

Victor BK2: Ch18

Book 2: Chapter 18: Old Mother

Tellen himself rode out to greet Victor and Thayla as they approached the camp. He pulled up on his roladii, giving them a long, questioning look before returning Victor's called-out greeting. "Well met, Victor and Thayla. I feared something had gone wrong when you didn't return in the night."

"Yeah," Victor said, shading his eyes against the sun as he gazed up at the hunter. "Some things went wrong." Victor saw Tellen glance briefly to the left and right, and that's when he suspected something was very wrong. "What's going on, Tellen?" he asked, putting a hand just beneath Lifedrinker's head, lifting her in the leather loop ever so slightly.

"Oynalla had a vision last night. A dark surge of Energy to the south. We need to make sure you are still you, Victor." He glanced at Thayla and added, "and Thayla."

"Oh," Victor relaxed, letting his hand fall away from Lifedrinker. "That's fine. What do you need? Want us to talk to Oynalla?" Tellen visibly relaxed as he saw Victor release Lifedrinker and whistled and made a gesture with one of his hands. A dozen Shadeni clan members rose up from their hiding places among the grassy tufts and watched the trio warily, arrows nocked in their bows but not drawn back. "Jeez, you really are nervous, eh?"

"I've never seen Oynalla as upset as she was last night, Victor, not to mention the strange lights in the air—evil portents."

"Well, if it helps, I brought you some roladii," Thayla said, finally breaking her silence.

"An interesting gift to bring forth from poisonous ruins." Tellen rode forward, looking more closely at the two stocky roladii. "Bred for draft work. We can find a use for them. Thank you, Thayla."

"Yeah, they weren't from the ruins," Victor chimed in, "but Thayla earned them fair and square."

"Follow me, please, and stay calm, so you don't further alarm my people." Tellen turned and started toward the camp, maintaining a slow, walking pace on his mount. He led Victor and Thayla directly to Oynalla's tent, and the old woman was sitting on a stool outside, poking at the coals of her fire. She looked up with squinting, wrinkled eyes and gestured to vacant stools and camp chairs around her fire pit.

"Sit down, and, Tellen, you can relax; they are themselves."

“Ancestors!” Tellen released an explosive breath and leaped off his mount, striding over to Victor and offering him his hand. “I’m sorry, Victor, but we feared the worst.” Victor took his hand firmly and thumped the wiry man on the shoulder.

“Don’t worry. After what we saw last night, I understand why you’d be cautious.” He nodded to Thayla. “We had an awful experience, and only half of it is due to those ruins and the phylactery we brought into them. Tellen, I’ve done a lot of boneheaded things in my life, but walking through a mysterious portal with a death caster’s phylactery is probably near the top.”

“You entered a portal?” Tellen asked.

“A portal?” Oynalla crowed, chasing her words with a short cackle.

“Yeah, let me start at the beginning,” Victor said, sitting down next to Thayla. He explained the portal they found, the strange, different version of the ruined village, and the conversation with the Naghelli.

“Naghelli?” Tellen asked with a questioning look to Oynalla.

“An ancient bloodline of the Ghelli. They thrived in darkness and fought for control of this continent during the great merging. My grandmother told me they were gone but always to keep a wary eye on the shadows.” For the first time Victor could remember, the old woman didn’t cackle after she spoke.

“This Belikot, he must be a powerful death caster, indeed, to send shards of himself off in the world. It’s not unheard of for powerful Energy users to split their souls in such a way, but for each shard to be so autonomous and powerful ...” Oynalla trailed off, looking around, then said, “He is not one to be trifled with. We should move to the autumn camp, Tellen.”

“Sorry for the bad news, but there’s more,” Victor said. “Powerful people are hunting us, and I can’t stop to help deal with this Naghelli shit right now.”

“There’s nothing to help with,” Tellen said. “We’re leaving—this is a problem for the empires and armies of the world. We hunt.” He shrugged like those last two words explained everything.

“Right. I, uh, I guess I was thinking it would be cool if he could be dealt with before it became a matter for armies. You know, to avoid all the death and destruction that comes with warfare.” Victor looked at Thayla as he spoke and saw her squint her eyes, but he couldn’t tell if she was agreeing with him or not. She saw him looking at her and cleared her throat.

