

## Victor BK3: Ch13

Book 3: Chapter 13: Winter Camp

“Yes!” Chandri said with a wide grin, looking around the fire at her audience—Chala, Deyni, Thayla, and Victor. “That’s when we started to hear the loudest, most terrible howling, roaring, and barking you can imagine! It sounded like a mad, gigantic boyii hound!”

“Oh, Ancestors,” Thayla said, under her breath, clearly having guessed the punchline.

“Ancestors, indeed! We thought all was lost! Clearly, the demon had allies! Victor was doomed! We heard the clash, heard the demon cry out, but then the roaring and howling turned to screams of challenge and wild shouts that echoed around the keep, rattling the loose stones and sending rubble down upon our heads! It went on for hours!” She paused to look at her sister and Deyni, watching their faces, making contact with their wide eyes.

“Well, what happened?” Deyni broke first.

“After the demon was gone and the fighting was over, and the mad screams and roars echoed through the ruin, I figured something out!” Chandri said.

“What?” her sister asked, red eyes staring from her black and white face paint, her voice hushed.

“I recognized something in the new monster’s voice. A certain note I’d heard before! Can you guess what it was?” She winked at Thayla and waited for Chala and Deyni to answer.

“A cave howler!” Chala said.

“A . . . I don’t know! A monster?” Deyni said, looking at her mother for help.

“It was a monster, all right,” Thayla said, grinning at Victor. He did his best to keep his face straight, though, and turned to Chandri.

“He’s as big as a cave howler, that’s sure,” Chandri laughed, “but it was none other than Victor! He’d finished punishing the demon that had tormented the hunters and was celebrating his victory!”

“You were barking, Victor?” Deyni asked in dismay.

“Don’t believe everything she says,” Victor laughed. “But sure, why shouldn’t I bark?” He stood up and crouched down, hands out like claws, and approached Deyni, a low growl in his throat. She laughed, perhaps a little nervously, and cringed away, but then he lunged forward and barked, giving his best imitation of

his old neighbor's pit bull. She toppled backward in giggles, and everyone else joined in, especially Chala.

Victor tickled Deyni as she squirmed away in the grass, and then he stood up, still laughing, and looked around. They were camping about half a mile away from the main body of the hunter clan, about three-fourths of the way toward their winter encampment. Nearly two months had passed since he and Chandri had gone to rescue the hunters, and a lot had changed in that time. Still, a lot hadn't changed, he thought, glancing toward Thayla and Chandri.

He'd spent a lot of time with Oynalla, and the clan's Old Mother had taught him a few things, but not much, not yet. She'd insisted he needed to improve his Core, and a great deal of the time he'd spent at her tent had been in silence, cultivating inspiration and rage-attuned Energy and adding it to his Core.

He'd gotten to "Base Nine" within two weeks, but the last month, he'd struggled with that rank, trying to push into "Improved" and seemingly getting nowhere. Oynalla described the different tiers like walls, saying he'd climbed up a hill to the base of the wall, but now he was scaling straight up to get to the next hill.

She'd made him practice his Spirit Walk spell almost every night, showing him tricks for traveling and finding people. She took him and Thayla with her to meet some of her distant friends; apparently, they had regular meetings on the Spirit Plane. Victor felt a lot more confident about himself in that realm these days, and when he arrived, his pack was there, almost like they were waiting for him. Thinking of their Spirit Walks, Victor glanced at Thayla, still sitting next to the fire, hugging her daughter, who'd run back to her.

Things were good with Thayla, he decided. He'd helped her to build and set up her own tent, and she and Deyni spent even more time with Oynalla than Victor did. Recently, she'd proudly told him that her courage attunement had overcome her death-Energy in size and that Oynalla was starting to teach her more spells. Victor felt annoyed at first—Oynalla had been avoiding teaching him spells, always putting him off, sometimes with a cryptic statement like, "A warrior should find his own way with the spirit. What does an old clan mother know of it?"

He knew she was full of shit, that she had some things to teach him, but he felt like she was waiting for him to do something or prove something. He wasn't sure what, but he resolved to be patient—she guided him in her own way. That was another thing he was glad of; Oynalla had quickly admonished him to put his extra attribute points into will. She said his powerful will had saved him a dozen times and would continue to do so. He chuckled, remembering her words, "I suppose you want more strength? You're big enough, warrior! Keep building up your will—you'll know when it's enough!"

