

## Victor BK3: Ch10

Book 3: Chapter 10: Stories

Chandri moved carefully through the scrub on the low hillside, searching for signs of Tellen's hunting party. This was the fourth area she'd led Victor to, hoping to pick up a trace of the hunters' roladii or evidence of them camping. She knew most of the general areas where the clan liked to hunt at that time of year and insisted once she picked up the tracks, she'd be able to find them without any problem.

"How does it work? Your tracking? I mean, are you looking for footprints or flattened grass or what?" Victor asked, still sitting atop Thistle's back. The vidanii had proven to be a tireless runner, and during their travel, Chandri had started to verbalize plans to acquire a breeding pair for her clan. When Victor had told her about them not breeding in captivity, she'd seen it as only a setback and begun to devise plans to take a yearly trip to the north where she was sure she'd be able to capture some live animals.

"It's a skill, like Animal Taming. I learned it the way all our people do—I was left to fend for myself when I earned level five. If the System senses your need and intent while you hunt for food, you have a good chance of gaining the skill. It's tough for people with higher Energy levels to learn because you're rarely truly in need when it comes to tracking game."

"What about tracking people, like we're trying to do? Do you think I could learn the skill by trying to find tracks?"

"It's possible, but I've never heard of any of our people learning it that way. I think the System views it differently when you're starving and desperate to find a feyris for the fire."

"Feyris—that's the name for the little rodent animals in the grass?"

"Yes, and other small game animals. It's sort of a general term." Chandri straightened and looked around the hollow. They'd spent a day riding at a breakneck pace to the east and, just that morning, started climbing into the hilly lands that led toward tall, dark, jagged mountain peaks that stood out starkly against the gray-blue sky. Chandri called the mountains Starfall Ridge and said that if he and she crossed them or followed them to the northeast, they'd come upon the Starfall sea.

"Nothing?" Victor asked, watching Chandri huff in exasperation.

"No. Let's try a bit further south. They hunt these hills often, and I think we'll have a good chance of picking up their trail if we meander through them."

"Right. Walking? Or . . ." Victor eyed the saddle behind him.

“Walking. Just let your beast have a break! I can only imagine having a man your size riding on my back . . .” Chandri clamped her mouth shut and quickly turned away, busily studying the ground as she began climbing between two hills. Victor started to chuckle, then shook his head and stifled it. He clambered out of Thistle’s saddle, deciding to ignore the, in his opinion, hilarious opportunity for teasing. He paused a moment, giving Chandri a bit of space, and gave Thistle a good long drink from one of the small casks of water he had in his storage pouch.

“Good boy,” he said. After a few minutes, he started after Chandri, leading Thistle behind him, and when he crossed the ridge and saw her a short ways ahead, he called out, “Hey, why do they call it the Starfall Sea?”

Chandri turned to him, her eyes magenta in the bright light, and regarded his face for a moment. He thought he saw the hint of a smile and a nod, then she said, “We have a story about it. Do you want to hear?”

“Yeah, sure. Tell it to me while you hunt for tracks.” Victor gestured around the hills as he came closer to her.

“I will, but you keep your eyes out, too. You might spot something I miss!”

“Right.” Victor nodded.

“Well,” she said as she turned back to the little gully between hills and started walking, “a long time ago, when Fanwath was new, and the people of the four worlds still fought for their places in it, it’s said that there was a great city where the sea now rests. It was a city built by a third people from Alurath—the homeworld of the Shadeni and Ardeni.”

“Oh, is that why you called Rhessa ‘cousin?’” Victor asked while Chandri paused to inspect a small gully to their left.

“That’s right. We’re closely related. Some people think that Shadeni and Ardeni are the same people, that we simply have a predominance of different bloodline traits.”

“Huh,” Victor said, his mind busy imagining, not for the first time, that this world was once four different worlds.

“It is said the people who built the city were the Ordeni, and they were brilliant people, very gifted with Energy use, and they embraced the System and its lessons after it merged the worlds. They gathered there, on a great plain and built their vast city-state, and began to develop Energy in ways the other peoples thrown into chaos by the world-merging couldn’t fathom.

