits crowded around when I started the Spirit Walk.”

“Truly?” For once, Oynalla didn’t chase her word with a laugh of any sort. “They must have sensed your strong Core, and, of course, the smoke I gave you helped. Yes, you can thank Oynalla that so many spirits came to witness you.” This time she laughed.

“Well, I need to hunt this bear, and I should probably start soon. Thunderbite made it so that I have to keep working toward it, or I’ll lose Energy affinity. Whatever that means . . .”

“Mother’s bones!” Oynalla hissed. “Fool boy! Must I teach you every little thing? You are bound to complete this quest now, or you’ll make yourself a helpless, whimpering shadow of a man! Should you refuse to hunt this bear or fail, you’ll slowly lose your ability to channel and absorb Energy! You’ll become as you were when you first came to this world, but worse because your body and spirit now require Energy!” She looked at Victor’s slack-jawed face and shook her head. “Did the bear not warn you?”

“Yeah, he said it would ‘weigh heavily on me.’ I mean, the System also put up a message saying this would happen; I guess I just didn’t understand it fully. It doesn’t matter, anyway, Oynalla. I want to complete the quest. Thunderbite’s going to help me uncover another affinity.”

“Best you start then,” the old woman said, nodding. “Keep the quest the focus of your attention, and you shouldn’t suffer any loss of affinity. Can Oynalla help you with anything, warrior?”

“Where are Thayla and Deyni?” Victor looked around, indicating the empty space around Oynalla’s tea kettle.

“They’ve gone with Tellen and his daughters—a hunt for small game and a learning opportunity for the young one.” Oynalla grinned and narrowed her eyes mischievously, “All your women off together on a hunt! What might they talk

about?” Her cackle rang out, and Victor was glad they weren’t out in the open, around other clan members.

“You’re fucking nuts,” Victor said before he could catch himself. Oynalla didn’t seem offended, though, and she continued to laugh, though more quietly.

“Anyway, I’m glad they’re gone. The bear said I should go alone, that anyone who came with me would be at risk.”

“At risk, hmm? It’s good that you took this quest, then. If this mad bear is nearby, it threatens the clan.” She regarded Victor for a long moment, her sharp, bright eyes finally resting on Lifedrinker. “Will you hunt the bear with that axe? Spinebears grow large, warrior. Perhaps a spear would be wise. What about your armor? Did not your fancy metal vest get destroyed when you rescued Tellen?”

“I figured I’d use Lifedrinker, yeah. Sure, a spear is probably better for hunting something big, but I’m good with an axe, and she’s thirsty. I owe her. As far as armor goes, no, I don’t have any.” He rested a hand on the beaded leather vest he wore, a gift from the clan, and said, “I have other leather vests and even a leather jacket, though.”

Oynalla frowned, still managing to laugh somehow, and said, “A spinebear will scoff at leather. Help me up, warrior. I’ll bring you to the clan’s treasurer and tradesman. Bring your wealth—you’ll need to barter.”

Victor laughed and said, “My wealth? It’s all in my storage rings. I guess my wagon’s the most valuable thing I own, but I don’t want to trade that. Let’s go, Old Mother.” He pulled her to her feet, thinking back to the time when she’d refused his help, saying she needed to work to remain strong. He wondered if it was a sign of her giving in to her old age or just a sign of her familiarity with him that she now let him aid her.

Oynalla clung to his arm, and they climbed up out of the lower level and then out through the longhouse into the bright afternoon sun. “Gul-dak is in yonder longhouse,” Oynalla said, pointing to the building directly across the central courtyard, on the opposite side of the well.

“Gul-dak, hmm? Sounds familiar. Have I met him?” Victor asked, starting toward the building with Oynalla still gripping his elbow, her bony old fingers strong as vise grips.

“Ha! How do I know who you’ve met, warrior?” Oynalla shook her head, eyes on the ground in front of her feet, a chuckle bubbling up from her throat the entire time they crossed the courtyard. Victor didn’t bother to answer—either he’d met the man or heard people speak about him. It didn’t really matter.

They found Gul-dak on the fourth level of the longhouse, in a wide, open space, though, as usual, Victor had to duck to keep from cracking his skull on the long, rough beams that held up the ceiling.

