

Victor BK3: Ch30

Book 3: Chapter 30: Lifting Spirits

Victor opened his mouth and tried to think of the perfect thing to say but came up short. Instead, he tossed Valla's sword into the grass next to her, strode forward, and grabbed her shoulders. She tried to flinch away, and as his hands grabbed her, she scowled and jerked back, but Victor held on and cast Inspiring Presence, shouting, "Valla! Get ahold of yourself!"

As Victor's warm, positive Energy surged through his pathways and out, he saw it wash over her, saw her eyes, previously unfocused and crazed, narrow, and, for the first time, really look at his face. She stopped jerking and took in a deep, shuddering breath. Victor felt a surge of relief wash over him, perhaps an effect of his spell, but he knew it was warranted—it was working. Valla had grown calm and reached a hand up to wipe at her eyes shakily.

"What, on my Ancestor's Bones, was that?" she asked, looking past Victor's shoulder toward the woods. "Why did I think it was you?"

Victor thought about the question, thought about the easiest way to make things right, but he knew better than that—that was a fearful response, and he wasn't going to give into fear anymore.

"Because it was me. I fucked up and cast a spell I wasn't ready for."

Valla looked at him quizzically and, with the light of inspiration behind her eyes, said, "Well, I'm glad you figured it out. Did you see those hounds? They saved me, I think."

"Those were my spirit totems. Yeah, I'm glad I summoned them before I cast the other spell. They represent the best part of me, Valla. At least those did—I called them with courage-attuned Energy." Victor looked around the cold field and saw a farmer had stopped his wagon on the dirt road leading to the gates and was staring at them. The man raised a hand and waved, and Victor waved back, wondering if he was just making sure they were all right.

"Courage . . ." she sighed, shaking her head. "I could use some of that right now. Victor, I never felt such terror. I'm ashamed!" she hissed, pulling out of his grip and looking around the field until her eyes fell on her sword. "I don't deserve that sword. I left it and ran!"

"Hey, chill with that stuff, Valla. That was a powerful spell—it got into your mind and made you see things that weren't real. You weren't yourself. That was one hundred percent my fault. If it makes you feel better, I lost control of myself too! It was fucking awful. I feel absolutely wrecked about what I did to you!"

"This spell—you don't have to cast it?" Valla asked, wiping at her nose where it had started to run. Victor thought it was more due to the chilly air than her crying. She seemed to have gotten a grip on herself. Before he answered, Victor bent down to pick up her sword and held the hilt out toward her.

"Fuck no; I don't. I'll never cast that again if anyone I care about is within ten miles of me. No fuck that, a hundred miles. Maybe if I'm in an enemy castle and

there's no other way out, maybe I'd try it then, but it'll be a last resort. I need to talk to Oynalla about it, about what went wrong. She might have some ideas for me."

Valla took her sword, to Victor's relief, and whipped it through the air, sending the leaves and bits of mud flying off it to spatter in the frosty grass. She drew the blade over her sleeve, further cleaning it, and then it disappeared, presumably stored in her dimensional container. "I'll hold you to that, Victor. I don't want to encounter that side of you ever again." She paused and looked into his eyes, her seafoam green irises clear and focused once again, "Also, thank you."

"Thank you? For what?"

"For this," she touched her chest, right below her throat. "Your inspiration spell. It helped me to see things the way they were, helped me to push that horror out of my mind."

"The least I could do! Again, I'm sorry, Valla. C'mon, let's get to the inn and have a hot meal, hmm? Something to put this chilly, creepy experience out of our minds."

"Yes." She nodded and turned to start walking, and Victor smiled when she slowed, waiting for him to keep pace with her.

"What do you say we stop by a bookshop on the way? I've wanted to buy some for a while." Victor reached up to his chest to feel Gorz's outline.

"What kinds of books?"

"All kinds, but I'd love to get my hands on some history books or an atlas."

"Ahh! I know a good place—I've seen it off Gaul-dak Square a few times and thought about stopping in. Never had the time," she said with a shrug. They finally crossed the field and came to the berm leading up to the road. Victor hopped over the loose soil and stones to the flat, graveled surface and held his hand out for Valla. She smirked and hopped up next to him, giving his hand a slap.

