

Victor BK3: Ch31

Book 3: Chapter 31: Portents and Prophecies

Victor watched the enormous dark-furred bear, once again fishing the sparkling waters of the twilight stream. The bear was a mighty creature with long, shaggy fur and a massive set of shoulders that rose in a hump of muscle over its huge head. It grumbled and huffed as it fished through the water, and though it resembled grizzly bears Victor had seen in VR, it stood taller, with longer limbs than any bear he'd ever seen depicted. It seemed primal, ancient, something from a time long before humanity had dominated the lands of Earth.

“Well, shit, maybe you aren't from Earth,” Victor said, though he felt like the bear was—weren't coyotes and mustangs from Earth? It felt to him that his spirit totems were rooted in his experiences and the experiences of his ancestors. Maybe it had something to do with his bloodline or even his DNA.

He started down the wooded slope to the stream, walking tall with his head high, staring at the bear, waiting for it to look his way. As he cleared the woodline and stepped along the water bank, the great bear lifted its head from the water, a glistening, massive fish in its maw. Luminescent blood dripped from where huge teeth pierced the fish's scales as the great creature stared at Victor. The bear had bright, deep-set brown eyes, and though Victor was still twenty paces from it, across a ribbon of flowing water, he could see the intelligence therein.

The bear closed its jaws, bisecting the fish and letting the two halves drop to the rocky shore at its feet. Before Victor could guess its next move, the mountain of fur and muscle bounded into the stream, splashing through the crystal waters in an explosion of frothing spray. Victor stood stock still, staring at the enormous creature as it rushed through the water and up the stony shore to stand before him.

The bear towered over him, hunching its boulder-like shoulders to lower its head to stare into Victor's eyes. It huffed damp, hot, copper-scented breath into his face, but the only sound that emerged from its sedan-sized chest was a low rumble that sounded more like a welcome than a warning. Victor grinned and reached up a hand to scratch at the bear's shaggy, wet jaw. He had nothing to fear here, for wasn't this totem a part of him, a fragment of his spirit?

When he'd found his coyotes, Victor had awoken shortly after from his Spirit Walk, the purpose of his Shape Spirit spell having been met. This time, things were different; Victor had cast the spell while already on the Spirit Plane, and though he'd made his decision, welcoming the bear into his heart, he still stood there with his new totem. “Get your fish, big oso! I don't have work for you right now.”

The bear huffed another hot, fishy breath into his face and then turned and bounded through the water, snatching up another fish on its way back to its meal. A snap of a twig alerted Victor to movement behind him, and he turned, smiling, and said, “There you are, Old Mother.”

“Getting too clever for your britches,” the young, beautiful version of Oynalla said, grinning as she made her way down the slope to the creek.

“To be fair, his britches are pretty big,” Thayla said, following behind the old Spirit Caster. She glanced past Victor to the bear and said, “Couldn’t you find a bigger totem?”

“He and I have some pretty bad assholes to deal with. I thought he was a better choice right now than a mustang.”

“Mustang?”

“The horse that ran up to me on the grassland.” Victor gestured up the hill toward the vast plains where he’d been walking earlier.

“Oh, we didn’t see that, warrior,” Oynalla replied. “We tried to follow you, but it’s hard to keep pace with a Spirit Walker until they stop for a while.”

“Horse?” Thayla said, still trying to make sense of Victor’s words.

“Uh, it’s a kind of animal from my world that people use for mounts. Maybe I’ll get another chance to pick him someday, and then I can show you.”

“Your mastery of the spirit begins to extend into areas I’ve only heard of in old stories. I wouldn’t be surprised if you earn another totem,” Oynalla said, nodding. “Well, warrior? Thayla’s time grows short—she’ll need to leave the Spirit Plane soon. I still have a word or two for you, so say your goodbyes to her.”

Something about her words or her delivery sounded ominous to Victor, so he let the smile fall away from his face and took her words seriously. “Come here,” he said, walking toward Thayla and reaching out to hug her. As she folded into his embrace, he said, to the top of her head, “I’m so glad I can still hug you in this realm. I needed this.” He kissed her soft, luminescent black hair, and she squeezed him tightly in her arms.