“Belikot needs to be stopped, but it’s not something we can handle right now. There might be months, years, or even decades before he makes his next move,

Victor. Remember what we talked about? Priorities.” Thayla spoke confidently, but she wore a scowl—she wasn’t happy about things.

“Yeah, we need to get to Gelica, Tellen. Sorry to dump this all on you, but it sounds like you guys will be moving on, anyway.”

“Yes, but I’ll post watchers on the ruins, and Oynalla can speak with spirit casters in Gelica. They’ll give the word to the council, who can pass the word on to the Imperial Consul. If the Empire takes our warning seriously, they’ll no doubt issue a quest for the destruction or capture of the Naghelli lurking in the ruins, Belikot included.”

“Really? That makes me feel better about, you know, sort of running away,” Victor said. “Hey, Oynalla, can you teach me how you communicate with other spirit casters?”

“Hah!” She cackled again, and Victor was glad to see the genuine amusement on her wrinkled, red face. “Two things you must know: the spell and the spirit caster with whom you wish to speak. I’ll teach you the spell, but I can’t help with the other part. Hah!”

“What about you? We know you,” Thayla said, suddenly leaning forward, eyes hungry at the idea of learning a new spell.

“Oh, the fledgling wants to put her new affinity to use?” She laughed again, rocking back and forth on her stool. “Come,” she said, at last, gathering her breath, “you’ll stay the night, and Oynalla will show you one of her grandmother’s patterns. If you can copy it correctly, you’ll learn.”

“I have many preparations to make,” Tellen said, “Victor, Thayla, I’ll leave you with Oynalla. If I don’t speak to you again tonight, please find me in the morning before we part ways.”

“I will, Tellen, thanks.” Victor smiled at the angular, lean hunter, feeling a little guilty for the lines of worry and stress that creased the red flesh around his eyes. The hunter nodded and turned, leaving Victor and Thayla with the grinning old woman.

Oynalla was staring into her coals, running her fingers along the little carved bones hanging from her leather vest’s tassels. When Tellen had led away the three roladii, and Victor could no longer hear the sounds of their passage, Oynalla looked up, squinting at Victor.

“Do you still have the skull where you trapped that piece of Belikot?”

“Yeah.” Victor nodded.

“Don’t remove it from that storage device until you are ready to face that problem. No doubt, the greater part of the whole will want all the pieces returned. That shard will be beyond his reach so long as you keep it tucked away—he won’t be able to feel it, but if he knows you have it, he might seek you another way.”

“Well, that’s a problem I’ll have to deal with eventually.” Victor shrugged. When he saw Thayla’s pensive expression, he asked a question he’d been wondering about for a long time, “Is there a way to shield yourself from scrying spells?”

“Of course. You can learn spells to obscure your presence, though they require concentration. I’ve also seen traveling artificers selling wards, though most were fake or so weak that anyone with any strength could see past their obfuscations.”

“Do you know such spells?” Thayla asked.

“Me?” Oynalla laughed again, not really a cackle, more a dry, throaty chuckle. “Oynalla has never worried ‘bout people watching her. No, you’ll need to seek such protections elsewhere.”

“Oynalla, you’re the only other spirit caster I’ve met. Aside from Thayla, now, I guess. Can you teach me, I mean us, about spirit affinities and Cores?”

“Hah! You see what comes of people forgetting the old ways? Each generation, even among the clans, we see fewer and fewer spirit Cores. More and more of the pearls and gemstones—Oynalla can’t teach those! Even my daughter left! Living in Persi Gables of all places! She’ll let things die out; just watch. No daughters, no sons—wasting her talent helping the rich forget their guilt and feel joy for a while.”

“It’s not that I didn’t want to learn, Oynalla,” Victor said, trying to soothe her agitation, “I was kidnapped from my world and didn’t learn about my Core until I came here. No one I was with knew anything about it.”

