

Victor BK3: Ch20

Book 3: Chapter 20: A Dangerous Affinity

When Victor rode into the Shadeni winter camp, he was greeted by the watching hunters, and before he could get Thistle brushed down and fed, Thayla, Deyni, and Chandri found him, smothering him with hugs and questions. “What happened to your face?” Thayla asked, touching the long, still-pink scars from the bear’s claws.

“I . . .” he began, but then Chandri interrupted.

“Lifedrinker looks different!” She said, reaching out to touch the silver-streaked axehead.

“Victor, can you teach me to ride Starlight now that you’re back?” Deyni asked at the same time, reaching to grab hold of his hand, wrapping her little fist around two of his fingers.

“I . . .” he began again, but then Tellen rounded the corner of the lodge near which Victor’s wagon was staked.

“Victor, welcome back! Ahh! A new battle scar, I see!” He strode forward to clap Victor on the shoulder, and Victor could only look at the little crowd and laugh.

“It’s great to be back and see your faces! I missed you guys!” He laughed again, pulling Thayla, Chandri, and even little Deyni into a hug, squishing them together against his chest. “Yeah,” he said over the tops of their heads to Tellen, “the bear got me pretty good.”

“Oof,” Thayla said, trying to push him away, “I can’t breathe!”

“Yes, you can, mommy,” Deyni laughed, squeezing Victor around one leg.

“All right, all right,” Victor said, letting go of them all, though he really had savored their closeness. “Let me finish with Thistle, then I’ll meet you guys in the longhouse. I’ll tell you everything!”

They agreed and started back around the side of the longhouse, but Chandri lingered behind. “The scars don’t look bad—I’m sure some hunters would love to copy them if they could get away with it! You really fought a mad spinebear? Oynalla told us that much . . .”

“Yeah,” Victor said, still brushing Thistle. “I did, and I wasn’t really smart about it. Luck was on my side, though, and I learned a lot about myself in the process. Well, the old bear spirit helped me with that part.”

“Old bear spirit?”

“You’re really going to make me tell this story twice?” Victor laughed, leading Thistle further out, near Starlight, so he could graze some of the late fall grass. It wasn’t as blue-green as it had been when Victor first came to the plains, but it

wasn't dried and yellow, just shorter and paler. Tellen had told him that the plains grass never really went dormant unless it had a thick blanket of snow on top.

"Well, I feel like I won't be heard among all the others shouting questions at you." She followed him out onto the grass, lingering close.

"How about you? I heard you all went on a hunt. Did Deyni get anything?"

"She learned to track! We brought home a dozen feyris."

"Damn! So fast?" Victor almost automatically reached down to take her hand as they walked back toward the longhouse, and that's when he felt the first nagging bite of guilt in the pit of his stomach. He paused and took a deep breath, thinking about his words, and then said, "Hey, Chandri, we haven't spoken about this, really, in a while, but we're good, right?"

"We're good?"

"I mean, what we have. We're, well, happy? I mean, yeah, we're into each other, but we both know nothing much is going to happen right now. Maybe someday, though, right?"

"Well . . ." her face had grown severe, and Victor could see he'd caught her off guard.

"I'm sorry to be so blunt, but I'm a guy who needs some clarity, okay?"

"Well, I never put it in so many words, but I guess you're right. Is that fine with you? Are you mad?"

"No! Shit, no, Chandri. How could I be mad? Everyone knows I'm leaving, so why would you want me to, you know," he gestured around the camp to the various longhouses in view, "scare off all the competition? I mean, if I was with you officially, you'd never have another guy come near you!" He laughed at her outraged face. "I'm teasing, I'm teasing!" He kept laughing as she chased him to the longhouse.

Victor knew, in his heart, that he'd taken a chicken-shit way out of dealing with his feelings for Chandri. He'd gotten her to confirm that they weren't anything yet, that they might be someday, and then he'd turned it into a joke. Still, she was happy and laughing, and what else really mattered?

That night, they sat in the main hall of the longhouse, and Victor told his tale to more than two dozen of the clan members, including Oynalla, who came up to join them by the fire. The storytelling had become a kind of celebratory feast. The hunters cracked open several casks of cheb- cheb and passed around platters of smoked meats and roasted root vegetables glazed with tallow and heavily seasoned.