“I know things aren’t easy for you, Victor,” she said, pulling back so she could look into his face. “Don’t let Old Mother fool you—she was distraught when she felt your struggles. She tried to play it off, but I could feel it and got worried too. I’m glad you’re okay, and you need to remember that we’re here for you, all right?”

“I know, Thayla. It means everything to me. Please give Deyni a hug and tell her I miss her.”

“I will. Take care, Victor,” Thayla said, squeezing the backs of his arms and looking him in the eyes, her magenta irises shimmering in the strange light of the Spirit Plane. He opened his mouth to say something else, but then she simply faded away, and Victor knew she’d ended her Spirit Walk.

“Well, warrior? Come sit with Oynalla by the river a moment.”

Victor looked toward her voice and saw that the young-looking Old Mother had taken a seat on a flat stone, and she pointed to the rock across from her. He walked over and grunted as he ponderously lowered his bulk to the little stone. “You know, some people aren’t as close to the ground as you are.”

“Hush! Young as you are! Complaining about sitting with an old woman!”

“You’re not . . .”

“Hush, now! I have important things to say. When I felt your struggles earlier, I cast my strongest divination, trying to see what I could of you and your path. Victor, your future was obscured from me, but I felt you have dire challenges ahead.” She paused, and Victor thought about her words; they didn’t really bother him. What else was new? He’d had one “dire” struggle after another since those assholes yanked him out of his abuela’s living room.

“Yeah?” he said, and from Oynalla’s facial expression, she’d been expecting something more. “Look, Oynalla, what can I say? I’m doing my best to prepare for trouble. I’ve made some boneheaded mistakes in the past, but my friend and I are trying to be smart now. She’s seeking information, and I’m not planning to do anything stupid. If there are struggles ahead, I’ll face ‘em as they come.”

“Oh, Victor! I know you’ve had a hard road, and I debated even telling you about this, but I felt I should help you to prepare, if not physically, at least mentally. You have to be ready for more setbacks, for further losses. You have to focus on the strength here,” she held a flat hand to his stomach, and Victor knew she was talking about his Core, “and never give in to your darker aspects.

“Keep working to master your fear; keep working to master your rage. Use your Energy for good. Remember that things go on past the life you’re living on Fanwath. Look around you—spirits are real, and you want yours to be bright and strong. Never let it grow twisted with hatred or fear. Never let your light, your light in here,” this time she held her hand over his heart, “grow dim. Do you promise me?”

Victor reached up and put his rough, heavy hand over Oynalla’s slender, delicate red fingers, and he said, “I promise, Oynalla. I won’t let you down. When I think about my life here on Fanwath and all the things I’ve done, nothing brings me more joy than when I’ve managed to do something that felt right. I don’t cherish my memories of fighting, of killing; I cherish my time with Deyni, with Chandri. Nothing feels so good as to stand up for people who can’t help themselves. That’s who I am,” Victor squeezed her hand and thumped it against his chest, “in here.”

“Good, warrior. Good. I’ll listen to the spirits, and I’ll come when you’re here looking for me.” She pulled his big hand up to her face and kissed the backs of his knuckles, and then she was gone, slipping through his fingers like mist. Victor found himself holding his hands out as if to grasp at the remnants of her

spirit, and then his eyes started to fill with moisture, and he furiously scrubbed at them with the backs of his hand.

“Why did that feel like she was saying goodbye? Like, really saying goodbye?” he asked the Spirit Plane. No answer came to him from the babbling brook or the luminescent sky, and he sighed heavily, reached inside himself, and ended his Spirit Walk.

Victor opened his eyes to his dim bathroom and faintly glowing, silvery coyote companions. “Thank you,” he said as they stood up from where they’d been lying around him, some yipping and licking at his face. Victor laughed and continued, “I’m safe and home now. You guys can get some rest.” Then he canceled his Manifest Spirit spell.

Victor still felt a little hollow pit at the center of his stomach from Oynalla’s words as he opened the door and looked to the window to try to gauge how long he’d been gone—the sky outside was still dark, and rather than look at his watch to see the exact time, he decided to crawl into bed. Victor was tired and knew that if he saw the time, and if it were early morning, he might decide to stay awake. He kicked off his boots, shrugged out of his clothes, and collapsed onto the comforter, unable to summon the effort to pull it over himself.