“Mmhmm, mmhmm, and you’ve done a nice job building it up! Good lad, you are, Victor. You even gave this one some of the spirit,” she poked a bony finger into Thayla’s knee. “You’re worthy of learning a thing or two!” She punctuated her words with a bark of harsh, high-pitched laughter. “So, you can make courage, eh? I sensed your rage. What’s your other affinity, warrior? What do you mix with rage to craft courage, hmm? Is it hope?”

“Hope? No, my other affinity is inspiration.”

“Hah!” Oynalla slapped her knee. “What a boon!”

“I only had rage, at first, but some ass ...” Victor stopped himself, cleared his throat, and continued, “a nasty guy tried to break my Core, but I managed to rebuild it. When I gathered up the fragments, half of them were resistant to my rage affinity, so I had to sort of cultivate them with a different,” he looked to the sky, trying to think of the right word, “aspect of my spirit. That’s how I got the inspiration affinity.”

“Tribulations like that are how tempered, powerful spirit casters are made. You should find that man and thank him.” Oynalla nodded, picking up a long stick to poke around in the ashes of her fire pit.

“I had entertained fantasies of finding him, though thanking him wasn’t something I’d considered ...”

“What about me, Oynalla?” Thayla asked after Victor trailed off.

“Hmm? What, girl?”

“My Core is still a whisper class Core, but I have a band of courage around the death-attuned Energy at the center.”

“Whisper class, hmm? Yes, not bad! A Core dwelling on the borders of the veil and the spirit. You’ll never be as strong with spirit as your friend here, but much more versatile.”

“The veil?” Thayla’s eyes were wide with interest as she leaned forward toward the old woman, who’d grown quieter as she spoke.

“Death, girl. What did you think when you gathered up that dark Energy? Did you think it would bring you closer to the flowers and trees? To love? No, lass, your Energy is meant to draw forth and compel remnants of spirits before they slip too far away from this plane.”

“I wish I’d known ...”

“You’re lucky, though,” Oynalla said softly, but her voice was matter-of-fact.

“How so?”

“You’ve not cultivated that side of your power at all. You’ve not bargained with any spirits other than the one that tried to dominate you. You can cultivate your courage affinity and learn to use your death affinity for a cleaner purpose—communicating with spirits and putting them to rest, even those in the service of other death casters.” As the old woman explained herself, Thayla sat back with a soft exhalation, clearly contemplating her words.

“Oynalla, can I learn other spirit affinities? Can I further split my Core?” Victor asked, filling the silence.

“Of course, but with versatility comes a cost. I can see that your two affinities are balanced nicely but consider: if you hadn’t split your Core, you’d have twice as much rage Energy as you do now. If you split your Core again, you’ll lose half the potency of whichever part of your Core breaks. Then there’s the possibility that you don’t have any other strong affinities. I imagine you found your rage easily, hmm? How about your inspiration? Did you have to dig further? There may be others, but I don’t know. We have rituals, though; you could seek guidance from powerful spirits.”

“Rituals?”

“Yes, boy. Weeks of preparation are required, though, and we’re not near one of our places of power. Come visit me in our winter camp, maybe, hmm? Now, you want to learn to walk with your spirit? To talk to others like you?” Oynalla reached a hand to the turquoise and polished bone necklace she wore, and suddenly an ancient-looking, leather-bound sheaf of yellowed papers was in her hand. “You’ll need this spell anyway if you ever attempt a spirit quest.”

“Spirit ...” Victor started to ask, but Oynalla held up a hand as if to shush him.

“Let me find this,” she muttered, slowly thumbing through the thick, yellowed parchment, squinting carefully at each page as though she were trying to puzzle out a mystery scrawled there. Victor watched for a while and glanced at Thayla to see if she thought the old woman’s pursed lips and squinting eyes were as funny as he did, but she was still staring into space, clearly mulling over what Oynalla had said earlier.

“Here!” Oynalla said with a bark of laughter, pulling a sheet of paper out of the leather binder. She smoothed it out atop the binder on her lap. “Pull that stool over here, please, warrior.” Victor did as she asked, dragging a stool to act as a table between the three of them. Oynalla put the parchment down and turned it so that he and Thayla could see the intricate pattern depicted in delicate red and black lines.