There was one group of people, though, the Yovashi, who didn't like the System and wanted everyone to rage against its implicit control. They were from a different world—Kthella, also the homeworld of the Ilyathi and Ghelli.”

“Yovashi! I've met one!” Victor exclaimed.

“Really?” Chandri stopped her chant-like tale and turned to him with wide eyes. “There aren't many of them left in this world.”

“Yeah, I was tortured by one, but it was being controlled, I think, by an Ardeni—a lord near Persi Gables.”

“The nobility in the cities are known for their corruption, and Oynalla says it's because they've lost track of the old ways.” Chandri nodded as though that explained everything and then returned to her tale, “The Yovashi were strong Energy users before the System came to their world. They had learned about it, harnessed it, and were the dominant people on their planet. They were not kind to the other races—to this day, the Ghelli and Ilyathi bear a terrible hatred for them. The Yovashi saw the System as an interloper, ruining their position in what they viewed as a natural hierarchy.”

“I'm listening,” Victor said when Chandri paused and looked back at him.

“I'm sorry—I'm giving you more history than usually goes with this story, and I was afraid it was boring. I know you're new here, though.” She smiled at him, her black-stained lips curling up and revealing her long canines.

“I know you get the tattoos for your hunts, but does your face paint mean anything? I noticed your sister always has her whole face painted . . .” Victor gestured to his face as he trailed off, afraid he'd overstepped.

“It's just tradition, Victor. Some of us think the old ways are fun, especially the makeup! Chala does her makeup like she's going to war, and I only go about halfway. If you look, you'll see many younger men and women in the clan do similar things. Oynalla teases us about it, saying we should hope never to see a time where the warpaint is truly called for.” Chandri turned and kept scanning the hills. Perhaps she'd reminded herself that they weren't out on a hunt for fun but to find her father, who might be in danger.

“Well? What happened with the Yovashi and those other people?” Victor prodded after a few moments.

“Oh, right. Well, during that time, the System was still working on our world—especially our moons. It's said that great rings of rocks and pieces of the four planets' original moons circled Fanwath and that the System was building our current moons out of them. The Yovashi, using their brand of Energy-work,

performed a great ritual. It's said that they sacrificed a hundred thousand slaves and harnessed the blood and death-attuned Energy to reach into the sky, pulling down a mountain-sized piece of rock, directing it to fall on the Ordeni city."

"Madre," Victor hissed.

"Yes, Great Mother, indeed! Our story describes the falling mountain like a tremendous falling star, streaking through the sky and visible to everyone who lived at that time. The Ordeni were all but wiped out; only a handful who'd been traveling survived, and they've since mingled their bloodline with the Shadeni and Ardeni." She paused, perhaps used to the storytellers in her clan doing so at that point. Then she said, "From that moment on, the civilized peoples of Fanwath united against the Yovashi, and all of our leaders swore never to allow anyone to commit such an atrocity."

"Fuck, man. Do you think the whole story is true? Do you think that's really where those mountains came from? The impact pushed them up?" Victor pointed over the hills to the distant, jagged peaks.

"I believe it to be true, aye. Oynalla would tell me if it were fantasy."

"Yeah, Oynalla's not a bullshitter, is she?"

Chandri laughed and shook her head, "I understood part of that, and no, Oynalla doesn't speak shit!" She held up a hand before Victor could respond, and then she trotted down a slight depression into a narrow gully between two hills. "I see tracks!"

When Victor caught up, she scanned the ground around the sparse clumps of grass in the gully and carefully moved deeper into the narrow cleft between hills. "What is it?"

"It's Genn, one of Tellen's hunters. He was moving like he was stalking something. I don't see any roladii tracks."

"You can tell which hunter it was?" Victor asked softly, trying to match her steps.

"Yes, the skill shows me. I have my tracking up to Improved." She continued, crouching and moving like she, too, was stalking something, and after a few minutes, she stopped and studied the hillside to their right. "The rest of the hunting party came this way down the hill and followed after Genn's tracks!"

