

Victor BK3: Ch16

Book 3: Chapter 16: Duty and Madness

Victor sat near the coals of the fire that Gef had used to cook a stew for the three of them. Victor had savored the roots and small-game meat, seasoned in a way that he could appreciate more now that he had a bit of cooking skill himself. Gef, on the other hand, had some real talent. He saw the older hunter leaning against a tree trunk nearby, his spear propped next to him, and his eyes closed. Victor had a feeling that he'd wake at the slightest sound.

Teil had surprised Victor by scampering up into another tree, its branches heavy with blue pine needles, and then she'd announced that she'd be sleeping among the boughs. For his part, Victor sat, reading correspondence from Lam and Edeya. Over the last months, they'd sent him regular messages in the Far Scribe book.

Often the letters were just status updates—what they'd been up to, but more importantly, questioning what Victor was up to. He knew they were fishing for information, worried he'd get himself tied up with something that would make their rendezvous in the spring unlikely.

Today's message was more interesting, though—Edeya had sent him a bit of news:

Victor,

We miss you and Thayla and hope things continue to go well with Tellen's clan. We're settled into Lam's temporary estate in Persi Gables, and today she sent me to visit with Rellia. She wanted me to dig for information and rumors—find out how many troops Rellia had managed to raise and see that things were going according to plan.

In the past, when I'd met with Rellia in Gelica, I'd had to go through her personal guard captain, Valla. Today I was met with a different captain, though, and when I asked about Valla, he'd laughed and said she was "hunting barbarians in the grasslands."

I couldn't get him or Rellia to provide any more details, but I have a feeling Rellia sent Valla to check up on you. She knows we have the Far Scribe books, but maybe she wants her own direct line to you. Anyway, keep an eye out for her. I'm not sure you've met her, but her personality leaves much to be desired.

Yours,

Edeya

Victor grunted as he read the missive. He remembered Captain Valla and supposed he'd just deal with her when and if she ever showed up. He picked up his pen and wrote a response to Edeya:

Hey Chica,

Thanks for reaching out. I'll keep an eye out for that lady—she reminded me of my seventh-grade English teacher, Mrs. Deppa. Maybe it had something to do with her tight collar. Anyway, things are good. I'm on a quest right now to kill a crazy bear, and I know it sounds cool, but it's pretty tragic—the thing has been going around killing people, and I have some survivors with me helping me track it down. Stay safe, and don't let Lam run you around too much!

-Victor

Victor closed the book and stored it away in his ring, and then he stretched out on his bedroll, propping his arms under his head while he looked for stars between the tops of the nearby trees. He fell asleep that way, trying to make up names for the different constellations he saw, and before he knew it, he woke to the sounds of someone chopping wood and the smell of something brewing on the fire.

“Tanf?” Teil asked, lifting the iron kettle from the coals.

“Tanf?” Victor echoed.

“The drink—tanf root. Do you have a cup?”

“Yeah, thanks. Sorry, I haven’t had it before, but it smells familiar. I think some of the Shadeni back at the camp drink it.”

“It’s common enough,” the woman said. She was always curt and scowled often, and Victor felt very sorry for her. He’d learned that she and her husband had been newly married, and Gef had confided in Victor that the villagers had stopped her from charging after the bear alone after it had mauled her husband and the others. She had bright coloring, like most Ardeni, with hair and eyes that reminded him of the coals in the fire—a rich, deep, rusty orange color.

“Here,” Victor said, holding out a wooden mug that someone in Tellen’s clan had given him. It was smooth and polished, and he knew the wood was valuable because of how heavy and dense it was. It absorbed heat nicely, and he found it perfect for drinking hot tea or broth around the fire.

Teil poured some dark brown liquid into his cup, and if Victor closed his eyes and breathed just right, he could imagine it was coffee. “Good! Thank you,” he said, savoring the slightly bitter drink. It had a very different aftertaste than coffee, almost sweet with a tangy sourness.

“The tracks continue south. Even without the skill, you should be able to see it. See how those saplings are snapped and bent? The bear doesn’t move around things it can smash through,” Gef said, also squatting near the fire and holding out a mug to Teil.

“Yeah, but if it gets harder to spot, I’ll be glad to have you along. I never learned that tracking skill.”