“This is the spell?” Thayla asked.

“Aye, girl. Do you have things to write with?”

“I do! I have notebooks and a spellbook that belonged to Belikot, or at least the fragment of him that we met in the dungeon.”

“You keep that tucked away for now, girl. You should spend your days and nights building up your courage attunement. When it blazes brighter than your death affinity, then you can start to dabble with those magics. Do you hear me?”

Oynalla's face lost its nearly ever-present crooked grin, and she stared at Thayla until she nodded her head deeply, almost bowing to the older Shadeni.

"Yes, I understand."

"Good!" she said, and Victor sighed, relieved to see the smile come back on her face as she cackled again. "Give your large friend a notebook; you both should copy this pattern. You'll need to study and practice for a while before this spell will be yours. Might take you a few nights, might take you a year. Hah!"

"Will we know what to do when we finish the pattern? I mean, in our pathways?" Thayla asked.

"No! Start copying, and I'll explain."

"I already have a notebook, Thayla," Victor said, pulling out the one he'd taken back in the dungeon so that he could work on his courage weave. Together, he and Thayla started to scrawl out the pattern for the spell Oynalla had laid out for them. Oynalla cleared her throat and began to explain the magic while they worked.

"You must never practice this magic if you aren't secure. Lock yourself in a hidey-hole, or have a friend watch over you! Tsk! Don't ask why; I'm about to explain! When you cast this spell, your spirit will enter a plane adjacent to this one—the spirit plane. Your body will lie helpless, and you won't be aware of anything happening to it. Do you see the danger? I hope so because if you didn't, Oynalla would be wasting her time on your soft brains."

Victor grunted and kept concentrating on the delicate spiral he was currently drawing. Thayla also made a sound of assent, and Oynalla continued, "Distance on the spirit plane is different from this one. You also won't be bound by the same limits that your physical body endures. You can travel great stretches of space with just a thought, and that's how you can communicate with distant spirit casters; if they expect you or make themselves available at a certain time, you can think about them, think about moving toward them, and your spirit will make the journey in the matter of a few 'steps.'"

"So we still walk around? As spirits?" Thayla asked.

"Oh yes, your spirit will be bound to a form similar to your physical one, simply because that's the construct your mind will be most familiar with. Experienced spirit walkers can change their form, which brings me to the next part of your lesson: beware of other spirits you meet while spirit walking."

"We might run into others?" Victor took his turn to ask a question.

"Aye, warrior, and your axe won't help you on that plane. You might meet a harmless, lost, wandering soul, or you might meet a predator—a spirit caster

that feeds on those weaker than herself.” Her laugh sounded ominous, and Victor glanced up from his drawing to see a distant look in her eyes. “One such tried to take me when I was younger. Oynalla bested him, though.” Her laughter was deep and husky, and Victor could tell she was reliving a relished memory.

“Well, what do we do if we see someone like that?” Thayla asked.

“Run! Fool girl, hah!” Oynalla reached out and took up one of Thayla’s long braids, giving it a gentle tug. “Don’t pout; Oynalla is just teasing. This spell is easy to cancel; if you see danger, just end it, and your soul will rush back to your body. You must be quick, though—a true spirit hunter will have ways to bind you if you aren’t.”

Oynalla spoke for a while longer, but then she returned to her tent to “prepare herbs,” and Victor and Thayla kept working on their copies of her ancient spell parchment. Victor was surprised when he finished his copy before Thayla was much further than halfway done. He spoke to Gorz for a while in his head while he waited for Thayla to finish, and Gorz speculated that Victor’s intelligence attribute was probably higher than Thayla’s.

Victor thought Gorz might be correct, but when he looked at Thayla’s copy of the pattern, he saw that she was shading the lines, whorls, and weaves of the pattern far more elegantly than he had, using different colors of ink, and he said, “You’re creating a work of art, there.”

“Well, it’s the first time someone ever let me copy something so precious. Think how old this spell is. Think about the honor of having this Old Mother share it with us. I want to save this in my spellbook for my daughter.” The way Thayla said, “old mother,” was heavy with reverence, and Victor looked at his friend for a moment, realizing he’d missed something about her and the way she felt about Oynalla.