And then there was Chandri. Victor sighed, looking at the beautiful young Shadeni sitting next to Thayla and chewing on a small bone from the stew they'd made. If Oynalla's reluctance to show him spells was frustrating, then Chandri was on a whole other level. They spent a lot of time together, flirting, checking trap lines, riding, and even snuggling by the fire, but never more. Victor had tried to make a move a couple of times, leaning in for a kiss, only to be giggled at or to have her turn it into a hug, breathing maddeningly into his ear and then pulling away.

He couldn't blame her, he supposed. He'd as much as told her that he'd be gone soon and that he craved violence and adventure. Was that true? He thought about it and had to admit that it was.

He'd had a fun time with the hunters but was ready to go anytime now. He'd be ready, for sure, when winter ended.

Victor figured that was what kept Chandri at arm's length—she was waiting to see when he'd leave and trying, perhaps, to keep the goodbye as painless as possible. He sighed and turned away from the fire, looking out into blackness over the endless grasslands. "Who wants a broken heart, anyway?"

Victor rested a hand on Lifedrinker and smiled. "You're always with me, aren't you, hermosa?"

"Talking to your axe again?" Thayla asked, quietly walking up next to him.

"You always catch me when I do it! I swear, it's like you have a sixth sense!" He laughed.

"Enjoying the stars?" Her eyes were aimed up, taking in the enormous depth of the starfield.

"Well, I should be," he said, awed, as always, by the sight. The stars were so numerous and bright, and if he looked in the right areas, he was starting to recognize some of the more apparent constellations. He pointed to one such grouping of stars, four bright ones that almost made a diamond pattern, the one on the right side just a faint shade more pink than white. "What's that constellation called? The one with the pink star?"

"That's the Eye of Kvahn. At least that's what my mother told me. It's named after a powerful Yovashi Lord from before the joining."

"Huh. Considering what the Yovashi did, I'm surprised people still want to remember him."

"Well, some things stick around, even if we don't want them to." Thayla shrugged. "What were you grumbling about over here? One minute you were laughing with Deyni, and the next, you were frowning into the darkness and talking to yourself again."

"Oh, nothing, really. Just wondering what Oynalla's got in store for me at the winter camp, and also thinking about the spring. You know, all that shit with Rellia." Victor was only half lying—Rellia's campaign was on the back of his mind more and more as the days grew longer and colder.

"Hmm. I guess that's allowed. I'd probably be grumbling about that too." She nudged him in the ribs with her elbow and added, "Sure you aren't having trouble with your love life?"

"Hey!" Victor laughed, truly surprised by the question. "What do you mean?"

“Think I haven’t noticed how your eyes follow Chandri everywhere she walks? How you two cling to each other but never leave the fire together?” Thayla smiled slyly, glancing over her shoulder at the fire where Chandri was in the middle of another story.

Victor took another step out into the grass and hoarsely whispered, “Hey! Seriously! Don’t say shit like that! I have a hard enough time without you mixing me all up!” Was she really talking to him about his feelings for Chandri? Was this happening?

“Shh, relax, Victor. I didn’t bring it up just to tease you. I know you worry about me, about leaving me, about my feelings. Sometimes I wonder if it’s making your life,” she gestured again over her shoulder with her chin, “sort of difficult.”

“Well . . .” he started, but she shushed him again.

“Let me get this out. You know, Oynalla tells me a lot. Sometimes we talk about you, too. She’s helped me see some things. I’ll always love you, Victor, but it’s a warm, steady love that fills me with pride and hope. It’s not a passionate, please-never-leave-me or no-one-else-can-have-you kind of love. Do you understand? Don’t worry about me, okay?”

“God! I knew you loved me!” Victor laughed and pulled her into a hug. “Thank you, Thayla. I love you too, and I’ll never forget about you. When I leave, I mean. You can believe I’ll be back. We’ll visit each other on the Spirit Plane, too, right?”

“Right,” she said, squeezing him back.

Victor pushed her back, looked into her eyes, admiring how the stars twinkled in their depths, and said, “Do you miss Rhessa?” After a few weeks with the Shadeni, her friend had left, promising to visit Deyni but insisting that the hunter-clan lifestyle wasn’t a good fit for her.