Victor had never really considered himself an outgoing person, but he found himself enjoying all the attention and told the tale with little embellishment—none was really needed. He described his fasting, the spirit realm, the great bear, and his quest. Then he told the tale of how he rode out on Thistle, searching for the bear, found the ruined village, met Teil and Gef, and encountered the strange tracks of his friends being chased by trolls.

“But we never went into the forest!” Deyni interrupted.

“I know, munchkin,” Victor said. “The spirits were testing me!” Then he went on to explain his encounter with the trolls and how the curse started to affect him. Oynalla watched him the whole while he spoke, never interrupting, not even to erupt into one of her trademark cackles. When Victor finished describing how he’d killed the bear and destroyed the necklace of teeth, Oynalla still didn’t comment, and her silence was beginning to unnerve him.

Victor paused to sit back down and take a bite of meat, chasing it with a long pull of liquor, and Oynalla finally cleared her throat. Everyone paused their side conversations and laughter to look her way, and she said, “Aren’t you going to tell us about your reward, warrior?”

“Well, I suppose,” Victor said, though his stomach had knotted up at the mention. “I mean, I had to do another spirit walk, and the bear, well, he helped me to improve my Core, finding another affinity. I can tell you more later, Oynalla. I think it’s boring stuff to most everyone else.”

“No, it isn’t!” Chandri said, and ten people echoed her sentiment.

“What affinities do you have, Victor?” One of Tellen’s hunters asked, demonstrating that his Core and abilities weren’t as common knowledge as it often felt to Victor. Oynalla, for the first time, cackled, and Victor could see she’d been wanting to ambush him with this.

“All right,” he said, straightening his back and taking a deep breath. “I’ll be honest, my first instinct is to avoid talking about this, to play things off like nothing much happened, but that’s one of the things I’m learning about myself—I often react out of fear. I think I . . .”

“No, you don’t, Victor!” Thayla interjected. “You’re the bravest man I know!”

“True!” Tellen said, and Chandri banged her mug on the table in agreement. All of Tellen’s hunting band were present, and they, too, took up their mugs in objection, crashing them against the long table.

“Wait, wait!” Victor said, holding up his hands. “Let me explain!” He paused, waiting for people to be quiet, and then he looked into Oynalla’s shrewd eyes and said, “I didn’t say I wasn’t brave, but it’s true—the bear helped me see it—I do often act out of fear. Listen!” Again he had to wait, and then he picked one of

the older women who often gave Victor baked goods to sample and asked, "Letha, can I ask you a question?"

"Aye, warrior, go ahead!" She spoke forcefully, though she slurred her words, and Victor knew she was a bit drunk.

"If there are two hunters, and one is terribly afraid of wolves, while the other isn't, but they both go out, track down and kill a wolf, which one was braver?"

"Why . . ." she paused to think, and several people started to mutter their own answers, but she cleared her throat and said, "The one who was afraid!"

"Isn't she wise, everyone?" Victor asked, laughing. "Well, that's what the bear helped me to see; I wasn't as wise as Letha, so I thought when he said I had a lot of fear, he was calling me a coward. He helped me to see that when I overcome my fears, I'm brave. Anyway, to shorten the story, he helped me to find my third affinity. Fear."

The table erupted in chatter, people arguing about what bravery was, others exclaiming about what Victor said, wondering what it meant to have a fear affinity, and others still sat quietly, contemplating their own thoughts or Victor's words. Chandri was one of those, and though her eyes were fixed on Victor's, she didn't seem to notice when he smiled at her. The conversations continued, and Victor realized he was done with the storytelling part of the night, and he leaned forward on the table, resting on an elbow, and began to eat in earnest.

"Deyni," Thayla said from beside him, "it's time you went to bed. Say goodnight to Victor."

"Wait, mommy! Victor, what about Lifedrinker? You didn't tell us that part of the story!"

"Oh? You want to hear about a giant tree and the evil creature sucking its life away, corrupting its roots?" Victor asked, leaning past Thayla to lock eyes with the little girl.