He woke to the sound of steady knocking at his door. When he looked around, eyes bleary, he saw bright light through his window and could smell the unmistakable aroma of bacon, or at least lard, cooking. The knocks at his door were steady and insistent, but he lay there on his back, blinking his eyes and stretching for a minute or two, trying to think about his dreams but failing to bring them into his conscious mind.

The knocks kept coming, and as he woke up, he found it harder and harder to ignore them, so he grunted, lurched out of bed, and made his way over to the door. “Who is it?” He knew it would be Valla, but he felt like making her announce herself.

“It’s Valla!” She sounded a little strained, and Victor suddenly felt guilty for not hurrying more. He unlocked the door, and as soon as the bolt slid free, it swung wide, and Valla stood there, green eyebrows brooding and lips pressed into a thin line. She looked Victor up and down and said, “Well? Please put on some pants and move so I can come in.”

“Right,” Victor said, glancing at himself—he wore a pair of knit holbyis wool underwear, and, in his opinion, they were modest enough. Still, he walked over to the bathroom, splashed water on his face, and got dressed. When he returned to the larger space, Valla had taken a seat at the table and arrayed some documents on the wood in front of her.

“I have some information on ap’Horrin’s estate.” She tapped the papers in front of her and smiled. “You don’t normally sleep so much! It’s nearly noon, and I was starting to think something might be wrong.” For the first time, Victor realized she hadn’t been so much annoyed by his slow response to her knocking as she had been worried.

“Ah, shit. Sorry if you were worried. I, well, I didn’t go right to sleep last night. I think I fell asleep right before dawn.” He walked over and pulled out a chair, sitting to her left so he could look at the pages she’d laid out.

“Oh! I should have let you sleep. My apologies.”

“Nah, stop it. I’m fine—don’t usually need much sleep, but I think last night took a lot outta me; I went on a Spirit Walk.”

“Victor! Who watched your body?” She scooted out her chair, and he could see that she was warring with how to respond to him; was she guilty, angry, annoyed? He didn’t think she could decide.

“Relax! I had my spirit coyotes watch over me. You know, the ones that protected you in the forest. Besides, you were shit-faced.”

“What?”

“I mean drunk. You were drunk and needed your sleep. You had a rough day, too, right?” He could see turning the conversation to her was making her uncomfortable; she straightened, looked down at the table, and then cleared her throat, pulling one of the papers in front of Victor.

“I have a map of ap’Horrin’s estate. More importantly, one of my agents managed to observe Pyromancer Boaegh’s movements yesterday. She followed him to a secured, guarded door and her investigations revealed that it was a place ap’Horrin calls his ‘oubliette.’”

“Oh, fuck,” Victor said, remembering the agent of ap’Horrin’s that he killed in Gelica. “I’ve heard that word before—I think it’s where ap’Horrin keeps his pet Yovashi. It’s where he broke my Core.”

“Well, Rasha, my agent, did some research at the city records hall. There are some indications that the oubliette was built atop a much older structure that existed on ap’Horrin’s grounds when his ancestors built their estate.” Valla pushed a charcoal sketch depicting a cross-section map of a many-leveled structure, presumably all beneath the ground. It was rough and had many vague sections and hallways that seemed to lead nowhere.

“Not very detailed.”

“It’s more than a hundred years old. Before ap’Horrin built the estate, the city planner insisted on a survey of the ruins. This is the map he made. Rasha couldn’t find anything else.”

“So Boaegh spends his time in there?”

“Boaegh, yes, and Lord ap’Horrin. Rumors on the estate indicate that he’s been down there for more than a week.”

Victor grunted and looked at the map, wondering if he could recognize the room where the Yovashi had reached into his stomach to fiddle with his Core. Nothing on the sketch was detailed enough to jog his memory, though, and he looked back into Valla’s eyes, “No idea what they’re up to?”

“No, but at least it’s proof that the Pyromancer is still around.”

“As of yesterday?”

“Correct. Rasha left her partner to observe the oubliette’s entrance. They’re connected via artificed communication devices—no further comings or goings have occurred.”