"Right," Victor laughed, having momentarily forgotten how this woman could move when she held a sword in her hand—something like a cross between an Olympic gymnast and a ballerina.

"The thought was nice, I guess," Valla laughed. They walked through the gates, Victor once again hooded with Hine's big cloak. He let Valla do the talking, and soon they were working their way through busy streets that smelled like animals, sweat, and food. Victor's stomach started to growl, and he fantasized about some hot albondigas soup, wishing his abuela was waiting for him back at the inn with a pot simmering on the stove.

“I hope Hine has some good soup in the kitchen; this is perfect weather for it.”

“I agree! It feels like we might be in for some snow tonight. Feel that breeze? Look to the north—see those dark gray clouds?”

“Yeah. Aren’t there, like, people with weather magic or something?”

“Yes, I’m sure if we were at Rellia’s estate, she’d have told us exactly what to expect from the weather. We could probably ask around the town and get some concrete information—Weather Witches are common enough.”

“Can they control the weather?”

“Not usually, and only in small areas when they can. The one that works for Rellia is good at predicting the weather and can keep the worst of storms from affecting the grounds of her estate.”

“That’s pretty cool, though,” Victor nodded as they walked along. They continued through the city for a good ten or fifteen minutes, and then they entered a market square dominated by a large bronze statue at its center. It depicted a warrior with a giant curved sword riding atop a mount that reminded Victor of a velociraptor. “Who’s that?”

“Gaul-dak. He was a hero in the early days of Fanwath—killed a lot of Yovashi. Now he lives in Tharcray when he’s not off-world.”

“Not here? You’d think he’d want to see his statue!”

“Oh, I’m sure there are statues and streets named after him in Tharcray, too. There’s the bookstore,” Valla said, pointing to a corner shop with window displays of stacked books. A wooden pyrographed sign above the door read, “The Sisters’ Books.” Next to the lettering were painted depictions of the two sister moons of Fanwath.

“Seems like the third moon doesn’t get much attention,” Victor said.

“Well, the sisters are in the sky more when it’s dark. Easier to notice them, right? Also, don’t worry; there are cults dedicated to Dohl.”

“Dohl? That’s the name of the third moon? Do the sisters have names?”

“Yes,” Valla said, reaching to open the shop’s door, “Thivia and Galia.”

Victor grunted, acknowledging the information while he surveyed the inside of the little shop. Thousands of books lined the walls and stood in stacks all over the wooden floor, and he was instantly doused in the smell of them—musty with a hint of dust, but this shop had something more. He could smell the scent of oiled leather and spice, and all together, he found he quite liked it. A

young woman, a Ghelli with tiny wings and bright red hair, sat on a stool near the front counter. She looked up at their approach and smiled, though she didn't say anything.

"Miss," Valla said, striding forward. "Could you direct us to texts on the history of Fanwath, its cities, and its wars?"

"Oh, sure," she said, yawning and putting her book down on the counter. "Let's see." She walked around a stack of dusty texts toward the wall to Victor's right. The young woman looked over the bookcases as she walked, and when she stood in the middle, she gestured vaguely toward six or eight shelves and said, "These should cover that request."

"Thanks." Victor squeezed past Valla so he could walk between some stacks toward the wall. His axe haft brushed against a narrow column of texts, and it tottered and would have collapsed had Valla not quickly put out a hand to balance it.

"Please be careful!" the young shopkeeper said, scowling at Victor. He was still hooded and cloaked, and she added, "We don't normally get Vodkin in here. I'll have to tell Mr. Vollun to widen the aisles!"

Victor laughed and pulled his hood down. "I'm not a Vodkin, but yeah, I'll try to be careful. Hey, while I'm looking at these books, can you find me a few volumes with maps in them? I'm mostly looking for maps of the Empire and the surrounding areas, but I'll take anything."

"Oh," the girl seemed flustered at mistakenly calling Victor a Vodkin, and her pale skin blushed a brilliant shade of red. "I'll see what I can find," she squeaked and hurried behind the counter.

"Silly girl," Valla said from near Victor's left elbow, and he looked down at her to see amusement in her eyes.