"Yes!"

"Well, then you better go to bed because that's a story for tomorrow. How about a ride on Starlight, too?"

"Promise?" Deyni asked, looking at her mom, "Promise you'll save the story? Don't tell anyone else first, Victor!"

Victor mimed locking his lips shut, then he held out his arms, and the little girl rushed forward to hug him. "See you in the morning, runt." Thayla gave his neck a gentle squeeze then she led Deyni down toward their sleeping quarters.

"You're good with the girl, warrior," Oynalla said from across the table.

“He is, isn’t he?” Chandri asked, apparently having recovered from whatever deep thought she’d been struck with.

“It’s easy to speak to the young when your heart is young, girl. Victor is young in his soul, and a good soul it is. I’m glad you weren’t ruined by your new affinity, warrior. There are many horror stories about spirit casters with fear affinities.” Oynalla favored him with a genuine smile, and he nodded.

“Yeah, I can see how it could go in a very different direction.”

“What do you mean?” Chandri asked, looking from Victor to Oynalla.

“I mean, being afraid but not conquering that fear can make a person really shitty. If you had that affinity and a shitty persona? You could do a lot of damage.”

“So eloquent, warrior—always speaking of scat like it had a million uses. Girl, Victor is saying that someone ruled by fear but able to share it, someone willing to do so could destroy a community. It’s happened many times in the past to clans, towns, and even cities, sometimes before anyone realized what the cause was.”

Chandri nodded and reached across the table to take Victor’s hand. “Good thing you aren’t ruled by it, then.”

Victor looked at Chandri, at her open face and the pride in her eyes, and he felt hot shame in his chest. He looked down and cleared his throat. “You’re embarrassing me with all that,” he said, playing it off with a laugh. Chandri laughed along, but Oynalla tsked with her tongue and stood up.

“Off to bed for me. Victor, you should walk the perimeter. Take Chandri with you. I’ll see you in the morning, and we’ll review what you’ve learned.” Victor stood and nodded to the old woman, understanding all too well what she wanted him to do. He knew he had to, also, and that was what really chafed—why did it matter? What Chandri didn’t know wouldn’t hurt her, right? He shook his head as the answer came to him—it wouldn’t hurt her, but it would hurt him. He needed to face his fears, even one as annoying as this one.

Chandri nodded and stood, though her face betrayed some hesitation, some doubt. She nodded quickly and reached out for Victor’s hand. “Come, I doubt anything will be stirring out on the plains, but it’s good to have a look around.” Victor accepted her outstretched hand, and they walked out of the longhouse in the cold night air, woodsmoke heavy in the air from all the longhouses.

It was quiet out, and Victor could hear the roladii shuffling together in the low shelter the clan had built for them. It was attached to their nighttime pen and only a hundred yards or so from Tellen’s longhouse. Chandri gestured in that direction and said, “Let’s start with a look at the roladii.”

Victor didn't say anything but walked with her, still holding her warm, small fingers in his. He struggled with what to say, how to broach the subject of his guilt. His instinct was to rip the bandaid off and face his fear head-on, but he recognized that he wasn't dealing with a monster here, he was dealing with Chandri, and anything he said would have some repercussions with regard to his relationship with her. More than that, he worried that he'd hurt her. Was it worth hurting her to make himself stronger? To face down a fear?

"Hey, I should tell you . . ."

"Wait, Victor. I need to say something before I lose the courage," Chandri said, squeezing his fingers, still walking, still not looking into his face.

"All right . . ." he started, but again, she interrupted.

"You see, when you were talking in there, when you spoke about how you had to face your fears to be brave, I started to feel guilty. I know you, Victor. I know you fear hurting the people you care about. You care about me, right? And here I am, holding your hand, acting like I want something from you, but knowing in my heart that I'll never go anywhere with you. I can't, Victor." She paused when Victor started to object and reached up to gently place her fingers over his mouth, "No, shush, I have a lot to say, okay?"