“Not too late to try. Spend more time hunting and less time fighting, and you might pick it up.” Gef took a long sip and grinned at Victor.

“What makes you think I fight a lot?” Victor asked, drinking from his mug and smiling back at the man.

“Oh, stop, you two. Let’s not play word games. Drink your tanf, and let’s get back on the hunt,” Teil said, putting a stop to the banter before it began. Victor

shrugged and stood up, throwing the remnants of his drink onto the coals and stowing his cup.

“Yeah, I’m good with that.” While the other two packed their bedrolls, Victor put away Thistle’s feedbag and barrel of water and then saddled him up. He’d been leading the animal since he met Gef and Teil the day before, and he figured he’d keep doing so, but he liked having the animal ready to ride in case he needed to chase something faster than his two feet could manage.

They proceeded deeper into the forest, and as they delved into the old growth, Victor began to feel grateful that they were following in the bear’s path. The great animal had flattened much of the undergrowth, snapped smaller trees, and bent some of the larger ones, making progress through the thick, dense foliage easier. Still, he had to use a machete he’d bought while shopping with Thayla to push through some of the springier, heartier stuff.

After several hours of progress, they came to a fairly wide game trail, and Gef stopped them, studying the rock-strewn dirt path that ran perpendicular to their current course. “Interesting,” the man said, rubbing a palm along his bald, blue scalp, brushing the sweat back so it didn’t run into his eyes.

“What is it?” Teil asked.

“More tracks,” Gef said, then stood and gestured off to the right. “Some Shadeni went this way, and, if I’m not wrong, some forest trolls are shadowing them.”

“Shadeni?” Victor asked.

“Aye,” he said, leaning over and studying the tracks. “One, two, three, four, five sets. Two fairly bright, two not so much, and one barely registering—a child, I’d guess.”

“I think I know who they are.” Victor knelt and touched the track, wishing he had the skill Gef and most of the Shadeni clan used so freely. “How many trolls? Are they dangerous?”

“I see at least three sets of troll tracks, though they move in each others’ steps, making it harder to count. You’ve never met a forest troll? Aye, they’re dangerous, lad.”

“I’ve got to help them, then.” Victor didn’t wait for them to reply. He just turned to the right and, pulling Thistle, started down the game trail.

“Hold up, Victor!” Teil called. “What about the bear?”

“We’ll go for it after I’ve made sure my friends aren’t going to become troll dinner!”

“What if it kills more? There are Ghelli villages in this part of the deep!” Teil said, rushing to grab hold of his shoulder.

“Teil,” Victor whirled on her and continued, “You don’t get it—those people are like my family. I’m not abandoning them. I promise we’ll haul ass after that bear after we find them.”

“Teil, you go with him. I’ll get eyes on the bear,” Gef said.

“Gef, it’s mad and uncanny, and if it senses you, you’re as good as dead. Stay with us,” Teil said, and Victor nodded.

“Yeah, man. Let’s stick together. My friends can help track it after we find them.” Victor started walking again and said, “Seriously, let’s go!” He said the last like he meant it, his voice rumbling from deep in his gut, and Teil and Gef started after him. Victor nodded, pleased that they’d listened, and picked up the pace, making it hard for Gef to get around him to keep tracking. The older man broke into a trot and glided past him, though, and Victor slowed so he could stay ahead, minding the tracks.

After they’d hiked that way, moving quickly down the game trail for nearly an hour, Victor felt an uncomfortable sensation in his gut, like someone had reached into his innards with an icy hand and given them a squeeze. “Ungh . . .” he grunted, stumbling forward. “What the shit?” Victor pressed a hand to his stomach, and slowly the wave of discomfort seemed to fade away until he felt almost normal.

Victor turned an eye inward to his Core, trying to see if he could determine what had happened, and things looked normal to him. He shook his head and began to turn his attention back outward when a faint, blue shimmer around his twin suns of Energy caught his attention. He studied it carefully and slowly exhaled a troubled breath—it looked like a shell or cage of tiny runes had surrounded his Core. “The curse . . .” Victor called up his status sheet, looking at his Energy affinity section:

Energy Affinity:

2.6 (3.1), Rage 8.6 (9.1), Inspiration 6.9 (7.4)

Energy:

2841/2841 (3041)

“Shit!”