“Ancestors, no!” she laughed. “She was starting to really get on my nerves, Victor. We both changed a lot over the years and not in complementary ways.”

“Well, that’s good, I guess. I mean that you don’t miss her.”

“Sure, I miss my old friend, my old life sometimes, but only when I paint the memories with nostalgia. More important to me, though, is that Deyni is starting to see me as her mother. Rhessa was good to her, Victor, and I’ll always be grateful for that, but I’m glad not to have to compete for Deyni’s affection. Well, I mean, I still have to compete with you . . .” She laughed, squeezed his arm, and walked off, back toward the fire, when Victor affected a stricken countenance.

He watched her, a warm feeling in his chest, as she sat down behind Deyni, pulling her into her lap as they continued to listen to another one of Chandri’s hunting tales. Victor stretched; his shoulders were stiff, and he knew that if he didn’t have a monstrous vitality, they’d be sore too. He’d practiced the axe forms that Polo had taught him for nearly three hours after they’d made camp. His wagon

was much faster than the rest of the Shadeni caravan, and they ended up with quite a bit of downtime each evening.

He wished he had Polo or someone with some axe-fighting skill to practice against, but the hunters almost universally preferred the spear and the bow. Some of them were competent knife fighters, and a few were skilled with a hatchet, but their styles were quite different from the way Victor and Polo Vosh fought. Tellen said he should still spar with them, that he'd improve his ability no matter what sort of weapon he faced, and Victor agreed, taking them up on it whenever they had time.

He felt like his skill was improving. He was quicker with the forms, more fluid with the parries and dodges that he'd gained when he'd reached the "advanced" tier, but Tellen said it was a long, long way through advanced with any weapon. "Ahh, well. Nothing for it but to keep practicing," he said to the night air as he turned back to the fire. When he walked over to the little group, Chandri was just finishing her story, and she looked up at Victor with a smile.

"Needed some air?"

"Yeah. I think Chala ate something that didn't sit well . . ." he had to cut himself short because Chala was instantly on her feet and screeching as she circled him, leaping onto his back and trying to choke him. "Oh," Victor said, standing up with the young woman still on his back, arms around his neck, "Do you guys see a bug on my back or something?"

"Victor!" Deyni laughed, "Chala is on you!"

"Chala!" Chandri laughed, "Get off him! You're going to fall into the fire!"

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The rest of the journey to the hunters' winter camp followed a basic routine. Victor and his friends traveled in his wagon, Chandri and Chala taking turns riding their roladii with a few hunters keeping pace until they reached the day's waypoint. Then, they'd set up a little camp, get a fire going, and spend the afternoons and evenings sparring, cooking, telling stories, and even singing, though Victor preferred to just listen on those occasions.

On the afternoon of their twelfth day of travel, when they rounded a long rise in the grassy plains and started on the downward slope, Victor saw their destination and whistled in appreciation. He nudged Chandri, who sat on the driving bench next to him, with his elbow. "That's what I call a forest!"

"That's the Blue Deep," Chandri said.

"I can see why." Victor shaded his eyes, taking in the immense stretch of primeval forest that came to an abrupt edge along the plains a few miles south of them. The name suited it—the leaves in that sea of trees were predominantly blue, or at least he thought they would be if they didn't still have some fall foliage clinging to their branches. The trees were enormous, some with white, narrow trunks and others with darker, more standard wood colors, at least in Victor's

limited experience with trees. The leaves, though, the leaves were stunning in their colors.

Victor could see quite a few of the trees were this world's equivalent to evergreens, and they were still decked out in deep blue needles, but many of the other trees were brilliant oranges and reds. From that distance and height, Victor could see the bands of late fall coloring stretching into the forest like ribbons of red-gold fire twisting around the deep blue pines. "I'm assuming those red and gold leaves are usually more blue?"

"Yes, but isn't it beautiful like this?" Chandri asked, leaning into him, so she pressed against his side and rested her head against his shoulder.

"Yeah, it's something," Victor said. He glanced at Chandri and out at the hunters in the grass around them. No one was close. Even Chala was riding her roladii ahead, probably wanting to be the first to camp. "Hey, what's the deal with us?"