"I'm glad you're feeling better," he said.

"Yes, I am. The horror of that experience is fading quickly. I think that's a good sign—you were right that my behavior was caused by the magic you wielded, not by a failing in my character."

"Exactly!" Victor clapped his hands together for emphasis. "If that was a reflection of anyone's character, it was mine." He glanced at her, saw a puzzled look in her eyes, and added, "I'll explain it some time, but trust me: spirit Cores can be a real bitch to deal with."

"Veeja's Treatises," Valla said, pointing, "Those are very good. Rellia made me study them. You're in luck; I see the whole series on wars and the empire." Victor followed her finger and saw two rows of books with similar bindings and a stylized, gold-leaf "Veeja," printed over numerals one through eight and one through six.

“Cool,” Victor said, reaching up to pull them down. He carried them to the counter, four at a time, and Valla helped. By the time they’d set all the books down, the young Ghelli had returned with a huge leather-bound book. It was easily two feet square, and the cover was embossed with a stitched map depicting mountains, rivers, and lakes. Colorful stars represented cities and towns, and Victor didn’t have to guess the contents of its pages.

“This atlas is rather in demand at the moment, but we have a few copies. It’s the latest edition of Gorndilia’s Wide Surveys.

“Nice,” Victor said, nodding. “I’ll take that and these Veeja books.”

The girl’s eyes bulged, “All of them?”

“Yep,” Victor said, and before he could reach into his dimensional container, Valla put a hand on the counter holding an official-looking signet ring.

“House ap’Yensha will pay for them,” she said and looked at Victor, “They’re part of the lady’s spring campaign expenses.”

“Oh! I’m so sorry! I didn’t realize you were representing the ap’Yensha clan. Of course . . . Will you be taking them with you, or shall I have them delivered to the estate?”

“We’ll take them,” Victor said.

“Excellent. Give me a moment to write up a bill of sale, and then we can have you sign it, Lady . . .” she trailed off, looking at Valla hopefully.

“Valla ap’Yensha, and please address me as Captain, not Lady.”

“I’m so sorry! One minute please,” the woman said, and then she lifted a black slate and quill. She carefully traced the names of the books onto the slate, and Victor saw the lettering appear in the stone as if etched. When she was done, she placed the slate before Valla, who touched her finger to it. A pulse of crackling electrical Energy shot over the slate’s surface, and the woman took it back and nodded with a pleased smile.

“Take your books, Victor,” Valla said, gesturing.

“Thanks,” he said and touched each book, sending them all into his storage ring.

“Please pass my regards on to the Lady ap’Yensha! Thank you for your patronage, Captain Valla,” the young woman called as they wended back through the stacks of books to the door. Once they were outside, Victor chuckled and looked at Valla.

“Are you going to get in trouble for that?”

“For what?”

“For spending that money and saying you’re an ap’Yensha!”

“No, Victor. I told you Rellia was like a mother to me, didn’t I?”

“Yeah, the key word being ‘like,’” he chuckled.

“Well, she adopted me, so I suppose, legally, I’m her daughter.”

“What the fuck?” Victor hadn’t been able to edit his outburst; it came out so quickly.

“What?” Valla looked a little surprised by Victor’s explosive tone, but he saw a bit of a smirk tilting the corner of her mouth.

“Oh, I don’t know. Never mind—maybe I’m just stupid; I should have put two and two together,” Victor laughed, shaking his head as they resumed their walk through town. “How much were those books, anyway?”

“Less than three thousand beads.”

“Shit! Rellia’s going to be pissed!”

“No, she’s not!” Valla laughed and took hold of Victor’s shoulder, giving it a comradely squeeze. “It’s a good investment! How can she expect you to lead her expedition if you haven’t learned about important wars or even the lay of the land? I’ll be happy to explain this purchase to her.”

“If you say so.” Victor grinned at the idea of Rellia receiving that bill. They made their way back to the inn, and Victor went up to his room while Valla got them some food. She still wanted him to try to keep a low profile while they waited to make their next move against Lord ap’Horrin, Boaegh, and his band of summoners.