"What about their roladii?"

"No, they were all on foot! Perhaps they were trying to be stealthy . . ."

"Can you see how old the tracks are?" Victor asked, imagining how valuable such a skill would be.

"Sort of, but only if I know a person's normal tracks. The images I see are brighter based on the residual Energy of the person or animal that left them, and they fade with time. I don't know all these hunters normal tracks well enough to

judge, but Tellen's . . . Tellen's are about two days old." She continued down the gully, Victor close behind. Something seemed to tickle the back of his neck, and Victor found himself holding Lifedrinker in his free hand, the other still leading Thistle.

"I feel like something's watching us," he said, glaring up and down the scrub-covered hillsides and back over his shoulder. He didn't see anything move, but that was strange in itself—earlier, he and Chandri had remarked about the abundant small game and the birds warbling from the dense clumps of scrub. He was busy looking for a mysterious attacker when Chandri took in a hissing breath and stumbled back toward him. Victor caught her, dropping Thistle's lead, and looked over her head.

The gully widened ahead into a stone-floored, miniature box canyon between three hills. Rubble and scree covered the ground, and Victor figured the stones had fallen from the hillsides over the years, resulting in the jumbled mess ahead. That explained the rocks, but it didn't explain the blanket of blood covering a dozen gray stones and thickly sprayed over the ground. The blood was nearly black and very dry, but the stench of copper still tainted the air, and Victor was no longer surprised that the local wildlife had departed the area.

"Oh, Ancestors!" Chandri hissed, moving forward. "I see so many tracks. All the hunters were here, but," she moved around the bloody spot at the center of the clearing and continued, "eight left that way, climbing over those stones, and Genn's end at that mess."

Victor was warily looking around the canyon walls, Lifedrinker held crossways in both hands, and growled, "Well, do you see the tracks of whatever did that?"

"I don't, Victor. It doesn't make sense, though I suppose there are ways to obscure your tracks. I've never heard of an animal doing so." She was squatting near the blood splatter, shaking her head. "Nothing left of him."

"Well, don't you think your father and the hunters would have gathered his remains? Shit, maybe he wasn't dead, and they were carrying him!"

"It's so much blood. Could he have lived?" Chandri shook her head and said, her voice small, "I don't think so, Victor. Maybe. Maybe if Tellen was close behind and gave him a powerful draught . . ." She stood and warily looked around the surrounding hills, slowly scanning like she could force whatever was out there to reveal itself to her.

"I don't like this place, Chandri. Let's get after Tellen's tracks—he'll be able to explain what happened." Victor moved toward the piled boulders and scree, scanning the blockage for the most probable path.

“Right. You’re right, Victor. Let’s hurry!” She hurried past him and climbed the first, largest boulder, and then Victor grabbed her hand.

“Hold up,” he said and pointed at Thistle.

“Oh!” she sighed, sliding down from the rock. “We might have to work our way ‘round this hill and then pick up the track again.”

“Yeah, it’s that, or I can start moving rocks. What do you think will be faster?”

“Let’s give Thistle a chance to show us what he can do. I bet we can round this hill and pick up the next gully in just a few minutes.” Chandri said, moving over to the big animal. “He’s not even skittish around this blood. He’d be a wonderful mount to take on a real hunt.”

“Yeah, he’s a good boy, didn’t even pull back on the reins when I led him in here. Maybe he knows something we don’t,” Victor said, climbing into his saddle and pulling Chandri up behind him.

“What do you mean,” she asked the back of his neck as they started back the way they’d come.

“I mean, maybe he’s good at sensing danger and didn’t feel anything here. I mean, either that or he’s really bad at it!” Victor laughed, then touched Thistle’s sides with his heels, pushing him into a trot. Chandri chuckled at his attempt at humor, squeezing his sides to hold on, and Victor continued to urge more speed from Thistle.

