

Victor BK3: Ch5

Book 3: Chapter 5: Running with the Pack

Victor had found that when he cast Tether Spirit before sleeping, it seemed to calm his dreams quite a lot. It made him wonder just how much he was dreaming and how much his spirit was wandering and encountering strange things. After saying goodnight to Thayla and Deyni, he'd returned to his rooms, prepared to get a long night of rest after the mentally straining, emotional couple of days he'd had.

When he stood there, naked except for his underwear which was how he liked to sleep, staring at his bed, he had the thought that maybe he wouldn't cast Tether Spirit. Hadn't he just said to Thayla that he thought Belikot might have been tricking him, might have been trying to keep Victor out of his hair by getting him to tie his spirit down? He struggled with the impulse, shaking his head, and wondering if he was being stupid.

Part of his problem with the spell was that he didn't like the idea that he had to restrain himself. He didn't want anyone tying him down, not with collars and chains, not with control rods, not with spells. Why should he do it to himself? Oynalla hadn't mentioned anything like that, had she? She'd cautioned him about Spirit Walking carelessly, saying there were dangerous people he could encounter that way. Was his spirit wandering while he slept the same sort of thing? "Why don't I just ask her?"

He looked around his bedroom, wondering if he felt safe enough to Spirit Walk without getting someone to watch his back. He moved to his door and locked it, then shoved the heavy, five-drawer dresser in front of it. The windows were another matter—they opened with a crank, each large enough to allow a person through. He cranked the little handle in front of them each until they were closed, then looked around the room for something to barricade them.

Victor hoisted the armoire on the far wall, carrying it over to block up one window. Then he picked up his mattress, a fluffy, feather-filled thing that bent and wobbled as he carried it, and plopped it upright in front of the other window. Frowning at the wobbly barricade, he reached into his storage ring and pulled out a few of the spears he'd taken from the skeletons in the dungeon. Apologizing silently to Captain Lam, he propped the mattress upright with the spears, jamming their blades into the hardwood floor to hold them in place.

Victor nodded to himself, looking around the room. Nobody would easily gain entry, and if they created enough racket to get past his barricades, he was sure the guards in the hallway would come running. Still, he moved into the en suite bathroom, closed the door, and jammed another spear into the vanity to bar it shut. Then, Victor sat down on the cool tile floor and cleared his mind. As he was getting ready to cast his spell, another thought occurred to him, and he said, "Hey, Gorz, you there?"

"Hello, Victor."

"Gorz, I'm sorry I haven't been much of a friend. The truth is you're so quiet all the time unless I'm talking to you that I forget you're there half the time. I know that's shitty, and I hope you aren't feeling messed up about it."

“I appreciate the sentiment, but I don’t feel bothered at all. It’s the nature of my enchantment. Unless I’m addressed or working on a task, I don’t generally notice the passage of time the way living creatures or some differently enchanted spirits do.”

“Did your old master make you that way on purpose?”

“I’m not sure, Victor. I’m just a fragment of my original self, you know. It’s possible that there wasn’t enough of me to be more . . . aware.”

“If I ask you to watch out for trouble while I cast Spirit Walk, do you think you could do that? Could you scream into my mind if something bad was happening?”

“I believe so! If I have a task, such as watching the tether when you were hunting Belikot, then I seem able to focus on it.”

“Awesome!” Victor looked to Lifedrinker, where she leaned against the nearby counter, and shook his head, pulling her over to rest across his knees. “All right, Gorz. I’m casting it. Please watch over me.”

“I will endeavor to stay as vigilant as possible.”

“Right.” Victor rested his hands on Lifedrinker’s haft and cast Spirit Walk. When he stood up, surrounded by the lightly wooded grassy plains around Gelica, he realized his hands weren’t empty; they held a spirit version of Lifedrinker, her haft dark like the night sky but filled with a billion twinkling motes of silvery light. Her axehead, always dark in reality, was brightly shimmering like the surface of a lake as the wind stirred its waters to reflect the moonlight.

“Hey, you never came with me before!” he said, lifting the weapon to look better at the bright, shimmering blade. “Well, thanks, Lifedrinker; I’m glad to have you along.” He held her hard, cold metal to his forehead for a moment, but though he felt a buzz of Energy and warmth, no voice sounded in his head. He rested her on his shoulder and started striding forward, thinking about Oynalla, and wondering if she’d be waiting for him or if his efforts to speak to her would be in vain.