He'd spent most of the trip sitting by Chandri, eating with Chandri, joking with Chandri, always open, always showing that he wanted to be even closer. Still, nothing ever happened, and she never initiated anything more—Victor had given up trying to make the first move after the third or fourth rebuffed kiss. Thinking about it, he'd remembered how Thayla had been blunt and open with him and how good it felt, so he'd decided to try it with Chandri.

"Hmm? The deal with us?" She sat back and looked at him, troubled by his tone or words; Victor couldn't tell which.

"Yeah. I mean, back when we were looking for Tellen, I felt like we had something going on, and then, I don't know, you're always hanging onto me and hugging me, but whenever I try to, I don't know, take it further, you back off. So, what's the deal?"

Chandri sat back and frowned, and her eyes narrowed. Victor felt like he was about to get screamed at, but she took a breath and said, "I suppose I don't know. Maybe I'm scared."

"Scared?"

She nodded, and her brow relaxed, her expression more open, and Victor saw moisture was starting to gather in her big, magenta eyes. "I think so. You're so different from anyone I've known, Victor. My feelings are so . . . big! I'm afraid of them. I thought I could be different than Thayla. I thought I could have some fun with you and say goodbye, but . . . Grandfather's Bones, Victor! I want to be with you so badly! How will I feel when you ride away on your wagon, and I'm left here with this . . . clan?" She said clan like she was cussing.

"Shit, Chandri. I guess you could . . ." Victor started, but she held a thin-fingered red hand to his mouth.

"Don't you dare say I could come with you! I've seen the kinds of trouble you get into. I've seen the kinds of things you fight! Even if I weren't worried about my own skin, I'd be worried that you'd get yourself killed trying to protect me." She

shook her head, and now he could see that the tears weren't from sadness or joy but from frustration.

Rather than reply to her right away, Victor clamped his mouth shut and slowed his racing thoughts. She'd been right when she'd stopped him from speaking—he was going to say she could come with him, and what a boneheaded thing that would have been. She was absolutely right about the kinds of shit he got into. Instead of rambling off some half-assed solution he didn't have or hadn't thought through, he blew out a deep breath and said, "Shit's frustrating, isn't it?"

"Yes!" Chandri growled. "Shit is frustrating!" She caught him glancing at her, and a smile crept onto her lips. "You see? I would love to kiss you right now!"

For once, Victor didn't let his brain get in the way, and he leaned down and gently pressed his lips to hers. She watched him the whole way in and didn't pull back, so he figured he'd finally pegged the right moment. Her lips were soft, and he tasted salt and the hint of something sweet, but as he pressed hungrily, savoring her hot breath, she groaned and pulled away.

"You stole that!" she said, though she still wore a smile.

"I did, and it was worth it. If that's all we ever share, Chandri, I'll remember that kiss."

"Well, don't be too hasty. We'll see what happens, won't we?" Her stress and frustration seemed forgotten, and her relaxed smile was contagious. Victor leaned back and draped an arm over her shoulders, grinning like a kid who'd gotten his first kiss outside the busses. "There! See that break in the trees and those grassy mounds by the forest's edge? That's the campsite! Those mounds are buildings with sod roofs—we use them for winter dwellings and storage. Some of them have as many as five levels underground."

"That's pretty cool. So you guys just leave all that unattended for what, six months?" Victor imagined vandals and looters, broken doors and windows, and animals making dens inside.

"We don't leave much, Victor. We carry storage devices, too, you know. No, it's mostly just some emergency supplies in case we come home from a bad hunt or, as happened to Tellen's father, we're being pursued by a militia and don't have time to stock up. You know, situations like that."

"Oh, sure, sure. Militia pursuing you. Makes sense. Dios mío," Victor shook his head. Sometimes he forgot that Tellen's clan wasn't always a tribe of simple hunters, that they'd done their share of raiding in the past. As they drew nearer, Victor saw that the grassy mounds were nine long buildings, wholly covered with dirt and grass save their front walls facing inward to where a big stone well sat.

“The shelters make a circle, see? We put up some tents in the center, but we mostly use the shelters because sometimes there’s a cold snap or bad snow.”

“Don’t you guys come south to avoid the worst weather?” Victor thought back to Rellia’s map, and though he knew the overall shape of the continent, he didn’t know how to place it on a globe. Were they very far north, even after traveling south like this?