Barrels, sacks, and crates filled the room, and Gul-dak was busy counting carefully packed bottles of wine when Oynalla spied him and called out, “Ha! Old trickster! Pretending to count the wine while you have an early drink?”

“Oynalla!” Gul-dak said, turning to face her and Victor. He had the biggest belly of any clan member Victor had seen, and he clapped his palms against it, making the fat quiver under his tight, linen shirt while he laughed. He was old, though not as old as Oynalla, and his hair had gone mostly white. He wore spectacles, too, and Victor strained his brain, trying to remember if he’d seen anyone else wearing glasses in this world. It seemed to him that anyone with any levels or Energy to speak of wouldn’t need them.

“I’ve brought you a customer, old thief. Be good to him, or I’ll curse your dreams with a spell.” Victor knew Oynalla was teasing the old merchant, but he was startled to see real fear in the man’s eyes. He hurried forward, wringing his hands in front of himself and bowing.

“Old Mother! You wouldn’t, would you?” he asked, bowing again and ducking his head.

“Oh, Ancestors! Victor, look upon a man with no sense of humor.” Oynalla laughed, and as Gul-dak straightened, smiling in relief, she continued, “Also, look upon a man who spent his life counting beads instead of strengthening his Core—a man with little understanding of the workings of Energy!”

“Hello,” Victor said, holding out a hand, feeling rather sorry for Gul-dak. He’d not seen that side of Oynalla before—what he’d taken for teasing seemed, in actuality, to be thinly veiled scorn. The small, portly fellow reached up to take his hand, and though his hand was pudgy, his grip was firm, and he smiled genuinely at Victor.

“I’ve heard much about you, Victor, the demon slayer! Tellen is the son of my oldest friend, and I owe you greatly for his safe return. What can this old merchant do for you?”

“He requires armor and not something for hunting hooved game. He needs something that might stop the claws of a great spinebear,” Oynalla said before Victor could answer.

“Um, yeah, and I have goods to trade,” Victor said.

“Armor, you say? Surely we have something that will work. Come over to the storage coffer,” Gul-dak said, motioning Victor toward a row of rune-covered wooden and metal boxes lined up against the far wall. Some were small, about the size of a shoebox, and others were more like big wooden trunks.

“Are those all dimensional containers?” Victor asked, looking at the runes that adorned the “coffers.” Some had the runes burned into the wood, and some had them etched into metal straps.

“Aye, lad,” the old merchant said as he walked over to them. He gestured back toward all the barrels and crates. “All this is usually stored within a few of those coffers. I take things out to keep ready for the clan and to take inventory.” He glanced nervously at Oynalla and said, “Not to steal sips of wine!”

“Ha! Old lush,” Oynalla said, shaking her head. Again, Victor couldn’t quite figure out if she hated the man or was just busting his chops.

“Here’s where I’ve stored all the armor—some for the clan warriors, but most for trading when we stop by a city.” He looked nervously at Oynalla and then smiled up at Victor and continued, “What sort of armor do you need, warrior?”

“Well . . .” Victor started, but Oynalla cut him off.

“Something metal. Something that can grow with him when he lets his rage run rampant. Don’t hold out, Gul-dak—not if you value peaceful sleep!” Oynalla cackled, and Gul-dak flinched away. Victor swore he saw beads of sweat pop into existence on the old merchant’s wrinkled, red brow.

“Metal and enchanted for resizing . . .” he said softly, eyes going distant as he laid a hand on the iron-strapped, wooden chest.

“Don’t play your merchant games with us, Gul-dak,” Oynalla said, giving Victor’s elbow a squeeze. “He’ll have something, Victor, don’t worry.”

“I’m not . . .” Victor began, but then Gul-dak exclaimed and produced a heavy, metal garment, grunting with the weight as he hefted it to the top of a nearby chest.

“Enchanted scale shirt, too heavy for most of our hunters. It’s been in here for a few seasons now. Couldn’t get the price I wanted in Gelica, and Tellen thought it might come in handy during a raid.”

“You have permission to sell it, old man?” Oynalla asked.

“Of course! If I get the right price . . .” he eyed Victor nervously.