He strode between trees and out into a seemingly endless plain, the enormous night sky with its countless stars making him feel small yet part of something vast and amazing. He glanced left and right as he walked, always keeping Oynalla in his mind, but after just a few steps, he stopped. Not far away to his left, he saw a brightly flickering fountain of lights that reminded him of fireworks—something like a giant sparkler. He debated ignoring the phenomenon, but something inside him was too curious, so he turned and walked over to it.

As he drew near, Victor saw his analogy become more and more appropriate. The sparkling lights looked more and more like a fountain of sparks erupting from some unseen object. Soon he was standing before the spray, and he felt the Energy pouring out of it, and he realized the differently

colored sparks were various types of attuned Energy. He strained but couldn't tell what sorts of Energy they were—none of them resonated with his two affinities.

Victor knelt and examined the fountain's source, but all he could see was a blurry distortion in the air. When he tentatively reached out a hand to see if he could feel anything, it felt like he was sticking his hand into thick, warm syrup, but when he pulled it back, it was completely clean—just his slightly glowing spirit fingers.

“Strange, isn't it?” Oynalla asked from right behind him. Victor jumped, literally, and rolled forward into the grass, coming up with Lifedrinker between him and the old woman.

“You scared the shit out of me!” he growled.

“Hah!” Oynalla said, then she started to chuckle and then laugh, and it sounded strange to Victor's ears because her spirit self had a pleasing trill of a laugh, not the cackle he'd grown to expect.

“Well, since you're here, tell me what this thing is!” Victor gestured to the phenomenon, struggling to hold back the surge of anger at being made to look a fool.

“Relax, warrior,” Oynalla said, smiling, beautiful, and youthful. She glided, graceful in her movements, to the fountain and studied its spray of Energies. When she turned to look at Victor again, her eyes were distant and unfocused. “If you found this spot on the physical plane, you'd be in the presence of a powerful artifact. Something that could change a person's life.” Her eyes refocused, staring into Victor's face, and she said, “Come, it's not safe to linger here. Take my hand.”

“All right,” Victor said, moving closer, and then Oynalla recoiled.

“Careful with that weapon, warrior, don't let her touch me! I can feel her hunger from here!”

“Really?” Victor lifted Lifedrinker, and a grin spread on his face. “No wonder she came along—she is hungry!” He rested her back on his shoulder and said, “Hopefully, we'll find something to feed you, but leave Oynalla alone, please.” He grinned to himself, enjoying the discomfort the old Spirit Caster had shown, then he stepped closer to her and reached out a hand, and the old-young woman tentatively took it.

“Walk with me,” she said, striding into the endless ocean of purple, starlit grass. Victor matched her pace, and she continued, “I was with Thayla just a little while ago. She thought you might seek me out tonight. She knows you well, doesn't she?”

“I guess so,” Victor said, wondering how Thayla might have guessed his intentions and annoyed with himself for not considering or even wondering how often Thayla and Oynalla had been meeting on the Spirit Plane.

“I’ll speak to you about an important matter before discussing why you sought me out. Will that be all right?” Oynalla asked, lifting his hand that she held and gently patting the back of it with her other.

“Sure, Oynalla,” Victor said.

“Thayla has an important role to play with my clan, and I believe you have important things to do and see in very distant places. Can you understand that?”

“Uh, sure, but I don’t know if you’re right—about me, at least.”

“Victor, you’ve been very kind to Thayla and her daughter. She’s told me about her time with you since your great victory and before it. She loves you like a brother and begins to wonder if she should think of you as more. I don’t want you to hurt her, Victor. You are young and foolish and can’t see past your two feet, but I see more and further, and I’m certain you won’t be staying with our clan. Do you believe me?”

The point of this strange conversation suddenly smacked Victor in the face, and he realized what Oynalla wanted him to say, “Oynalla, I care about Thayla a lot, but I’m not sure how far those feelings go. Yeah, I figure you’re probably right; I’m not looking to settle down with a clan of hunters, even if I do like your people an awful lot. I won’t push things with Thayla, all right? I’m happy thinking of her as a friend—family, even.”