“What is it, Victor? Why curse yourself?” Teil asked, jogging lightly to come up beside him.

“I’m bound by this quest to hunt that bear, and I’m losing some Energy affinity by not focusing on it.”

“We should turn then. What good will you be to your friends if you’ve lost your strength?”

“Look, I know you want to hunt that bear, and for a good reason. I do too! Let’s just hurry, all right? If I start to get too weak, I’ll turn and get back to the quest—hopefully, that will alleviate some of this curse.” Victor gazed ahead for Gef and raised his voice, “Gef, we need to move faster!” Gef turned back, looked at Teil and Victor, and then nodded. He picked up his pace, jogging ahead while he scanned the trail.

Teil gave Victor a searching look, then shrugged and hefted her bow, slipping off the trail to shadow them from the foliage. Victor had no idea how she moved so easily through the ferns, berry bushes, and other shrubs. She did, though, and he had to wonder if she had some sort of travel skill that made it possible. He was still thinking about that when he almost crashed into Gef’s back. The older hunter had stopped and held a fist up, indicating they should be quiet. Victor loomed over him, Lifedrinker held ready, waiting to hear what he had to say.

Gef didn’t speak but held a finger to his lips, pointing off the trail and to the right. Victor saw that Teil had also stopped, hugging the bole of a tree in the direction Gef was pointing. She pointed to her eyes, then off in the same direction, and Victor thought she either meant she saw something or she was going to go look.

His second guess proved right as she slowly, silently, started to creep around the tree trunk, and, as she disappeared from sight, Gef squatted down, making himself small behind a bush. Victor followed his lead, carefully stepping on moist soil as he moved off the trail to put a wide, rough, white-barked tree trunk between him and whatever Teil had gone to investigate.

A few moments later, Teil returned to the trail, creeping noiselessly through the shadowy undergrowth. When she was squatting on the trail between Victor and Gef, she spoke, though in such a soft voice that Victor wasn’t sure he’d have been able to hear it if not for his improved body and attributes. “Three trolls sharing a bloody feast not far from here.”

Victor liked to think he’d gained some control over his rage, that he’d figured out how to keep himself cool and collected in high-stress situations. Still, when he heard that the trolls they were following, the trolls that had been following the people he cared about, were having a “bloody feast,” his vision went red, and he turned, crashing through the undergrowth, shouldering saplings aside, and, without conscious thought, he cast Berserk.

He smashed through the last stand of shrubs between him and the little clearing where the trolls were hunched over a carcass, oblivious to the shouts and queries coming from his two companions. He’d made plenty of noise in his passage, and the trolls weren’t caught unaware, though he’d moved so quickly, they didn’t have much time to prepare. They stood from their shared meal, monstrous faces and fangs dripping their red delights, and lifted their clawed hands, circling Victor as he burst into the open.

Victor had one thing on his enraged mind—punish the creatures that had wronged him somehow. When his red-tinted vision met the trio, some part of his brain acknowledged their brutish, dangerous appearance. They each stood hunched with muscle and thick, knobby skin, but even with their stooped posture, they matched Victor’s enormous berserking physique, towering between eight and ten feet tall. One had two straight, long horns, while the other two had a variety of curved, spiral horns around their shaggy crowns.

Something in Victor rejoiced at seeing enemies that looked him in the eyes without fear, and he bellowed a roaring challenge, leaping forward and hacking Lifedrinker, one-handed, with the speed and fury of an avalanche. The trolls were big, powerful, hearty creatures but weren't fast. Lifedrinker buried herself into the central troll's neck, carving deeply into its flesh and wedging into its spine, and Victor lifted his right foot and kicked out at the troll's gut, ripping Lifedrinker free with a shower of green-red blood.

The troll fell back, smashing through some brush, and while it thrashed, trying to right itself, the other two took the chance to leap at Victor. One charged at him as though to grab him into a bear hug, its wide maw open to reveal rows of serrated teeth. The other tried to circle Victor, swinging its claws at his back. Victor ignored the circling, clawing troll and met the charging one with a mighty grip, grabbing its rotting, uncured hide of a jerkin by the collar and then hacking Lifedrinker furiously into its side, over and over.