Victor just grunted and picked up the armor. The metal looked like steel to him, and the layered scales were dense, meticulously stitched to the supple, thick leather underneath. They rippled with the lights in the storeroom as he hefted it and turned it over, looking for defects and trying to imagine what it would feel like to wear. “It’s heavier than my old armor. I’m used to my arms being free, and this goes all the way to the wrists. Looks like it will hang down past my belt, too.”

“It’s a good piece of armor. We took it in trade for a Gethian roladii sire and two dams. The man who traded it swore the metal was ten percent amber ore. It’s enchanted for self-repair and, as you asked, resizing.”

“Put it on, Victor,” Oynalla said.

“Well, there’s the matter of the price . . .” Gul-dak said, but Victor pulled the heavy garment on over his head, grunting to get it over his shoulders. He’d made it halfway when he finally had to admit defeat.

“I’m stuck,” he said, voice muffled.

“Bond with it,” Oynalla said.

“Wait!” Gul-dak said, but it was too late. Victor channeled some Energy out into the armor, felt it expand, and easily pulled it on the rest of the way. When his head pulled clear of the neck hole, he looked at the message that had appeared when he bonded with the armor:

Amber-alloy scale shirt. Artificed for durability, comfort, and self-repair. A fine armor crafted by Getchit Boyle of Fazador.

“Cool!” Victor said, then added, “I saw a description of the armor and the name of the guy who made it when I bonded to it.”

“Ah, some artificers add such to their creations. The System is known to do it also.” Gul-dak nodded. “There’s the matter of the price, though, and seeing as you’ve already bonded with the item, I feel somewhat disadvantaged. Oynalla, you know my profits go to the clan coffers!”

“Hush, old merchant! This clan owes Victor much. Name him a fair price.”

While they bickered, Victor flexed his arms and twisted his torso. The shirt was long, hanging over his hips, and he knew he’d need to take his belt off and put it on over the armor, but other than that, it was quite comfortable. It was heavy, probably twice the weight of his old ringmail vest, but he felt it was probably better armor. He knew he’d be hot in the sun wearing it, but some discomfort might be a reasonable trade-off for receiving fewer wounds in battle. He thought back to the description and said, “It says it’s enchanted for ‘comfort.’ What’s that about?”

“That’s an enchantment that allows the armor to fit you perfectly. It may have secondary effects, like making it feel lighter than it is or allowing airflow to help you keep from overheating in the sun. I really can’t be sure. If I sold that shirt in Gelica, I’d expect three or four thousand beads. Can you afford that sum, Victor?” Gul-dak didn’t look hopeful.

“I could, but how about a trade instead?” Victor dug around in his storage rings until he found the shortswords he’d taken from the Ilyathi bounty hunter back when he and Thayla were making their way to Gelica. “These are magical and

made of an expensive metal.” He laid the pair of swords on the top of the chest, and Gul-dak whistled.

“Those are fine blades, Victor.” He glanced nervously at Oynalla and added, “More valuable to the clan than that heavy armor. I’ll take them in trade, but you’ll have credit with me. Is that fair?” He asked the last question looking at Oynalla, not Victor.

“It is good,” Oynalla said, reaching up to retake Victor’s elbow. “This one has a quest to begin. Enough dallying. Victor, you have enough supplies?”

“I do,” he said, allowing Oynalla to tug him toward the stairs leading up from the storage room. “Thanks, Gul-dak,” he called over his shoulder as they left. When he and Oynalla had made it back out into the sunlight, she took Victor’s hand in hers and looked up at him, smiling into the daylight so her eyes were lost in folds of wrinkles.

“Victor, keep focused on your quest. Work ever toward your goal and the spirit’s curse won’t take hold.”

“Curse?”

“A turn of phrase. I mean the requirement that you keep working to solve the quest. Come now, Warrior, you could discern my meaning!”

“Yeah, I get it. I’ll just go fetch Thistle, and then I’ll be on my way, all right? The spirit said the bear was only a few days to the west as long as I traveled ‘like a bear.’ I figure Thistle’s even faster.”

“The west? Go quickly then because Tellen took your women that way!”