“Good, warrior,” Oynalla said, patting his hand again. “Now, why did you seek Oynalla out?”

“Do you tether your spirit when you sleep?” Victor looked down at the much smaller woman, watching for her reaction.

“Why would I do that?” She squinted her eyes in puzzlement, then looked up at his face and continued, “When I sleep, if my spirit wanders, it’s only partially walking on this plane. It, no, I have one foot on the physical plane and one foot here. Any harm that came to me would send me scurrying back to my body, which I still have contact with, waking me up instantly.”

“What’s the point of that spell, then? Tether Spirit, I mean.”

“I suppose someone with a weak will could be snatched away if their spirit wandered near a powerful Spirit Caster. None in my clan ever had a problem with such a thing, though. Perhaps others in large cities have an affinity or curse . . . maybe a class that causes such things. You shouldn’t worry, Victor. Your will is like an iron spike embedded in the footings of a mountain. No one will move your spirit against your will.”

“Goddamn it,” Victor said, shaking his head.

“What is it, warrior?” Oynalla turned to look at him, holding his hand with both of hers. He realized they’d stopped walking a while ago and now stood in a small, wooded depression, a stream babbling nearby. He glanced toward the sound and saw that the water looked like liquid moonlight, and as it cascaded over the rocks in its path, it threw up a mist that made rainbows in the twilight of the Spirit Plane.

“This is a beautiful spot,” he said, temporarily forgetting their conversation.

“Yes. This is near my birthplace. My mother showed me the Spirit Plane for the first time here. Now, why do you berate yourself with the curses of a distant god?”

“Bel . . . the spirit that we dealt with, the one that was in Thayla’s body. He spoke to me while I dreamed, told me to learn to tether my spirit, and that he was doing me a favor. I fucking listened to him and have been casting that damn spell every night before I sleep.”

“Ha! There is real danger here, from creatures like him, even, but not for one such as you if you’re only dream walking. Perhaps he feared you wandering upon him while he performed his dark works. Death casters use this realm, too, you know. Here, we’re very close to the veil.” She stopped talking for a moment and looked hard at Victor and at Lifedrinker, then said, “Warrior, he may well have feared you. This one you speak of, he’s no Spirit Caster. I felt his fragment when you drove it out of Thayla and into that skull. Death Casters, even strong ones, are not a match for a strong Spirit Caster in this realm.”

“I had that thought but wondered if I was being too cocky. You know, too, uh, full of myself.”

“You’ve manifested your weapon here. You did so without trying, hmm? She’s a smart one, though, not a plain old axe . . . still, that’s not something easily done for even an experienced Spirit Caster. I can feel your Core blazing from across the plains, though mostly because I know what to look for. Hmm, no, I think, in this realm, the one whose name you fear to speak should be the one with fear in his heart.”

“Really?” Victor asked, and a wild, slightly insane impulse flared to life inside him. Oynalla, perhaps, saw the look in his eyes, and she opened her mouth to speak but stopped herself, cackling instead, and this time it was the sound the older woman made in the real world.

“Really, warrior! Now do what your heart calls for you to do!” Again, she cackled, and Victor felt his mouth responding with a maniac’s grin. He dropped Lifedrinker from his shoulder, holding her in both hands, and started striding out of Oynalla’s grove, his mind focusing on Belikot. He pictured Belikot’s skull, he pictured the figure that came to him in his dream, and he focused on the sound of that deep, self-important voice. He could hear it echoing in his mind, hear the words Belikot had spoken in his dream. When he had the image solidly in his mind, he picked up his pace, moving into a jog.

While he ran, Victor cast Manifest Spirit, and suddenly he was running with his pack, five red-tinged, yipping, barking fragments of his spirit keeping pace with him. “Let’s hunt!” he called, and they answered him with barks, howls, and their ever-present yapping chatter. They coursed over the plains, and Victor felt a thrill in his heart, and he pushed himself even faster, stretching his long legs and really letting his improved body loose, sprinting for everything he was worth and laughing at the rush of the ghostly wind whistling past his spirit form’s ears.