Over the last couple of days, he’d gotten quite comfortable with the animal. Still, he didn’t fool himself—he knew that ninety percent of his riding skill was based on his knowledge of the Animal Taming skill and his body’s super-human attributes. He was stronger, healed faster, and was far more agile than a normal person. Shit, if he were taking stock, he was smarter too. He laughed at that—he definitely wasn’t smarter than some of the people he’d known back on Earth, even now. Intelligence must have more to do with Energy use or how quickly your brain works. It didn’t make you a rocket scientist by magic.

“Maybe it has something to do with what kinds of skills and spells you can learn,” he said, having lost track of his reality while his mind wandered.

“What?” Chandri asked.

“Nothing,” Victor said as he steered Thistle around the big hill to the right, already halfway back to the gully if he were correct in his estimate. He figured he should probably speak to Gorz and get the amulet’s take on his mental attributes and how they affected him outside of Energy use. He’d made a little effort to talk to the amulet now and then, but he found the conversations dry and very one-sided, and he wondered just how much of a personality the trapped spirit really had.

“Watch out!” Chandri cried, and Victor realized they were riding right toward a deep fissure that split the side of the hill and the ground across their path. Almost instinctively, he clicked his tongue and twitched the reins, and Thistle surged forward to leap the crack. Chandri whooped, and Victor laughed as they came down well clear of the obstacle.

“Good boy!” Victor cheered, patting the animal’s neck, and then they were rounding the last corner of the hill and riding straight for the gully the landslide had blocked. Victor pulled up on the reins as Thistle trotted between the hills, and Chandri dropped out of the saddle. She spent a minute scanning the ground and then pointed further east, where the gully grew into an actual canyon between two very large hills. Victor figured if they continued that way for very long, they’d eventually come to the mountains of Starfall Ridge.

“Now that I have the tracks, I can see them from Thistle’s back. Let’s make up some ground!” She said, reaching up for Victor to pull her into the saddle. Victor nodded and steered Thistle in the right direction, and soon they were trotting over the rough ground, moving ever deeper into the long, shadow-filled canyon between the hills. He had to slow down before long because their makeshift path grew more and more rough, with fallen rocks and loose stones making footing treacherous, even for the nimble vidanii.

While Victor didn’t mind getting the sun off his neck, the shadows also sobered up their charging pace, and soon he had to let Thistle walk, trotting when there was a stretch of clear ground. Still, his steady gait was much faster than he and Chandri could have moved on foot. The tracks led directly between the towering hills, and it wasn’t long before Victor and Chandri realized they were in a dried-up riverbed, the long, high-walled canyon stretching to the east, seemingly endlessly.

“Maybe this river flowed before the worlds merged,” Chandri said at one point, but Victor had another idea.

“I bet it was a river that passed by that city the Yovashi destroyed. When the falling ‘star’ smashed into the ground and pushed up those mountains, it blocked the river. That’s probably why there’s a sea on the other side.”

“Ahh! Victor, you’re smart!” Chandri said, giving his ear a tweak.

“Hey!” he laughed, ducking his head to the side, “Sometimes I guess the right answer, that’s all.” He was about to say something about how he’d also done plenty of guessing in school, but then he saw something ahead. “Shit,” he breathed, pulling on the reins, slowing Thistle to a stop. Chandri leaned into his back, standing in the stirrups so her chin rose above Victor’s shoulder.

“No!” she hissed, leaping from the vidanii. Victor jumped down after her, yanking Lifedrinker from her loop on the saddle, and followed her into the scene of carnage. It was much like the one they’d found earlier, where the unfortunate

hunter, Genn's, tracks had ended. Though, here, it looked like two or three people had been bled of every drop of blood. Splash marks marred the stone of the canyon walls to the north, and the ground was painted with deep puddles, still tacky and moist.

Chandri slowly walked around the horrific scene, silently pointing to pieces of flesh and shredded clothing and leather. This slaughter hadn't been picked clean like the previous one. Still, no large body parts, dead people, or animals could be seen, and Chandri breathed a sigh that sounded relieved to Victor, saying, "Seven sets of tracks continue, only poor Jeggit's end here. Something else must have died with him, don't you think, Victor? It's too much blood for one man!"

"Well, something died with him, or something bled a hell of a lot. You still don't see any tracks from whatever it was?"

