

Victor BK3: Ch18

Book 3: Chapter 18: The Root of Things

Victor sat on the rough-spun rug in the middle of the room, looking at Teil's naked back as she breathed the steady, slow breaths of deep sleep. They'd ended up throwing the blankets on the floor because the beds were too small for the two of them to share, especially considering Victor's size. She was beautiful, that was sure, and Victor had needed the affection, the closeness that she'd provided, at least as much as she had.

As he sat there, contemplating her, Victor tried to feel any guilt and regret, and he kept coming up empty. He cared a lot about Chandri, maybe even loved her in a way, but she'd made it pretty damn clear that he was too much for her, that the idea of getting closer to him was something frightening. In a corner of his mind, he knew he was rationalizing; Chandri might come around, they might get more intimate, and now he had this hanging over him.

"Well, it's not like we're together right now," he said softly to Lifedrinker, holding her cool, silver-streaked metal to his forehead. The axe hummed slightly, vibrating the bones in his skull, and he liked how it felt, smiling as he slowly touched his molars together and pulled them apart, allowing the vibration to rattle through them. "Getting ready to talk again soon, aren't you?" he whispered.

The room was quiet, but the night sounds of the forest were loud—crickets chirped, frogs chirruped, and night birds sang their trilling, haunting melodies. He loved it. He loved the sounds that came alive in the darkness of Fanwath, where the power of untamed nature still had that depthless, almost scary, overwhelming presence wherever people hadn't fully mastered it. He'd noticed it everywhere, from the mountains to the plains to the forest. Hell, he'd even noticed it in the mines. Nature was powerful here, and he could see why a guy like Norl would choose to study and try to master it.

Their door was secure, and though the window was open for a night breeze, and the woods outside were dark, gloomy, and full of noises, Victor's gut told him nothing dangerous was lurking there that night. He felt safe enough and wanted to make a quick Spirit Walk; he wanted to speak to Thunderbite. He thought about it for a few moments, deliberating on whether the risk was worth it, and then he had an idea. He reached into himself, touched his inspiration-attuned Energy, and he cast Manifest Spirit.

Around the room, pearlescent, white, misty forms began to coalesce, and with them, the characteristic yipping chatter of his coyote totems. Victor shushed them, and though she stirred and murmured softly in her sleep, Teil didn't wake.

His companions paced back and forth, silently padding on the hardwood floor and rug, and Victor stared at them, one by one, until they met his eyes, and he made clear his desires, thinking clearly about how they were to guard him and Teil and wake him if trouble came.

Amazingly, the coyotes seemed to understand his thoughts, taking up positions around the central rug where Victor sat and Teil slept and sitting on their haunches, patient and watchful as gargoyles. Victor nodded, softly said, "Thank you," and then he cast Spirit Walk. The cabin faded away, but

the trees drew closer, and Victor saw no more of the night sky than he had under Norl's roof. As he stood up, though, he was pleased to see misty echoes of his coyotes, their five forms still sitting in a loose circle around him.

"Spirits, eh? I guess I can see you whether I manifest you in this realm or not." The misty forms didn't respond, and they were vague enough that Victor couldn't really look them in the eyes, so he just hoped they'd keep watching his physical body for him.

He turned around in a slow circle, awed by the endless depth of the forest in the Spirit Plane. The trees were solid-looking, but they had an ethereal quality that gave them a sort of shimmer, and he could see how the moon and starlight seemed to filter down through the canopy, even though Victor couldn't see the sky.

He wasn't sure where to find Thunderbite, but the bear had said he'd have no trouble reaching him if he finished his quest, so Victor just fixed the bear solidly in his mind and started walking. He passed between great boles and smaller saplings, but his going was easy, and he noted the lack of underbrush. Was it really not there? He looked further away, between more massive trunks, and there seemed to be a lot of shadowy, glimmering undergrowth. Perhaps it simply gave way before his spirit.

Occasionally, Victor saw other spirits flitting away between trunks or even up into the high mist-veiled branches. Were they people? Animals? He didn't know, and it didn't seem to matter—they were intent on avoiding him.

After a time, he came to a clearing, and at its center was a hollow that sloped down away from the forest floor. Victor walked toward the hollow, trudging down the shallow grade, stepping around boulders wreathed in mist. As the sides of the hollow stretched up over his head, he came to a wide, sunken area before a deep, black pit of a cave.