“Did you have someone like Oynalla in your family?” he asked.

“My father’s mother was sort of like her. Everyone respected her, but none of us could be bothered to learn from her. When she died, a lot of our family history was lost. If I could go back in time, I’d do things differently with her.”

“Ahh, yeah, I can see that. Oynalla’s story about her daughter hit you kinda hard, huh?”

“I hope my daughter doesn’t resent me or refuse to learn what I want to teach her, Victor. I’m afraid the damage is already done, and I’ve missed too much time. I hope I can help her build a Core that uses this kind of magic—it seems special, Victor. It’s not like the cold, callous magic of a Sorcerer or an Elementalist. It’s not like the flashy weapon skills used by many Hunters, Warriors, and Skirmishers. Spirit magic is a reflection of the caster; it’s a reflection of what they are.”

“Yeah, I guess so. What does that say about me, that my strongest affinity is with rage?”

“It means you’ve had a hard life! Victor, you’re so strong—you’ve shown me what a spirit caster can do, and yet, I’ve never seen you hurt someone that didn’t deserve it. Your second affinity is with inspiration! Think about that! You found inspiration when you were nothing but a slave, beaten down and nearly broken. What does that say about you?”

Victor opened his mouth to reply, but he couldn’t find the right words, so he just sat back and looked at the pattern Oynalla had shared with them. It was beautiful and complex, and he wanted to start trying to build it with a strand of Energy in his pathways, but he felt he should wait until Oynalla told them to. He decided to sit back, study it, and wait.

Thayla smiled softly at his silence and kept doggedly working at her beautiful copy of the spell. Half an hour later, when she was finishing the last swirl, Oynalla came out of her tent as if on cue, and she carried an ornate silver tray with a pot of steaming tea and three cups. “Good, good, daughter,” she said, glancing at Thayla’s work. Victor saw Thayla’s eyes widen at the old woman’s words, and he wondered how she felt. Daughter was definitely a loaded term where Thayla was concerned.

Oynalla looked at Victor’s copy of the spell and smiled, nodding. “This is clean and simple: a good reflection of your spirit, warrior.” She handed the tray to Victor, then reached down and scooped up her spell, clearing the little stool they’d used as a table. She gestured for Victor to set the tea tray on it, and after he’d complied, she said, “Now, we’ll try to spirit walk together, hmm? This tea will help focus you, and Tellen will watch over us. This is the best way to learn, children.”

“Now?” Victor asked.

“No, no. First, you need to build the pattern in your pathways, and when you feel it’s right, when you see your Energy accept it, and the nosy System tells you what you’ve done, then we’ll cast it and meet on the spirit plane.”

“So you were teasing about it taking us a year?” Thayla asked.

“Yes, and I was snooping when you spoke to the warrior here. I want to meet your daughter, Thayla, and I want to help her gain a spirit Core. Would you like that?”

“I ...” Thayla opened her mouth to speak but then stopped, clearly at a loss for words. “I think she’d ...” again, she stopped, and Victor could hear the thickness in her throat and see that her eyes were welling with tears, and he looked down, self-conscious about staring when she was feeling such raw emotion.

“Hush, tut. Oynalla forgets how sensitive young people can be. Don’t worry, daughter. We’ll talk many times before you bring her here. I’ll meet with your spirit, and we’ll make plans. You want to learn, yes?” Thayla only nodded, wiping at her eyes, and Oynalla shuffled over to her and pulled her into a hug. Thayla’s

head came up to her collarbone, even sitting, and when Victor saw the smile on Oynalla's face and the tears streaming down Thayla's cheeks, his own eyes started to fill, and he rubbed the backs of his knuckles at them, taking a deep breath, happy to see such joy in a world that had, so far, demonstrated a great deal of the opposite.

"Better?" Oynalla asked, stroking Thayla's braids.

"I am, thank you, Old Mother." Thayla sniffed, glancing at Victor and smiling when she saw his watery eyes. "What are you crying about, you softie?"

"What? It's the smoke!" Victor laughed and looked up at the stars, and, for the first time in a long while, he felt lucky to be where he was.