Victor was thrilled when Valla showed up carrying a small cask with one of Hine’s kitchen staff in tow, holding a pot of steaming soup and two bowls. He gave the young man a couple of beads and then locked the door, and the two of them spent the evening eating vegetable and pultii soup—a game bird that tasted very much like turkey—and drinking a sweat, honeyed mead. By the time the cask was empty and their bellies were stuffed, Valla claimed to be feeling much better, and the two of them agreed to turn in early.

After Victor saw Valla to her room, he closed his door, threw the bolt, and pulled one of his chairs over to it, jamming it up under the handle. He prowled around his room, jabbing Lifedrinker into the shadows, making sure some invisible lurker wasn’t hanging around. That done, he made sure the windows were latched and went into the bathroom, again locking the door.

Nodding to himself in satisfaction, he cast Manifest Spirit using inspiration-attuned Energy, and when his white-gold coyotes were curled up around him, he cast Spirit Walk. Victor stood up on the spirit plane and immediately started marching toward the east, his mind set on Oynalla, hoping she

was out that night—she seemed to have an uncanny knack for knowing when Victor would come looking for her, so he was hopeful.

He felt lonely striding through the twilight plains, the brilliant, limitless starfield stretching out over his head. Victor had grown accustomed to having his companion coyotes walk with him, but they couldn't do that while they watched his body, and he felt that was the more important job for them at the moment. Idly, he wondered what it would be like to have a place of his own, someplace where he could feel secure while he cast spells like Spirit Walk. "Maybe one of these days, I'll build that hermitage or whatever it's called."

Victor's journey was quick and uneventful—it seemed the more he gained power and control over his spirit-self, the more other spirits seemed to give him space; he wasn't sure if it was a show of respect or fear, and again, he was bothered by the loneliness of it, but he knew it was for the best—it might be fun to glimpse animal spirits here and there or notice the passing of another Spirit Walker, but it was safer for all involved if he didn't have to deal with any challenges.

Suddenly, Victor found himself striding down a familiar slope. He could hear the babbling of Oynalla's brook up ahead, and he knew he'd been lucky, yet again—Oynalla was waiting for him. He broke into a trot, flying down the hill, through the tall birch-like trees, and into her clearing. When Victor caught sight of Oynalla, he was happy to see that she was waiting with Thayla for his arrival.

"Old Mother," he said, hurrying forward to sit next to Thayla before the young-old Oynalla, and she looked up at him with concern in her eyes.

"I felt your struggle earlier." She glanced at Thayla as if weighing what words to use in front of her, but then she scowled and added, "Did I not warn you about that affinity?"

Thayla reached a slightly luminescent hand out to take hold of his and smiled at him while Oynalla continued, "I can see that your spirit is still bright. You won your first battle with your fear, though it might not feel like it, warrior."

"I won? I don't think so, Oynalla! I totally lost control of myself! I almost killed a friend . . ." he glanced at Thayla, suddenly very thankful that she and Deyni were so far away from him.

"Did you kill your friend? Did you destroy her mind with terror?"

"No, I had cast Manifest . . ."

"No! That's right, Victor. If you had lost that battle, there would be great tragedy behind your eyes, and your soul would be many shades darker. Whatever you did to banish the fear away and not run amok, savaging innocents, be glad for it. Be proud of yourself, Victor—you've done well to gird yourself against the darker Energies of your spirit. Your soul is strong, your heart is true, and you have powerful Energies and allies to aid you."

“The weave worked,” Victor said, suddenly remembering his success with justice-attuned Energy.

“You created justice?” Oynalla cackled, though it never sounded quite right coming from her younger form—more a sharp laugh than a true cackle.

“Yes! I learned some new spells, obviously one I won’t ever use again.”

“What?” Thayla asked.

“Why?” Oynalla echoed.

“Um, were you guys asleep just now? Didn’t I tell you I almost killed my friend?”

“Victor, do you conquer fear by hiding from it?” Oynalla chuckled and gave Thayla a knowing look.

“You were right,” Thayla said, grinning and shaking her head.

“What?” Victor asked, starting to feel pissed off.

“Oynalla said you’d swear off using your fear Energy after what she felt earlier. I was dumb enough to make a bet with her!”

“Well, you guys didn’t fucking go through that, did you? It’s not a joke, all right?”