He could feel Thunderbite within, and Victor felt very reluctant to step into the bear's home uninvited, so he called out, "Thunderbite! It's Victor! I finished your quest." No response came from the dark depths, and he cleared his throat to call out again, but a deep rumble issued forth.

"No more yelling, warrior. I come." Ponderous steps echoed up out of the darkness, accompanied by the scrape of claws on stone. After a dozen steps or so, two bright, yellow lanterns appeared in the gloom, and then they blinked, and a gray-furred muzzle and brow appeared around them.

After another step, the massive bone-spur mane of the elder spinebear came into view, and the monstrous animal padded the rest of the way out of the cave, looming over Victor like a mastiff standing over a toddler. "You've done well, Victor," the bear rumbled, and Victor stood a little taller for the praise.

"Thank you, I . . ."

"You've done well, but it could have gone better. The spirits of the forest tested you, didn't they? Set a distraction in your path to see if you'd stray from your task. You did well enough, but their test revealed much about you." The huge

bear sat back on his haunches, then ponderously laid down in front of Victor, resting his enormous head on his paws, still able to look Victor in the eyes.

“Test? The spirits were messing with me?” Victor could feel the spirit bear’s breath, strange as that was in this realm, wafting over him with each pump of his bellows-like lungs.

“You want me to unravel a mystery of your spirit, do you not? I saw enough to help you with that. I can point you to another affinity, though you might rather I didn’t.” The bear spoke slowly, and Victor felt his heart race with excitement, then felt a cold knife of worry press into his heart at the final words.

“Why would I rather you didn’t?”

“It’s not an easy affinity, warrior. It will weigh on you as much or more than your rage does. It’s not a breath of effortless air like your inspiration affinity. You’ll have to fight this affinity; you’ll have to face it down and make it your own. Your cultivation will be fraught, and you’ll curse me a hundred times before you feel you’ve gained something worthwhile from it. I can offer you a different prize if that’s more to your liking.”

Victor didn’t speak right away; instead, he thought about Thunderbite’s words. He thought about how the bear had said he’d been tested. He ran it over in his mind—an affinity that would weigh on him like his rage did. “What sort of other prize?”

“So that is your choice?”

“No! Can’t I know more before I choose?”

“Something to help you fight or something to make you stronger. I’d have to think on it a moment,” the bear rumbled, finishing his statement with a yawn. Victor felt like he was in a trap, that if he chose a new reward, he’d be disappointed. Was the bear testing him again? Did it matter? Victor wasn’t the type to back down from a challenge, despite his nerves, so he straightened his back, rested one hand on top of Lifedrinker’s head, and nodded.

“It doesn’t matter. I want my original prize, despite your warnings.”

“As I knew you would,” Thunderbite said, blinking his huge, lantern-like eyes.

“You knew?”

“Yes, even in your ignorance, you follow this affinity like a hound on a chain. You fight against it, snapping and lashing out wherever you can, but it’s there, leading you along. It’s good that you’re going to have your eyes opened to it because you should learn to take control of the chain and be the one leading the way.”

“Well? What’s the affinity?”

“Be patient. I’ll need to guide you to this slowly, else your spirit will rebel, and you might lose this opportunity. Sit.” Thunderbite blew a tremendous snort of air out of his nose, blasting the twigs and loose grass away from the ground in front of him, and Victor complied, sitting down at the bear’s paws, marveling at the size of his claws, each easily the length of Victor’s forearms.

“Shall I manipulate your Core, or would you like to try? I can guide you.” Thunderbite’s lips hardly moved while he spoke, but they did quiver up and down, and Victor, close as he was, noticed the enormous, yellow teeth in the elder’s mouth.

“I’d like to try,” Victor replied.

“Good. Turn your mind inward, look at your Core, but first, place one of your paws upon my long foreclaw. I’ll go with you and gaze upon your Energy as well.”

“All right,” Victor said, reaching out and resting his palm along the hard, black claw. It felt like touching a live wire at first, the surging Energy within so potent that Victor feared for the safety of his flesh. It faded, though, and soon it was like holding a buzzing, bucking, morphing thing—something so full of potential that it was hard to wrap his mind around its actual shape.

“Yes, I see it,” Thunderbite rumbled, but this time his voice came from within Victor’s skull, and he realized the bear had somehow merged his consciousness with his own. “Quite a job you’ve done, warrior. Your two affinities rage and pulse like twin suns—a strong configuration. We’ll build upon this.”