Victor felt the third troll scraping against his back, its claws mostly sliding off his scaled armor and serving to do little other than annoy the titan rampaging through his mind. He redoubled his efforts to hack apart the troll he held gripped by the throat. The creature struggled, fighting, kicking, gnashing its teeth, but Lifedrinker was extracting a heavy toll, tearing through its thick hide and smashing its bones, and Victor drove it back. It stumbled over a fallen branch and fell to its back, and Victor followed, driving it down with his weight, putting a knee into its groin, and then furiously hacked Lifedrinker into its collarbone, neck, face, and skull.

As the troll finally stopped moving, and Lifedrinker surged with the Energy she'd stolen from it, Victor felt a terrible, ripping pain on the back of his scalp, and, even enraged, he dimly connected the discomfort with the troll that had been clawing at his back. He roared and surged up, aware of the heavy weight on his back and further angered by how it hampered his movement. He reached his free hand over his shoulder, caught hold of something, and yanked, dipping at the waist to dislodge the creature. He felt a painful scraping at the base of his skull, and then the troll flew over his shoulder to smash into the dirt.

Victor roared and leaped upon his downed foe, madly hacking Lifedrinker into its neck, over and over again, until she'd shredded through its meat and finally cut through its bones, hard as iron though they were. The creature was dead, and Victor heaved his breaths in and out, each exhalation accompanied by a savage growl. As his rage began to dim, another icy contraction hit his Core, bringing him back to his senses faster than he otherwise might have. His mind raced with what he'd done, everything a blur after Teil had announced what she'd seen. He started to turn his gaze inward toward his Core but was distracted by a shout and the sounds of crashing undergrowth.

"Don't chase, Teil!" Gef called again, and Victor saw that Teil was standing at the other edge of the clearing, an arrow nocked and pulled back, ready to fire, staring after the crashing, swaying undergrowth—the third troll, the first one Victor had hit, must have fled.

"Victor," Gef said. "Are you all right? I've never seen anyone go hand-to-hand with a troll like that, let alone three. Are you mad?"

"Sort of," Victor replied, standing up and yanking Lifedrinker out of the dead monster. Moments later, he saw golden orbs of Energy begin to coalesce around

the two downed trolls, and then they surged into him, refreshing his mind and body, but Victor still felt an uncomfortable pressure on his Core.

“You are mad!” Teil hissed, coming closer, her bow relaxed, but the arrow still on the string. “I was going to tell you that the trolls were eating another troll! Someone killed one of them, and those creatures aren’t picky about meat. She pointed to the bloody mess where the three monsters had been hunched, and Victor saw the unmistakable carcass of a much-eaten fourth troll.

“Also,” Gef added, “your friends’ tracks continue down the game trail, no longer shadowed by the trolls.”

“Shit, guys, I’m sorry. I . . .” Victor hunted for words, hunted for an excuse that made sense, and then he shrugged and said, “I don’t have many people in my life that care about me. Those tracks, those people—they’re all I’ve got. I lost it when I imagined some fucking trolls eating them. Let’s . . . let’s get back to hunting that bear.” As he spoke, Victor looked at his Energy stats to see how badly the curse was hitting him:

Energy Affinity:

1.6 (3.1), Rage 7.6 (9.1), Inspiration 5.9 (7.4)

Energy:

2141/2341 (3041)

“Yeah, I need to focus on this quest—the curse is getting worse. You’re sure the trolls weren’t following my friends anymore?”

“Yes, I’m sure. Unless some of them picked up their trail further on . . .”

Victor thought about it for a moment, vacillating on what to do. Logically, he knew Tellen was an experienced hunter and that Thayla was no pushover. He wasn’t sure about Chandri’s fighting skills, but the young woman was skilled at tracking and wilderness craft. Was he being stupid, worrying about them so much?

He knew it would irritate Thayla to know he was interrupting an important quest to babysit her. Thinking about it, Victor realized he’d be irritated too. Why did he instantly assume they needed help. “It’s not so much that I don’t think they can handle themselves,” he said, voicing his thoughts aloud. “I just, well, I guess I’m just worrying.” He’d just finished speaking when another icy grip squeezed his Core, and he doubled over in pain.

“It’s happening more quickly,” he heard Gef say to Teil. “Whatever being he bargained with is not patient. Come, Victor, let’s make haste back to the bear’s trail.”