He continued to concentrate on his mental image of Belikot, hoping that the Death Caster was out on the Spirit Plane, hoping he could catch him unawares. A wild, mad grin was on his face, and he knew it was because he was acting—Victor was doing what he wanted to do and not following the instructions of one of the many people in his life that felt like they needed to direct his every move. Some part of his brain knew that wasn’t fair, knew that he’d asked for help from a lot of those people. Still, it felt glorious to do something spontaneous, dangerous, and decidedly, what he wanted to do.

As he ran, he began to fear that Belikot wasn’t out, that whatever business he had on the Spirit Plane was done. He frowned and focused, and this time he remembered how Belikot’s cold, slippery Energy had felt as he’d tugged it out of Thayla and pushed it into the skull. Suddenly his surroundings changed, and he and his pack were coursing up a steep hill littered with broken black stones.

When they came to the crest of the hill, Victor saw that they’d climbed to the rim of a black crater and at its center was a brightly shimmering, blue, misty rip in the air. A robed figure stood before the flickering tear at the head of a long line of dim, stooped, humanoid spirits bound by blazing blue chains. Victor turned to his pack and held a finger to his lips, and, amazingly, they stopped their yipping, crouching low like they were stalking a rabbit.

When he turned back to the scene at the bottom of the crater, perhaps a hundred yards down the slope, he saw the robed figure, undoubtedly Belikot, pull one of the bound spirits to him. Belikot put a hand on the spirit and, reaching out with his other hand, began to siphon Energy out of the captive and into the rip in the air. Victor grunted in disbelief and anger and started charging down the slope.

Belikot’s back was to him, and he seemed deeply engrossed in his efforts. Victor wanted to yell, wanted to holler a warcry, but he kept silent, and his pack did the same. As he charged down the strange, black crater wall, he lifted Lifedrinker and used Sovereign Will to boost his strength, dimly wondering how the spell even worked on the Spirit Plane. When he hit flat ground and was only fifteen paces from Belikot, he launched himself into the air and used Channel Spirit to flood Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy.

At the last minute, Belikot turned, eyes wide, mouth open in dismay, and then Lifedrinker split his head like a cleaver through a ripe cantaloupe and buried herself deep in his chest. “Drink that fucker up, hermosa!” he growled, driving Belikot’s spirit form to the ground and pressing Lifedrinker down on the thrashing body.

It said a lot, in Victor’s mind, that the Death Caster was still thrashing and fighting, but Lifedrinker wasn’t letting go. Though Victor could feel the spirit tugging and pulling, he reached out with his mind, almost like when he cultivated Energy, and pulled on it, locking Belikot down while Lifedrinker did her work.

Belikot’s thrashing grew more intense, and black tendrils started to writhe up out of the soil, reaching for Victor and his axe, but Victor held his ground, and as they snaked toward him, his pack jumped into the fray, biting the tendrils of evil Energy and ripping them apart, shaking their heads like terriers with rats. “No, fucker!” Victor growled, watching as thick rivulets of blue and frosty Energy surged through the spirit form into Lifedrinker. “You’re done, cabron!”

Lifedrinker drank from Belikot’s spirit for what felt like a very long time, and as the currents of Energy she was drawing grew thin and then trickled away to nothing, his form dissipated into a fine mist and was gone. Victor looked around and saw the shimmering, blue rip in the air and the bound, faintly luminescent spirits swaying nearby.

Close as he was now, Victor could see the faces on the figures—they were all Shadeni and Ardeni, and they looked weak and wan, their eyes haunted and filled with pain. The one closest to Victor held up his chained hands, a questioning look on his face.

“Can you speak?” he asked.

In answer, the spirit shook its head and held up its hands again. Victor nodded and lifted Lifedrinker, charging her with inspiration-attuned Energy, he brought her down on the exposed links between the man’s wrists, and she sliced through them with just a slight tug of resistance. When the chains were severed, the spirit’s face relaxed, much of the pain leaving his eyes, and he started to dissipate into a fine mist. An echoing, distant voice said, “Thank you,” as the mist dispersed.

The other spirits began to crowd forward, holding up their chains, and Victor repeated the process more than a dozen times, severing the bonds that Belikot had put upon them and watching as they all disappeared in a cloud of faintly luminescent mist. Victor stood there, surrounded by his coyote pack, now licking each other and yipping quietly. He looked around the black crater, then up at the shimmering blue rip in the air, wondering if there was anything he could do about it, when he felt a familiar presence at his back.