“Okay,” Victor said, turning his own gaze inward, trying to ignore the nuclear reactor he’d rested his hand upon.

“You should take some potential from each of your other affinities to craft your third. Gather yourself a strand from each, pull them apart and into an empty area nearby, and start to ball them together. Wrap them tightly, Victor!”

“Like this?” Victor asked, tugging a thread of Energy from his rage-attuned orb and another from his inspiration-attuned orb. He pulled the two threads out and began to weave them together, much as he did when he tried to create some courage-attuned Energy.

“Close, but stop that weave. We won’t make courage today, warrior. Simply ball the Energies together, and press with your will. Crush them tight!” The bear’s voice was louder than ever, echoing in Victor’s skull, and he winced, trying to comply.

He folded the Energies together, pressing, squeezing, driving them into a ball with all the terrible pressure he could muster with his prodigious will. “Good, see how they grow muddy? See the corruption in their attunements? You’ve broken the affinities—crushing them together without any sort of weave.”

“And that’s good?” Victor asked through clenched teeth.

“Yes!” the bear roared. “Keep pressing. Drive them together. Pull more!”

Victor complied, pulling Energy from both of his attunements, smashing them together into a ball until it was neither the white-gold of inspiration nor the throbbing crimson of rage. The third orb of Energy at his Core grew, and with each herculean, crushing press of Victor’s will, it grew denser and darker, a swirling, gray ball of Energy, not pure, but not attuned—something in between.

“Stop!” the bear roared. And Victor felt his grasp on the threads of attuned Energy slip away—the bear had pulled them loose. “You’ve taken a third of your Energy from your Core. You won’t want more than that in your new affinity.”

“How do I tell what the affinity is? This new orb feels . . . it feels wrong or something, like I can’t use it. I can’t even pull any Energy out of it.”

“Patience, warrior. Did you not say you wanted to learn?”

“Yes, sorry,” Victor said, forcing himself to take a deep breath while he studied his Core. His red and white-gold orbs still pulsed brightly, smaller than before, but not terribly. The third orb, the one he’d built, sat offset between the others, forming a sort of triangle if you drew imaginary lines between them all. It hung there, smokey and gray, and he realized it was sort of like a blank slate. It wasn’t pure Energy that could be used to craft spells; no, it was spirit Energy, part of Victor and waiting for an imprint—an attunement.

“Now, warrior, I’m going to guide you to your affinity. You must grasp it when you see it. Grab the emotions and feelings like you do when you cultivate your other attunements. Do you understand me?”

“I think so.”

“Good. Let us examine you, warrior. When you were hunting the bear, my diseased kin, but you left his trail to hunt after your loved ones, why was that?”

“I couldn’t let them get killed by trolls!”

“Why?”

“Because I care about them!”

“You do; that is right and good. Why do you care about them so? What do they make you feel?”

“Friendship?” Victor knew that answer wasn’t right, or at least not complete. He tried again, “Companionship. They make me feel like I belong somewhere. Like I have a home.”

“Now we grow closer to the point. Victor, why did you chase after your friends?”

“Because I don’t want to be alone.” Victor knew he was right before he spoke. He’d drawn the conclusion before the bear asked the question.

“You don’t want to be alone, or you fear being alone?” Thunderbite pressed.

“I fear it.” Victor shuddered at the unraveling of his motivations. He hadn’t chased after his friends for love or out of bravery—he’d done it out of fear. The idea that he could be alone in this world without anyone to care about him or return to was terrifying. He already felt like he’d lost his entire family and all of his friends on Earth—if he lost Thayla, Deyni, Chandri, Tellen, and even Chala all in one fell swoop? He’d be gutted. Would he even be able to go on?

“Good, Victor. Grab that feeling. Tell me something more, Victor. When you mated with that she-bear, that woman that helped you slay my kin, how did you feel after?”

“Uh, good?” He knew that wasn’t what the bear was getting at. “I felt good, but I felt worried. I feared how it might affect my relationship with Chandri. Shit, I even worried about how Thayla would react if she found out.” Was he really that fearful?

“Victor, are you a coward?”

“No!”

“No, indeed. Warrior that you are, how many battles have you fought?” Thunderbite’s voice rumbled, but it was low and gentle, coaxing him to see something.