As Victor nodded, she continued, stopping to look up at him, "You're destined for great, big things, Victor, and I'm not the kind of person that seeks that out. I love my clan. I love the hunt. I loathe the idea of cities and crowds, but more than that, Victor, I'm not cut out for facing down spinebears or going to wars! I have a pearl class Core and can barely manage to imbue a fire arrow before I struggle for lack of Energy."

"I didn't realize that . . ."

"Let's agree to love each other, as much as we can, the way we are, but never to hold each other back. I want a family and a husband that will hunt with me. You have a lot of living to do and great adventures to seek out, and I don't want you to feel like you owe me anything. Can you agree to that? I hope I haven't hurt you, Victor."

Victor was flabbergasted. He'd been about to confess an indiscretion he'd built up in his mind, and here was the object of his guilt telling him that she wanted to just let things cool off. He felt so lucky and relieved, but his guilt was still chewing at him. It was like he couldn't let himself off the hook so easily, but as he opened his mouth to push forward with his confession, he saw the kindness, the sweet concern in Chandri's eyes, and he knew it wasn't worth mentioning. Why should he hurt her to assuage his guilt? The braver thing was to swallow it and let her have this clean, happy break.

"No, you're not hurting me, Chandri. How could I be mad to have someone love me and care enough to want what's best for me? Of course, I want you to be happy too, so don't even think about it. I mean, life is long in this world, and who

knows what might happen in fifty or a hundred years, right? I'm glad to have you in my life as things are, though."

Chandri grabbed him around the waist and pulled him into a hug, and Victor laughed, relieved to have things settled. He kissed the top of her head and gently rubbed her back while she squeezed him. "You're a good man, Victor. Don't let your doubts or fears ever tell you otherwise."

"Well, you're pretty damn good, yourself, Chandri." After they'd hugged for a while, Victor and Chandri walked the camp's perimeter, checking in with the hunters on watch, making sure all the roladii were sheltered, and even spending a few minutes with Thistle and Starlight. The two vidanii enjoyed the cold weather more than the roladii and didn't seem at all bothered to be out in the wind, eating grass by moonlight. Victor knew they'd sleep sometime around midnight if left to their own devices, having witnessed their behavior many times over the past months.

When they returned to the longhouse, it was much quieter, and nearly everyone had turned in for the night. Chandri hugged Victor again, heading off to Tellen's quarters, and he snuck into Oynalla's section to throw a bedroll down between her room and Thayla's. Victor knew they'd wake him up early, as he was effectively sleeping in their living space, but he didn't mind; he only needed a few hours of sleep each night and wanted to spend time with Oynalla as early as he could—he figured she'd have a lot to say about his new affinity and how he'd dealt with Chandri.

He slept well that night, happy to be among friends and in a comfortable place. His belly was full, and his conscience felt clean. Though he replayed his conversation with Chandri over in his mind, he didn't feel bothered by how things had gone, and he drifted into an easy sleep, unplagued by nightmares or any dreams he could remember. He woke to the smell of Oynalla's pungent tea and a murmured conversation between Thayla and Deyni.

"Good morning, warrior," Oynalla said, never one to be fooled by feigned sleep. "Thayla, take your daughter out and practice summoning your orb. I want Deyni to try to feel the difference between your spirit Energy and the air-attuned Energy on the winter wind."

"Can we ride Starlight later, Victor?" Deyni asked as Thayla stood up.

"If he's not busy," Thayla said, trying to rescue him.

"I'll be very upset if we can't, Deyni. I've been looking forward to it all night!" Victor said. "Will you give her a good scratch for me while you're out there?"

"Yes!"

"Come on, then," Thayla said, shaking her head ruefully. "See you later, Victor."

"Yep. See you." Victor watched them leave, then turned to the Old Mother and shrugged. "All right, let's have it."

“Have it?”

“Sure. I imagine you’re about to chew me out about something. My affinity, my . . . behavior regarding Chandri.”

“Oh, hush, warrior. You did fine last night. Chandri rescued you, but you chose your words correctly.”

“Really?”

“Yes, forgive me for spying, but I’m a nosy old woman, and my little friend made it too easy.”

“Your little friend?”