“Hey, Oynalla,” he said, depriving her of the chance to startle him again.

“Warrior, you seem to have caught your quarry. I watched from yonder rim,” she pointed up at the lip of the crater.

“Did I kill him? Could it really be that easy?” Victor felt good but had a strange twist in his gut, like he’d cheated or something.

“Aye, warrior. He’s dead. I’ve never seen a spirit so thoroughly destroyed. Your axe is throbbing with the Energy she consumed.” Oynalla continued to walk forward, closing the distance between them.

Victor hefted Lifedrinker, feeling the warmth of her handle, and said, “Good. She deserves it. What were those spirits, the ones with the chains?”

“Victims of Belikot. He caught them here or killed their bodies to trap and bring their spirits to this place. He was using them to further rip this gateway through the veil.” She gestured at the tear Belikot had been making.

“Can we do something about it?” Victor asked, squinting at the weird, blue hole in the air.

“Perhaps, if we knew the right spells. Don’t worry; the veil will mend itself, given time and without Belikot’s efforts to the contrary.” She smiled at Victor then and said, “Why didn’t you tell me about your pack here?” She gestured to the slightly luminescent red coyotes.

“I didn’t have a chance, I guess. I learned a new spell called Manifest Spirit—they’re a little piece of me.”

“You’re going to surpass my abilities soon, Victor. You’re already stronger than I ever was. I can still teach you a thing or two, though, should you come to visit me. Even if you don’t!” She gestured around, indicating the Spirit Plane.

“Yeah, I guess if we can talk here, you can teach me here, huh?” Oynalla nodded, and he continued, “I’d still like to visit you. I’d like to see you and your clan in person.”

“Of course, of course,” she chuckled, reaching out to grab Victor’s arm. Strangely, at that exact moment, Victor became aware of someone grabbing his real, physical shoulder and shaking him.

Then he heard a distant echo of Gorz’s voice in his mind, “Victor! Your friend Edeya is here!”

“I think someone’s trying to wake me up. I’m going to go back to my body now, Oynalla. Thank you for your advice!”

“Hah! Of course, warrior. When you’re ready to talk more, seek me out. I’ll be here.” She nodded as though to affirm what she’d said, and Victor didn’t doubt that the old Spirit Caster would somehow know when to meet him.

He took the hand she’d put on his shoulder and gently squeezed it, then ended his Spirit Walk spell. “Victor!” Edeya said, shaking his shoulder again. He opened his eyes and smiled at her.

“What?” He grunted and heaved himself to his feet, looking around. His bathroom door had been broken in half, the part with this spear barring it was still in the frame, though the other half was in pieces.

“The guards patrolling the garden saw the barricades in front of your windows and came to get me. We were afraid something had happened . . .” Edeya trailed off, looking around the bathroom and then back toward his bedroom. Victor followed her gaze and realized it did look like it had been ransacked. Still, Edeya knew about his spirit walking.

“Hey, I was on a spirit walk. What if I didn’t want to be woken up?” He gave her shoulder a nudge, smiling to soften the words.

“In that case, you need to tell someone what the depths you're doing!”

“Yeah, I didn’t want to wake anyone. What time is it, anyway?”

“I don’t know. An hour before dawn? What were you doing? Is everything all right?” Edeya was dressed in her uniform, though the buttons were misaligned on her coat and her hair was wild. She must have been sleeping when the guards woke her. Victor felt a twinge of guilt, realizing she was working harder than anyone he knew, probably because she felt some massive debt to Lam for turning her life around in the mines.

“Hey, everything’s fine. I’m sorry you got woken up like that. Listen, I have some good news you can report to Lam,” he paused and waited for her frustrated snarl, indicating he needed to hurry up. “I just killed Belikot . . . what the fuck?” Victor cut himself off as he saw bright golden and purple lights burst through the walls of his bedroom, and then a stream of Energy surged into his chest, lifting him off the ground and flooding his pathways. Euphoria filled his mind, and he laughed, spreading his arms out and enjoying the weightlessness.

Congratulations! You have achieved level 31 Spirit Carver, gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 8 attribute points to allocate.