"No, I don't!" Chandri balled her fists in frustration, then returned to Victor and the vidanii. "Let's hurry! I think we've gained a lot of ground—they must have been moving slowly!" Victor nodded, and they remounted, continuing into the canyon. It wasn't long before they realized the source of some of the blood—significant drops and little puddles mixed in with the tracks Chandri was following. "They're hurt, Victor. You can see they had to rest frequently; look to where the blood puddles."

"Yeah, I get it," Victor said, jaw clenched, worried that Tellen, one of the few friends he'd made in this world who hadn't tried to manipulate him, might be hurt or dying. "Or dead," he muttered, too softly for Chandri to hear. He urged Thistle to move a bit faster than he felt was safe, but as they covered the ground, he was happy to see the blood drops and pools start to get smaller and less frequent.

"I think they managed to slow the bleeding—Tellen's band of hunters are all tier-two or higher. Given time, I'm sure most of them would heal from cuts," Chandri said when he pointed out his observation. He nodded, some relief seeping into his thoughts as they continued to hurry up the canyon.

The shadows were long, and the sky was starting to go from steel gray and cloudy to dark gray and foreboding when they came upon a rocky path that led up the northern side of the canyon to a ruined stone building—an ancient keep of some sort. Victor could see, from the jagged remnants of walls, that it had once stood imposingly over the canyon, but now it was little more than one story of crumbling gray, stone blocks.

Chandri said the tracks led up toward the keep, so Victor turned Thistle up the loose, stone-covered path that switchbacked up the steep hillside and they'd made it to the first turn when a male voice called out from above them, "Stop! There are traps!"

Victor peered up the hill and saw a Shadeni wearing the usual leathers of Chandri's clan, waving from a higher level of the trail, just beyond the next switchback. "Visha?" Chandri called out.



“Aye, Chandri! Tellen is above, but he won’t be happy to see you. Wait for me to guide you past the traps!” The lanky man, more a shadow than a defined person in the gloomy, late-afternoon light, started to make his way toward them. He moved quickly but clearly avoided some parts of the path and occasionally stopped to fiddle with something behind a rock or hidden in a scraggly shrub. “Here we are,” he said as he strode up. Victor immediately noticed that the man was missing several fingers and bore a long, freshly scabbed-over scar across his cheek and down over his chin.

“Visha! What happened to you!” Chandri said, sliding out of the saddle and rushing to hug the slender man.

“Something terrible is out here, ‘Dree. We need to hurry up to the keep before the sun’s gone. Gimme the lead to that beast, Victor, and I’ll guide you past the traps.”

“All right,” Victor did as he was asked, not surprised that Visha knew him, or at least knew of him—he’d met, in passing, a lot of Tellen’s hunters. Visha led them, Chandri walking behind him, up the path, pausing and returning to reset things that looked like tripwires to Victor. It took them fifteen minutes or so to slowly make their way up to the flat area near the top of the hillside where the ruined keep sat.

When they rounded the last turn of the trail and came into sight of the keep’s entrance, two more hunters came running over and exchanged hugs with Chandri and greetings with Victor. They also bore terrible scars and fresh scabs, and Victor wondered how the rest of the hunters looked if these were the ones chosen to keep watch.

“You shouldn’t be here, Chandri! This place is cursed!” the second hunter cried when Chandri pulled him into a hug, carefully avoiding his left arm’s bandaged, bloody stump.

“Hush, Kolo. Oynalla sent us—she had a vision.” Suddenly hope bloomed in the defeated hunter’s dark red eyes, and he looked at Victor, still sitting atop the tall vidanii.

“Maybe . . .” he gulped visibly and looked at the other two hunters. “Do you think the Ancestors haven’t abandoned us?”

“Of course, they haven’t!” Chandri said, taking his good hand and walking toward the keep. “Take me to my father.”

The hunters seemed reluctant, but they did as she asked, guiding her and Victor up the stone steps and into a broken-walled courtyard. Victor tied Thistle to an old, petrified beam sticking up among some stones. They all waited while he set up Thistle’s feedbag and put out a barrel of water, which the animal thirstily began to drink.