“They’re not my . . .” Victor started to say automatically before Oynalla’s words registered. “They went west? How long ago?”

“Two mornings they’ve been gone now. Go, warrior!”

Victor didn’t need to hear that again; he turned toward where he’d parked his wagon and ran. While he loped through the central area of the camp, he pulled off his belt, Lifedrinker and all, and then put it back on over his new armor. The belt was enchanted to resize, also, and it fit easily. By the time he’d adjusted Lifedrinker’s loop and felt comfortable, he was jogging up to his two vidanii, grazing near his wagon.

Victor saddled Thistle in record time, talking to him in a low, soothing voice the whole while.

“Ready for a run, boy?” He slipped his boot in the stirrup, pulled himself up, and then they were off, charging over the grass toward the setting sun.

He was worried about Thayla and the others, but only a little—it felt like long odds that they’d run into the rampaging bear just because they’d gone off in the same general direction. “Hey, Gorz,” he

said, having a sudden thought, “are there any villages or towns west of here?” When Gorz was silent, Victor slapped himself on the head—he’d forgotten to get the amulet back from Oynalla. “Oh well. I guess I’ll find out.”

Victor made good time—Thistle loved to run, and carrying just Victor, big as he was, wasn’t much of a struggle for the great animal. As the stars and moons came out, and he’d seen no sign of Tellen or the others, he wasn’t surprised. He had no idea if they’d gone straight west or followed some game to the south into the forest or north into the plains.

While he hadn’t slept, per se, Victor had been physically inactive for a long time, cultivating his Core and then taking a Spirit Walk, which seemed similar to sleeping as far as his body was concerned. The point of which was that Victor didn’t feel tired, and he let Thistle have free rein, thundering over the plains long into the night. Victor felt purpose-driven, and only part of it was due to his concern for his friends—the other part being a burning desire to solve his quest. Vaguely, he wondered if he’d feel so driven if he hadn’t agreed to that quest contract with the bear spirit.

Morning found Victor walking ahead of Thistle, holding his lead, giving the animal a break. He’d already fed and watered him and then taken off his saddle, and Victor figured some light walking wouldn’t hurt the beast. Truthfully, Thistle seemed ready to run again, and Victor wondered how great his stamina really was—he was supposedly much more evolved and rich in Energy than a roladii; did he need as much rest and sleep as Victor had been giving him? “Too bad I can’t search it up on the ‘net, eh, boy?”

Occasionally, Victor passed thin dirt trails in the plains leading north into the plains and south into the trees of the Blue Deep, and he wondered if they were game trails or paths made by people who lived nearby. He felt the urge to explore them, but the need to progress his quest weighed more heavily—he needed to follow the edge of the forest further west. In his mind, he still hadn’t gone far enough to match a “few days of travel if he ran like a bear,” at least not a bear like Thunderbite.

After walking briskly for most of the morning, Victor let Thistle wander and graze while he took a break. He sat in the grass, ate some cured meat and cheese, drank a bottle of weak wine, and stretched. Victor still didn’t feel like sleeping, which he thought was rather insane, considering how long he’d been awake prior to his Spirit Walk. “Wait a second,” he said, staring at the bright, gray sky, realizing he hadn’t asked Oynalla how long he’d been gone. For all he knew, he could’ve slept for days after his Spirit Walk.

“Well, no way to know for sure right now,” he said to Thistle, draping his saddle blanket over the animal and getting him ready for another run. “Let’s cover a bit more ground, and maybe tonight we’ll camp out, all right?” Thistle turned his big head back toward him and snuffled, pushing his black, velvety nose into his shoulder. “Did you want a treat? ‘Cause, that’s how you get a treat, buddy.” Victor laughed, holding a pear-like fruit on his flat, open palm while the vidanii crunched it down, then snuffed as though he might find another one hidden between Victor’s fingers. Victor laughed and hopped into the saddle. “Come on, boy!”

He let Thistle set the pace for the next few hours, which turned out to be a thundering gallop, and they ate up the miles, moving ever westward. Occasionally, Victor saw movement at the edge of the

forest, and he wondered if he'd surprised other animals that had bolted for the cover of the trees at his approach or if monsters or people were lurking in the shadows, watching him go past. Not for the first time, he wondered what kept the trees from growing into the plains, expanding the forest year by year. He thought maybe it was doing so, but then he remembered that Tellen's clan had camped there, at the edge of the woods, for generations.