“So . . . is it time already? Should I go in there? My gut says I should go in there.” Victor stood up and cracked his knuckles loudly.

“Victor, it’s the middle of the day. The entrance to the oubliette is secluded from the rest of the estate, but you should still use caution—an assault after sundown is likely to result in you having to kill fewer of ap’Horrin’s people. You do want to avoid unnecessary bloodshed, don’t you?” Valla scooted her chair back and crossed one long, uniformed leg over the other, coolly observing Victor as he paced back and forth.

“Yeah, I guess so. I can remember his fucking lackeys dragging me down there, guarding me, and joking about how I was fucked while I lay on that stone slab, waiting for the Yovashi to come and pull my guts out. I feel like going there and wrecking everything and everyone, but I know that’s not rational. I’m sure not all of his men are evil.” Victor was furiously grinding his right hand’s knuckles into his left palm while he paced and spoke his thoughts aloud. “Yeah, I think it’s best if I wait. Won’t do any good to slaughter a bunch of minions.”

“Good, because when we get into the oubliette, we should only encounter his most loyal men and agents that belong to Boaegh. It will make things easier.”

“We?” Victor shook his head. “Nah, Valla. You’ve done enough. Let me handle this one.”

“There’s no chance of that, Victor! You almost died the last time you encountered Boaegh, and there might well be more of his kind in there. At the very least, I need to know what befalls you so I can report to Rellia. If you die, she’ll need to flee.”

Victor stared at her for a long minute, his mind furiously chasing the implications of her words. It was true—if he died and Rellia couldn’t prop him up as the figurehead of her conquest into the Untamed Marches, her enemies would kill her. “She’d do that? Run for it?”

“I think so. I’ve begged her to empty the family’s vault and buy passage off-world. She refuses, of course, but I might be able to get her to take just enough to get away. She won’t want to see me killed, and if I refuse to flee without her . . .”

“They’d kill you too?” Victor sat down, suddenly feeling a bit deflated.

Valla laughed, a short barking sound, and said, “Of course! My loyalty to Rellia is well-known in the family, and most think of me as illegitimate, in any case. Without her protection, there are plenty who resent me enough to see me dead.”

“I’m surprised Rellia doesn’t have you trying to steer me away from this confrontation. I mean, you could have told me Boaeigh was in Persi Gables, then somewhere else, and kept me chasing ghosts until spring.”

“You’re quite right, and I proposed such a plan back before she sent me to help you.” Valla grinned at Victor’s outraged look. “Rellia wouldn’t have it, though. She says we need to earn your trust, that she’s ‘built too many bridges that require a strong foundation with you.’” Valla paused and nodded, “Sometimes I forget how wise she is.” She stared at Victor, where he sat, brooding, and added, “Rellia would banish me for a year if she knew I was about to share this. Promise me you won’t repeat it?”

“Sure,” Victor said automatically, but then he looked at her, saw the doubt in her eyes, and said, more seriously, “Yeah, Valla, I’m not going to betray you.”

Valla nodded and continued, “Rellia has seen much, been through more than most people could bear. Victor, she claims there’s something about you that’s magnetic, a kind of gravity. Her words were something like, ‘He’s a falling star that’s smashed into Fanwath, and we can either ride the shockwave with him or be buried in the wreckage he leaves behind.’”

“Seriously?” In Victor’s mind, he was still a teenager from Earth. A kid trying to figure out the world, still trying to find a girl and a purpose. He knew, objectively, that wasn’t the case, that he’d changed a great deal, but he still had that feeling inside. He couldn’t take himself that seriously; how could someone like Rellia?

“She keeps counsel with powerful oracles. Doesn’t that sound like a prophecy? She wouldn’t say as much to me, but she said she felt there are things about you—portents, that cannot be ignored. You might not be aware of it, but your spirit weighs heavily on Fanwath. In any case, you made me promise not to report your activities to Rellia, remember? She doesn’t know about the oubliette. She doesn’t know about the Pyromancer. If she did, she’d probably put a lot more pressure on me to stop you or at least allow her to send more of her agents to help.”