“That’s true. It’s not that bad here most of the time—sometimes we just get rain. You’ll see,” Chandri said, favoring him with another smile, then hopping out of the wagon. Victor watered and fed Thistle and Starlight, giving them both a good brushing. He saw Chandri, Chala, and some of the hunters moving around between the buildings, unlocking doors, pulling back shutters, and whatever else needed doing ahead of the clan’s arrival.

An hour later, Victor was sitting next to his wagon, eating some bread with hunks of dried fruit in it. One of the clan families had given him five of the dense loaves when he’d rescued Tellen and his band. He’d gotten all sorts of things like that, and he never knew who gave him what. Every morning for weeks, he’d stepped out of his wagon to another offering. Sometimes it was food, and sometimes it was art or something someone crafted.

Victor had several beautifully beaded vests, some warm woolen shirts, more socks than he could count, and even some knitted woolen hats. Most of the clothing was dyed in the muted grays and rust reds that the clan seemed to prefer, and Victor quite liked them. He’d tried to track people down to thank them or to politely refuse something overly generous, like an exquisite, finely detailed, carved bust of a great bear-like creature—its wood was lustrous and dense, and he knew it was rare. Nobody ever admitted to giving him anything.

He was just brushing his hands off when the first pack roladii started waddling into camp, and it wasn’t long after that when the whole place was abuzz with activity. Chandri and the others had done a good job getting the stale air moving out of the buildings, but it was quite a production getting everything else up and running. Victor helped wherever he could—rescuing a fallen well-bucket, digging post holes for the roladii pen, and generally helping anyone to lift pretty much anything.

Long after the sun had set and glow lamps were hung from the fronts of the shelters, a great bonfire was lit near the well, and the clan began celebrating their arrival. They’d had good hunts in their other camps and were looking forward to a long and restful winter and spring. Victor stood near the shelter where Tellen and Oynalla spent their winter, leaning against the wall and sipping cheb-cheb, watching Chandri and Chala dance to the clan’s wild drum and fiddle music.

He’d been told the names of the instruments, but his brain kept thinking of them as fiddles. They looked like violins, he supposed, but some were small, some were large, and they all seemed to play different notes. When three or four of the players got together, though, and played one of their rousing tunes accompanied by some of the drummers, the music stirred something in Victor, and he could see why the clan danced so much.



Thayla and Deyni joined in the dance, and soon twenty or more of the clan were gyrating in a circle around the fire. “You smile like you’d enjoy joining in, warrior,” Oynalla said, forcing his smile even wider with her usual cackle.

“Looks fun, for sure.” Victor nodded.

“You should have your little huntress teach you.” Oynalla’s cackle was particularly sharp; clearly, she was pleased with her barb.

“Hey, she’s not my huntress,” Victor chuckled.

“Good! Best you remember that. Now, are you ready for your Spirit Quest?” Oynalla didn’t miss a beat as she completely changed the subject.

“Spirit Quest? You mean to try to find another affinity?” Victor remembered her mentioning the ritual long ago, but she hadn’t said anything about it in all the time he’d been “training” with her.

“More than that might come from a Spirit Quest, Victor, but that’s one possibility. We’re near a place of power here, and if we prepare properly, you could gain many insights into yourself and your potential. The spirits are strong and old around here, and they favor our clan. They’ll test you, but I think they’ll favor you, too.”

“What do I need to do?” Victor asked, his mind racing with excitement—this was the kind of thing he’d been hoping she’d teach him.

Oynalla cackled and slapped the cup of cheb-cheb from his hand, sending it to the ground with a clatter and splash. “First, you stop drinking that—fourteen days without food or drink is the first and easiest preparation.”

“Uh, fourteen days without water? I don’t think so . . .”

“Foolish warrior! So quick to fill your belly that you haven’t tested your body, hmm? You trust Oynalla; fourteen days will be possible for you,” she paused to laugh, watching his face, then said, “You’re lucky, warrior! You’ll have a pure, cleansed spirit when you take up your quest. Someone with a weaker body wouldn’t be able to purge so thoroughly.”

Victor frowned and then nodded. He supposed if he started to die of thirst, he could just drink some water and tell Oynalla it wasn’t going to happen. He gestured to the cup of spilled cheb-cheb, “You could have let me finish that. It was the good stuff!”