His mind was wandering down just such a train of thought when he felt Thistle's speed falter, and he jerked his eyes back into focus and saw what had startled the beast—not far ahead were lines of smoke and the low, wooden structures of an encampment or village. “Good boy! Did you smell that smoke? Steady now; let's keep moving.” He slowed Thistle to a trot, still moving toward the single-story, wooden buildings.

Victor kept a hand on Lifedrinker, but he didn't pull her out of her loop. He figured some sentries would challenge him soon; he'd already gotten closer than anyone would get to Tellen's camp without being stopped. He was somewhat surprised when no one accosted him, and he rode past the first wooden building. It looked like a cabin to him, but no smoke came from its little stone chimney. Another, similar structure, was in front of him, and he had to turn Thistle to get around it, and that's when he saw the destruction and carnage.

The smoke wasn't coming from a cookfire or a chimney, he saw, but from a smoldering pyre where some bodies had been burned—not fully consumed by the flames. Whoever had built the pyre hadn't made it big or hot enough to finish the job. Victor rode past the smoldering mess, the smell of smoke and char heavy in the air, making his eyes water. He constantly scanned for movement, wondering who had killed all the people and then who had tried to clean up the mess.

Victor passed several more wooden structures made from logs, and then he started to see the blood and broken doors and walls—whatever had killed the people had broken their wooden doors to pieces and sent logs rolling over the dirt paths that served as streets in the little community. More than a dozen buildings were partially destroyed and slathered with dried, red blood streaks. Glancing at a log that had rolled onto the track, Victor saw four long, deep grooves, and he realized he'd found his first sign of Bitterpaw.

Nobody showed themselves to him, and Victor didn't want to linger in the ruined place. He turned Thistle to the west again and pushed him back into a trot, moving past the last building, and that's when he saw the little group of people walking ahead of him through the grassland. They appeared to panic and scattered at the sound of Thistle's hooves, but when they turned to see him riding their way, most stopped running and stood, staring while he approached.

Victor waved, trying to indicate his good intentions. None of them waved back, save one little girl with bright blonde hair. She was Ardeni, like the others, and Victor could see the soot stains on her pale blue skin and how her clothes were filthy and torn. Most of the group were young, children to Victor's eyes, though a handful were older. One older man, a burly red-bearded fellow dressed in dark leather clothing and holding a heavy axe of his own, called out, “We want no trouble.”

“I'm no trouble,” Victor said. “Well, not to people like you,” he added.

“We've nothing to give. Our dreams lie smashed and burned behind you.”

“I’m not looking to get anything from you,” Victor said, slowing Thistle to a walk as he came within a few feet of the group. “Except maybe some information. What did that do to your village? Was it a mad bear?”

“You know of it? A demon-possessed spinebear!” A young woman said, pulling the little yellow-haired girl close to her and backing away from Victor.

“I’m on a quest. I have to find that bear and kill it.”

“Ha!” The man guffawed. “Better you turn and run, friend. Tell whoever gave you that quest that it’s not worth it.”

“Don’t be an ass, Berom!” another man said, sitting up from where he’d squatted to rest while the group watched Victor approach. He was bald, with a tuft of black hair around his ears, and his dark eyes bored into Victor while he spoke, “The bear is in the woods south of our village. At least that’s where it lumbered off after eating its fill of our kinfolk. If you truly aim to fight the thing, I’d like to come. He killed my whole family. My name’s Gef. Gef ap’Horl.”

“I want to help also,” said a thin woman holding a bow as long as she was tall. “I’m Teil, and my husband rests in that beast’s gut.”

Victor thought about saying no. He almost said he didn’t want them to slow him down or get hurt while he fought with the bear, but then he saw their eyes, and he knew they’d happily die if it meant they might help him avenge their loved ones. He cleared his throat and pulled Lifedrinker out to rest across his knees, then he looked into the woman’s angry, green eyes and said, “Well, I can use the help tracking the monster, I suppose.”