Victor sat there and thought about her words, his brow creasing in an ever-deepening frown. He'd come to accept the idea that he would be helping Rellia with a conquest of some unknown, distant lands. He'd come to grips with the notion that his spirit craved adventure and conflict, but he didn't like the idea that so much weight was being put on his actions by so many people. What had he done to deserve such attention? It felt like he was losing the little bit of autonomy he'd struggled to grasp over the last few months.

Finally, unable to think of any profound statement or action, he shrugged and said, "Thanks for keeping your word to me, but you should know: I think Rellia is full of shit. I think she's trying to build me up into something much greater than I am simply because I beat her in the arena. She can't stand the idea that she lost to someone who isn't some kind of 'meteor smashing into the world,' or whatever."

"I must admit to having similar thoughts . . ." Valla started to say.

"Good! Then let's drop this dumbass subject and go get some food. I want to kick ap'Horrin's ass on a full stomach tonight."

Valla snorted and scooped up her papers. "Hine's still serving breakfast, and I saw a platter of glazed pastries."

"I suppose I should stay out of sight still. No sense ruining any surprise advantage I might have. Do you mind getting me some food?"

"No, I don't mind." Valla nodded curtly and turned to leave, but as she opened the door, she turned back to Victor and said, "I don't think Rellia's completely deluded. There's something about you, Victor." She looked like she wanted to say more, but she shook her head and stepped out, quietly closing the door behind herself.

Victor walked over to his bed and picked up Lifedrinker from where she leaned against the headboard. He held the axe for a minute, admiring the silvery streaks, like lightning striking out from the edge into the black metal. He knew he'd picked her up because he wanted comfort; he wanted to grab onto something solid that always felt good to him after the unsettling visit he'd had with Oynalla and then this further discussion about bullshit prophesies and portents. He pressed the cold metal to his forehead and said, "It is all bullshit, isn't it, lovely?"

Lifedrinker didn't answer him, not with words, but she vibrated softly against his head, and he swore he heard a delicate soprano humming. He closed his eyes and followed the sound and his mind's eye saw a beautiful vale surrounded by tall hills. He saw a river cutting through the blue-green grass; at its head, a misty waterfall fell into a gleaming pool. The cliffside behind the waterfall was streaked with silvery ore, and Victor knew it was Heart Silver. "Is this where you're from, beautiful?"

The sound of his door opening startled him, and Victor opened his eyes, whirling to see Valla holding the door open for one of Hine's kitchen staff. The man ducked his head apologetically when he saw Victor standing there with his axe and hastily set his tray on the table. Valla thanked him, and he left. Then she looked at Victor and said, "What are you doing? You look like you just fell out of bed and can't figure out where you woke up."

“I, uh, how long were you gone?”

“Not long. Maybe fifteen minutes.”

“Fucking crazy. I was just listening to my axe, and it felt like less than a minute.”

“Listening to your axe?”

“Yeah, she was singing to me, and I saw where she came from, I think.” Victor laughed at himself and gently slipped Lifedrinker into the loop on his belt. “I know I sound crazy, don’t worry.”

“No, you don’t. I’ve seen crazy, and you aren’t it.” Valla pulled out a chair and sat down, “Come. I got enough food here for three or four people. Let’s break our fast, and you can tell me what Lifedrinker’s home is like.”

“You’re all right, you know that, Valla? You might be a little tight-laced, but you know the right thing to say most of the time.” Victor walked over to sit down. The tray was laden with thick-cut bacon, a bowl of scrambled eggs, two enormous sweet rolls dripping with glazed sugar that Victor could smell the second they came through the door, and a pitcher of fresh-squeezed juice.

“Tight-laced?”

“Yeah, like, you know, prim and proper. Shit, when we first met, I couldn’t get you to say more than three words at a time.”

“I . . .” she started, and Victor saw her pale blue skin start to deepen toward purple on her cheeks, and he reached out to gently jostle her shoulder.

“Relax, Valla; I’m just busting your balls.”

“My balls?” Her voice rose an octave, and Victor laughed.

“See? This is called bullshitting, Valla. Isn’t it better than all that serious business? Now, c’mon let’s see who can eat their pastry the fastest!”