“Yeah,” Victor groaned and struggled to straighten. He felt like someone had knocked the wind out of him, but he pushed himself to begin moving back down

the game trail, keeping pace with Gef and Teil. He gathered up Thistle's lead, and, wanting to keep Lifedrinker in both hands while he jogged, he tucked the length of leather into the back of his belt. After a time, he felt like the icy grip had subsided, and he pulled up his status screen again:

Energy Affinity:

.6 (3.1), Rage 6.6 (9.1), Inspiration 4.9 (7.4)

Energy:

1841/1841 (3041)

"Fuck! Shouldn't it be getting better now that I'm back on the hunt for the bear?"

"I don't know," Gef said. "I've never had such a quest. Perhaps your patron isn't pleased with your progress?"

"Maybe the bear wreaks more havoc, and you're being punished," Teil suggested, giving Victor a rather judgemental stare.

"Well, I hope he fucking chills out because, at this rate, I'm going to have a hard fucking time fighting that thing." Victor glowered and picked up the pace, a distant alarm bell ringing in the back of his mind—this quest might be the death of him. He knew his abilities were greatly diminished already. He saw Gef and Teil exchange a pointed look, and he grunted, still jogging, "Yeah, I'm hurting, and yeah, this is going to be a hard fight, but I can still win. If you guys want to bail, though, that's fine."

He didn't fully acknowledge their responses because his ears buzzed with stress, anger, and self-judgment. Why had he been so quick to run after those tracks? Why had he leaped into battle with those trolls without listening or thinking? Was he really so hot-headed when his friends were at risk?

Did he think of them as friends? Were they more like family to him? Was it his feelings for them that made him act that way, or did it have more to do with how they felt about him? He needed to know there were people in this world that cared about him. He needed to know he wasn't alone. The thought of losing all those people in one fell swoop had brought him much closer to the madness that lurked in his rage Core.

"Victor!" Gef shouted, grabbing his shoulder. Victor stumbled to stop, realizing he was running full out, and when he looked at Gef, saw his red face and heaving chest, he realized they'd been maintaining that pace for a while. He looked around for Teil and finally caught sight of her, running up the trail, some hundred yards back. "The bear's passage through the forest is that way!" Gef pointed into the trees to the southeast.

“Shit. Sorry, Gef.” He took a few steadying breaths, patting Thistle’s shoulder and smoothing the rough, wiry hair on his shoulder. As Teil ran closer, he said, “Sorry, Teil. I need to get my head out of my ass.”

“This way. Come,” Gef said, leading the way between two trees and back into the rough passage of the great bear. Teil sighed, adjusted the bow strapped to her back, wiped the sweat from her brow, and nodded.

“If we have to hurry, so you have a chance against the bear, then I’m fine with hurrying,” she said, starting along the trail, and Victor nodded, hefting Lifedrinker and following after her.

They made good progress in the bear’s wake, and Victor felt some stress start to melt from his shoulders and neck when no further icy bands formed around his Core—hopefully, whatever force governed his quest and monitored his progress had decided to stop punishing him. He resolved to keep the pursuit of the bear foremost in his mind, though, and pushed thoughts of friends and family and how important they were to him out of his thoughts.

They’d lost a couple of hours tracking after the trolls, and the sun was high, past its zenith, when Gef stopped them at another trail, a much wider one, smooth and free of stones, and Victor knew it had been built by people, not animals. “The bear turned to the east, following this path. I think we’ve gained some ground on it!”

“Right, I’ll take the lead. Just holler if the tracks leave the path,” Victor said, starting down the trail at a jog. He heard Gef and Teil running behind him and kept his pace light, not wanting to exhaust them. Thistle’s lead was still tucked into his belt, and the animal easily loped along, making quite a racket on the hard-packed soil. After only a few minutes, Victor started to smell woodsmoke and imagined another village.

He imagined a place where frail-looking Ghelli lived peaceful, simple lives. He imagined them working in gardens or singing songs around a central campfire. Then he imagined a great, mad-eyed bear bursting upon them, slaughtering them, laying waste to their village. “All because I didn’t hurry after him like I’d promised,” Victor growled through clenched teeth, and he broke into a sprint, and only Thistle could keep pace—he left his two companions in the dust as he charged toward the imagined scene of carnage.