“I don’t know. A lot. Many. I don’t think I could count them all.”

“You speak truly. Have you ever fled?”

“Well, I ran from a horde of giant rats but ended up fighting them all. I don’t think so?”

“Did you want to fight all those times, Victor?”

“No! Fuck no! I was forced to fight many times. Shit, man, I can’t think of a time when I went looking for a fight for the fun of it. Even when I fought for sport, you know, not to the death, but in wrestling, I was nervous, stressed, and only really happy after the match was over. I only did it because I was good at it, and the coach and my friends would lose their shit if I quit.” Victor hadn’t ever told

anyone that. Was the bear performing some sort of magic on him to make him honest?

“I ask again, Victor—are you a coward?”

“No! Goddamn it!” Victor felt some heat enter his words, and he saw his red orb of rage-attuned Energy start to bleed off into his pathways.

“Victor, you speak the truth. I would say you are a courageous man. You are brave. Can a bear, or a person, have courage if he has no fear?”

“What?”

“You constantly battle with your fear. You fear being alone. You fear your friends being harmed. You fear the consequences of fighting, not fighting, killing, or not killing. But, warrior, you never fear for your person, your physical life. You face your fear over and over again, and that makes you brave. Still, you’re much closer to your fear than your bravery. Do you feel it? Look into your mind, at your memories, and find your fear—it’s your strongest affinity.”

Victor reeled at the bear’s words. Was he really full of fear? Was he ruled by fear? He couldn’t lie about his motivation for rushing after his friends’ tracks in the forest—he feared being alone, but wasn’t that normal?

He looked back at his life before Fanwath, at his strained relationship with his family. He’d lost his connection to his mother’s family after her death. His cousins on his father’s side were distant. Yeah, it hurt, and he hated it, and things had been scary as hell when his abuelo died. Who would really care about him when his abuela followed him? She was the only person in the world—in any world—left alive that loved him unconditionally. That shit was scary.

Why did he hate fighting if he was so good at it? He wasn’t afraid of getting hurt, that was sure. Had the bear hit the nail on the head when it talked about consequences? He hated the pressure of people, including himself, expecting him to win. That feeling before the match or fight that he had to perform, that people were watching and counting on him. He feared failure. Did it really rule him so? Had he failed to finish Rellia out of fear? When he’d imagined Yrella and his rage had faded, and he’d let Rellia live, was he doing what he thought was right, or was he being a chicken?

“I’m not a fucking chickenshit!” he growled. The bear didn’t respond, and he kept thinking. Yes, he often acted based on a deep-rooted fear, a dread of what could be. He didn’t let those feelings force him into acting like a coward, though. He lived with them, and he overcame them. “Sure, I have fear. It’s a big part of me and why I do things, but I don’t let it win. I don’t let it freeze me up, and I never act like a coward.”

“Agreed, but when the fear does overcome you, you must acknowledge it. Face it, gather it, use it. When you fled the path of Bitterpaw to chase after your friends, you didn’t act out of courage. Come, face it. Gather it. Use it!”

Victor forced his mind back and remembered how he'd felt when he'd imagined a gang of trolls ambushing the people he cared about. He forced himself to relive how he'd felt when Teil had said the trolls were having a feast. He'd panicked. He'd charged into a battle with no thought because of the hopeless well of despair that yawned at the core of his being when he'd imagined life with no one that knew or cared about him.

Victor gasped as he felt that despair, that terrible fear, and grabbed ahold of the feeling. He choked out a sob and yanked it close, and then, acting on instinct, he drove that feeling into the ball of shifting gray Energy at his Core.

He felt a cold, dark hunger come to life in the center of his being, and he watched as the gray orb bloomed with a terrible new life—dark and angry, swirling with hunger, it took on a purple-black aspect, pulsing in counterpoint to the furious crimson and bright white-gold of his other affinities.

Victor looked at his status to see what he'd done:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

3041/3041

“You’ve done it, warrior. I hope this new affinity will not bring you more pain than you bargained for. At the very least, you’ve learned much about yourself on this journey.”

“What? That I’m a coward? Filled with fear?” Victor couldn’t believe his affinity for fear was higher than rage. He closed his spirit body’s eyes and shook his head. This couldn’t be real—he’d come looking for a new boost, a way to better himself, and all he’d done was expose that he’d been acting out of fear for most of his life.