When he was finished, the hunter named Kolo tapped his short, javelin-like spear against the piled barricade at the keep's entrance, and a moment later, Victor could hear things being dragged away from the opening. When the last sizeable wooden barrier, an old table, if Victor wasn't mistaken, was pulled aside, it was Tellen that stood before them. The Ban-tok of the clan was better off than the hunters Victor had seen so far, still sporting all of his appendages, though his leather armor was in tatters, and he bore the signs of many recent injuries.

"Ancestors! Chandri! No! Why would you come here?"

"Not you too, father!" Chandri cried, rushing to hug the tall, wiry hunter. "I'm here because Oynalla had a vision, and she sent me to find you. To bring Victor to you."

"Um, hello, Tellen," Victor said, taking the last step into the doorway. He loomed over the hunter as he held out his hand in greeting.

"Come in!" Tellen said, backing up. "Help me put this barricade back up!" He looked at the three hunters that had greeted Victor and Chandri and said, "You should come in now. It's dark soon." They didn't argue, hurrying in, pushing past Victor, and then, almost before Victor and Chandri could get out of the way, they started piling the barricade back into place.

"What the fuck's going on?" Victor finally asked.

"We're cursed, Victor! I wish you hadn't come! I wish you hadn't brought my daughter!" Tellen said, shaking his head and moving further into the ruined hall. Victor followed him and looked around. The ceiling wasn't fully intact, though it looked like Tellen and his hunters had worked to barricade the larger holes. The doorways out of the hall were similarly blocked off with ancient wood, furniture, and piled stones. Victor even thought he saw a stone statue tipped over to block a doorway, though it was partially covered with rubble, obscuring most of it from view.

A fire burned in an ancient stone fireplace, and several figures were laid out before it, wrapped in blankets and seemingly unconscious. "What kind of fucking curse?" Victor asked, resting a hand on Lifedrinker.

"Something hunts us, Victor. Something fast and strong and unrelenting. It toys with us, cutting us apart, slaying us, and then departing when it could have finished us all. Each night it comes, and each night it kills or maims one of my hunters." Tellen shook his head, despair in his eyes as they fell upon Chandri again.

"Why didn't you ride home, father? Why did you track it?"

"Hah! We didn't track it, child. We camped atop a hill, and Genn was on watch. We think he heard a noise and investigated, but when the morning came and he was nowhere to be found, we tracked him to the scene of his slaughter. While

most of us searched the area for tracks, trying to figure out what beast did this, Ulena went back for the roladii. She found them slaughtered.”

“So you gathered up Genn and then continued into the canyon? Why?” Chandri pressed.

“We were hot with rage! We thought if we stayed together, we could find the devilish beast that did this and slay it!”

“You were sure it was a beast?” Victor asked, something tickling the back of his mind.

“The way it killed—Genn was ripped apart. The roladii were disemboweled. I thought it a great saber-cat that had gone mad. Ulena said it looked like a mad terror bear had come upon the roladii.”

“Terror bear?” Victor asked.

“You don’t want to meet one, Victor,” Chandri said, reaching up to gently squeeze Tellen’s arm above his elbow.

“Well, I’ll need to switch places with my vidanii,” Victor said, surprising everyone. Tellen looked at him like he’d lost his mind.

“Yeah, I mean, if we’re going to put out bait, I’d rather it wasn’t Thistle. This whole thing reminded me of a story I know, a story that happens to be one of the five or ten things I remember from English class. Seems like too big of a coincidence not to mean something; I think your ancestors have a job for me.”

“A story, Victor?” Chandri asked, and when Victor nodded to her, looking around at the hunters, he saw hope in their eyes. He figured it was because he’d mentioned their ancestors. Still, when he saw their broken bodies and their desperate desire to believe him, when he saw Chandri and the pride in her eyes when she heard his words, he knew he was right—he had to face whatever it was that tormented them. These poor hunters weren’t up for it.

“Yeah, it’s about a monster named Grendel and the badass, pinche warrior that ruins his day.”