“You didn’t answer my question, warrior,” Oynalla said, tsking her tongue.

“What? Oh, well, no, I guess I can’t conquer fear by being afraid of it, but I’m trying to protect innocent people, don’t you see that? You’re the one that told me to be cautious!”

“True, and cautious you must be, but you’ve felt its bite now. Next time you’ll have the upper hand. Keep strengthening your will, and keep building your Core stronger and stronger. When next you let the fear-beast ride your skin, you tell it who the lord is!”

“If you say so . . .” Victor said, but Oynalla held up a hand and continued speaking.

“Tell me, warrior, why do you never manifest your other totem?”

“Huh?” Victor’s mind raced as he tried to make sense of the Old Mother’s words. Did she mean using a different Energy to summon his coyotes? He’d tried most of them by now; he supposed he’d yet to try his new Justice weave. Would that allow the coyotes to hunt his enemies? “I . . .” he started, but then he remembered—when he’d killed Bitterpaw, gained a level in Spirit Carver, and improved his Manifest Spirit and Shape Spirit spells, he’d gained access to another totem. “Fuck me, have I been damaged in the brain from all the hits I’ve taken?”

“Hah!” Oynalla cackled, and this time it sounded right. Thayla giggled and squeezed his hand.

“So, warrior? You had a hard day; why not see if another totem might help you sleep more easily?” Oynalla grinned at him slyly, her magenta eyes twinkling in the starlight. Victor couldn’t help smiling in response, his mood already considerably lifted simply from being able to spend time with the two women.

“Right now? Can I cast Shape Spirit here?”

“What better place?” Oynalla nodded enthusiastically.

“Will you two be able to come with me?”

“We’ll follow behind—don’t think about us, lest you influence your choices.”

“Right,” Victor said, standing up and looking around. The little clearing was idyllic, as usual. The grass was soft, the trees tall and peacefully swaying in the ever-present breeze. Between the wind whispering through the leaves and the brook babbling in the background, Victor knew he could very easily sleep there. “Not that I need to sleep right now,” he muttered, then he cleared his mind and cast Shape Spirit.

The last time he’d cast it, he’d stepped from the ordinary world into the Spirit Plane, but this time he was already there. Nothing really changed except for a tugging at his Core, a feeling like he should walk along the ridgeline above, so he started up the hill. When he came up out of Oynalla’s hollow, he turned left and followed the feeling at his center.

As he walked, the grass grew long, and the forest to his left seemed to fade away to more grasslands. The warmth in his Core swelled, and Victor felt it tugging to the right, and he turned just in time to see a luminescent, nearly spectral mustang charging over the grass. As it raced past him, it lifted its head in a mighty, trumpeting neigh, and Victor felt his heart stir with emotion. “What a beauty you are!” he called after the horse. It was fast and agile, as it demonstrated, standing on its hind legs, lifting its forehooves in the air, and whinnying as it looked at Victor.

“What fun it would be to charge through town or over the grasslands on your back, eh, hermoso? I don’t know, though, sir—I have a good mount, and I’m not sure you’re the right fit for me right now. I’ll find you if I change my mind!” Victor called as the stallion neighed again and charged off over the grasslands, its hooves reverberating like thunder. Victor smiled, watching it fade away; he didn’t worry that he’d made a mistake, for he knew his soul would pull him back to the horse if he decided it was the right totem for him.

A thought lurked in the back of his mind, though—he had fighting to do and dangerous enemies to meet. He kept remembering his coyotes staked out by the Pyromancer’s flaming spears. They were brave companions and great at harrying an enemy that Victor could put pressure on, but they were limited when it came to fighting a strong opponent on their own. Shouldn’t he be looking for a totem that wasn’t so easily brushed aside?

An image came to his mind—on his first totem quest, he'd come across a mighty old bear, and something had made him turn away from it. Maybe he'd feel differently this time. "Maybe I need to look at that old oso again, eh?" As the words left his lips, Victor felt another tug at his Core, and he turned to his left, walking down an incline he hadn't noticed before. A thick, twilit forest loomed ahead of him, and Victor grinned as he followed the tugging sensation into the woods.