“Come, we just spoke of this. You’re smarter than that, Victor. A bear with no fear cannot be brave, simply bold. To show bravery, you must overcome fear, and you do so all the time.”

“But it’s . . . it’s so high! I’m closer to fear than rage? It doesn’t even make sense! Why did I find my rage affinity first?”

“Your rage is a response to your fear, Victor. It’s how you fight through it. That doesn’t mean it’s not there, underlying your actions, your motivations, your feelings, and your words. Now you know it, warrior—turn it to your advantage. Face your fears when they come bubbling up; show your enemies what you deal with all the time. Make them cower!” The great bear snuffed and lifted his head, looking into the distance. “Go now. Our bargain is done. I wish you luck, Victor Sandoval.”

“You know me so well?”

“I do,” The bear said, twitching his paw and extricating his long, powerful claw from Victor’s hand. “I do,” he said more softly, huffing a warm breath at Victor. “Know that if all else is gone, if all else gets broken into dust, you’ve made a friend here, a friend who admires your bravery.”

The bear lifted one paw and, quicker than Victor thought possible, tapped it against his chest. The twilight Spirit Plane faded away, and Victor found himself sitting in Norl’s guest room, Teil still sleeping peacefully in a nest of blankets and his coyotes looking at him with expectant eyes.

“Thanks,” he whispered, dismissing his spirit totems, and they faded away, dispersing into a pale mist that wafted into nothing.

Victor sighed heavily and lay back, stretching his back and legs out so the blood could flow into his cramped muscles. He must have been on his Spirit Walk for a few hours at least, judging by how he felt.

He held a hand up in front of his eyes and flexed his long, thick fingers into a fist, releasing it again as he thought about what he’d done. In a way, he wished he’d taken the bear’s offer and accepted another reward—he could have been happy with rage and inspiration. He could have lived his life with those two affinities, but now he had this dark ball of fear at his Core.

“God,” he whispered, “if I thought cultivating rage sucked, wait ‘til I start analyzing how I was fucking scared all the time.” He lay there for a long time, thinking about things and wondering if he should be upset or happy, annoyed that he couldn’t really decide. Was it true? Had he been scared all of his life? He supposed there had to be some truth in it, especially as he looked at his Core and saw the glowering ball of purple-black Energy—there was no doubt his affinity with it was strong.

“Doesn’t mean I have to let it rule me. Now I know about it, I can use it. I can face my fears and not let them control me.” Victor startled himself when he realized he was holding Lifedrinker against his chest and directing his whispers to her. Holding her, he realized that when she’d given herself to him and shared everything she had to save him, he’d been afraid.

Victor had been afraid that she was doing something he didn’t deserve, that she was making a sacrifice that he’d squander. He’d worried that her faith in him was misplaced and that he’d fail to restore her. He really did seem to have fear at the root of many of his thoughts and actions.

Victor focused on those memories, on how he’d felt, and he found the seeds of his despair and grabbed them, pulling them out of the memories, and, just as he had with his rage, he made a construct of fear that he could study, focus on, and use to cultivate his new affinity.

“Take that shit, pendejo!” he hissed through the discomfort of the memory.

“Already facing this bullshit down.” Pride blossomed in his chest, and he knew, then and there, that he’d made the right decision—if he hadn’t learned this about himself, it still would have been there. At least now he could improve himself and use it.

“What are you doing?” Teil’s voice was sleepy, and Victor realized what a sight he must be, lying on his back, wearing just his pants, with his axe on his chest, talking to himself.

“Eh, just cultivating.”

“Put that axe down and come closer; it’s cold out there,” she said, lifting her blanket as an invitation. Victor thought about it, about his gut reaction to do what she asked, to put off facing his reality for a while, and then he sat up and pulled his shirt out of his storage ring.

“Actually, Teil, I’m gonna get an early start. I miss my friends, and I want to spend some time with them before I take off for what will probably be a long time. You okay?”

“Mmhmm. I’m okay, Victor,” she said, opening her eyes and pulling her blanket back tight under her chin. She smiled, though it didn’t seem to be reflected in her eyes. “I’m sad, and I’ll need a lot of time to get over things, but you helped. You helped me a lot, Victor. Thank you.”

“I hope . . . I hope things are better for you, Teil. Take care, all right?”

“You too, hero. You too.”