“Yes, I made a new friend since we returned to camp. Tsst, tsst,” she said, clicking her tongue and holding her hand toward a pile of furs near the wall. A moment later, a whiskered snout poked out from under a shaggy hide, and a long, white-furred, ferret-type animal slinked out and coiled itself around Oynalla’s wrist. She lifted the creature and hugged it to her bosom, smiling in a genuine and vulnerable way Victor rarely saw from her.

“You spied on me with him?” Victor asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Of course. How else do you think I know so much about what goes on around here? Oh sure, I spy with my spirit, and I have auguries, but little friends like this are the most useful for finding out what’s bothering the clan.”

“I’ve never heard of a spy being so open about their nosiness,” Victor laughed, shaking his head.

“I have good intentions, though. Like making sure a certain warrior doesn’t harbor any fears or regrets, poisoning his spirit and embracing the darker natures of his affinities.”

“Right.”

“Now, come here, warrior. Put your hands in mine, and let’s have a look at your Core. Let’s see what that great old bear has done to you.” She held hands out, palms up, and their smooth red flesh belied her age. Victor scooted closer and gently took them, careful not to squeeze too hard with his calloused, rough fingers. “Good, now look at your Core and let my Energy in; let it trickle through your pathways. You can trust me, warrior.”

“I know,” Victor said, following her instructions. He turned his gaze inward, studying the three orbs of his affinities, and when he felt Oynalla’s warm, thin stream of Energy begin to explore his pathways through his hands, he didn’t

resist it. Instead, he reached out with his will and pulled on it, guiding her deep into his Core, and she inhaled deeply through her nose.

“Such heat,” she breathed. “I could lose myself in the blaze of your rage, but . . . aha, there it is, oh, Victor, you’re lucky! The fear is balanced by your inspiration, though it’s so strong! Never cultivate it more than your other affinities, Victor. Keep it in balance like you’ve done. Use it only against those you despise, those you wish to see harmed—no matter how much you might be tempted to sway an argument or drive home a point.”

“Yeah, I appreciate the warning, but I don’t think I would use my fear affinity like that.”

“Good, because that’s how it always begins, spirit affinities are beguiling, and without control, they can start to influence the caster’s mind. You’ve done well to improve your will so much and gained great control of your rage. Rage is a tricky one because it’s not always negative, do you see? Fear, though, fear is a hard one to master, a dangerous affinity, and you must remain vigilant—never let it control you. Tell me, how have you used your fear affinity?”

“I’ve only used it once—when I was fighting the corruption beneath a great tree, I projected it to make some monstrous worm-things let go of the tree’s roots and run away.”

“Can you imagine the effect of such a working on a crowd of people? What if you were more subtle, only sending out a light, wispy wave, restraining that flood of mighty Energy at your Core? Do you see how it could ruin a population over time?”

“Yeah, I guess so. Oynalla, I’m not going to do something like that.”

“Good, warrior. Be wary upon your next class refinement, please. Don’t let your new affinity define you too much.”

“I will. I promise!” he added as he saw that concern in her eyes.

“Good, then let’s talk about some new uses for your combination of affinities.”

Victor leaned forward, “All right! That’s what I was hoping for . . .”

“Victor?” Thayla poked her head back into the room, interrupting his sentence.

“Has his visitor arrived?” Oynalla asked, surprising Victor.

“Visitor?”

“Aye, I saw a woman, an Ardeni with green features, speaking to you outside the longhouse.” She saw the confusion on Victor’s and Thayla’s faces and added, “In a dream I had last week.”

“Oh,” Thayla said, her eyes squinting in surprise as she looked from Victor to Oynalla, “Yes, that’s what I was about to say. She came riding a great cat! I’ve never seen a mount like it! Victor, she says she works for Rellia and wants to speak with you.”

“Oh, jeez,” Victor said, standing up with a sigh as his knees popped. “I’m sorry, Oynalla. Can we speak more about this later?”

“Perhaps. I think you’ll be rather busy soon, but Oynalla will be here when you’re ready.” She laughed softly at first but then more of her usual cackle. “We can always speak more on the Spirit Plane, warrior. Go now; she’s not a patient one.”