

Victor BK3: Ch9

Book 3: Chapter 9: Animal Taming

When Oynalla said she'd "seen" him hunting Tellen from the back of a great, horned beast, the first image that came to his mind was of Starlight and Thistle as he'd last seen them, quietly munching from their feeding trough. "I came here with a wagon pulled by two vidanii," Victor said quickly. "Did the horned creature I was riding look like that?"

"Show me," Oynalla said, climbing stiffly to her feet with several grunts of exertion. Victor tried to help her, but she swatted his hand away. "I need to work at it, warrior! If I don't do it on my own, will you be here to help me stand whenever I need?" She smiled at him, softening the words, and Victor backed up toward the tent flap, nodding. "Thayla, leave your girl here for now and go find Chandri. Bring her to Victor's wagon."

"She went to Tellen's tent," Victor said as Thayla ducked through the tent flap. "That way." He pointed in the direction Chandri had shown him.

"All right. Are you okay, Victor? This is all really sudden . . ." Thayla started to ask, but Oynalla was close on her heels and cut her off.

"Hush, daughter. He's meant for this sort of thing; don't put your worries onto him. Now hurry, get that little huntress!" She made a shooing gesture to Thayla and then took hold of Victor's elbow. "Take me to these vidanii of yours, Victor."

"Right," Victor said, turning and walking, as quickly as Oynalla's much smaller steps would allow, toward his wagon. When they came around the tent blocking the view of his little plot, and Oynalla laid eyes on the vidanii, she cackled, and her grip on his arm tightened significantly.

"That one!" she crowed, pointing to Thistle. "I recognize the white socks on his front feet!"

"You really saw me riding him?" Victor asked, looking at the big, horned animal in a new light. He was bigger than any horse Victor had seen up close, but that wasn't saying much. In fact, when he thought about it, he realized he'd never seen a horse in person, only in VR. Still, Thistle's shoulders were almost as high as Victor was tall, and he knew he was pushing seven feet. "Do people do that? Ride vidanii?"

"You do!" Oynalla cackled. She let go of Victor's elbow and walked closer to the animals, and when she laid her hand on Thistle's rump and drew it along his side, he turned and snorted at her with his big, moist, black nose. "You're a big boy, aren't you? He's rich in Energy, Victor. The hunters here would do much for a mount like him. I warrant he's much faster than any roladii."

“Oh, they’re fast, all right.” Victor walked up beside her and rested his hand on the short, rough fur of the animal. Thistle was almost uniformly rust-colored, though, around his ears and horns, it was darker, with little black hairs mixed in. Looking down at the animals’ feet, he saw that Thistle’s front feet were, indeed, the only ones with white fur. “His name’s Thistle,” Victor said, giving the animal a good scratch.

“You’re off to a good start with him,” Oynalla said. “He likes you, and he likes his name.”

“Well, actually, I didn’t . . .” Victor started to say, but Chandri’s voice rang out in greeting, and Victor turned to see her and Thayla jogging toward the wagon.

“Good! Chandri, you and Victor must hunt for your father and his band. I’ve had a vision, and it’s important that you leave soon.”

“I’ll get Boog,” Chandri said, turning.

“Wait, girl!” Oynalla said, shaking her head and walking toward the two women. “I saw you riding with Victor on this beast, not your roladii,” she said, pointing to Thistle.

“Really? Do you have riding tack for him, Victor?” Chandri walked toward Thistle, rubbing her chin. “I think I could ride him,” she said, nodding.

“No, Victor was in control of the beast. You were riding behind him.”

“Uh,” Victor said, stepping closer to Chandri and Oynalla. “That’s kind of going to be a problem. No, I don’t have any riding tack, and I don’t even know how to ride. I’ve never ridden a pony, let alone a pinche giant antelope!”

To Victor’s amusement, Oynalla snorted in laughter, shaking her head. “It doesn’t matter what you know. What matters is what I saw, warrior.” She turned back to Chandri and said, “Thayla and I will go talk to Berset-dak about a saddle. You teach this giant how to ride.” She smiled as Chandri nodded, clearly biting off a complaint by tightly pressing her lips closed. Chandri had dark burgundy, almost purple eyes like Oynalla, though hers seemed brighter, and when they squinted in annoyance, it was all too easy to read.

“Well,” Chandri said, her scratchy voice low as she watched Oynalla and Thayla walk away between two tents, “tell me you at least have some Animal Taming.”

“What? Not really—my abuela had two perritos, but I just played fetch with them now and then. They mostly slept and barked at me when I came home from school.”

“No, the skill. Do you have any ranks in Animal Taming?”

Understanding dawned on Victor, and he shook his head. “No, Chandri. I’ve only been in this world a few months, and most of that time was spent fighting or traveling. I guess I could have learned at some point, but I didn’t. I didn’t even know it was a thing.”

“Ancestors,” Chandri said softly, and Victor couldn’t tell if she was cursing or asking them for help. “Have you been taking care of these?” She pointed to the vidanii.

“Yes! I’m the one that’s been feeding them and brushing them, well, for the most part.” He felt he had to qualify the statement because Thayla and Deyni had also spent some time with the animals.

“That’s a good start, at least. What do they like to eat?” Chandri moved over to the big animals. “Do you know which one you want to ride?”

“The male, um, Thistle.” Victor ran a hand over Thistle’s back and scratched at it gently. “They like their feed—I bought a ton of it, and they look forward to it every day.”

“Good. Take his lead and move over there, away from the other, out into the grass.” Chandri started walking to the area she’d gestured toward, and Victor turned back to Thistle.

“All right, boy, I don’t know what’s in store for us, but I think I might be about to learn to ride you. Be cool, all right?” He said, keeping his voice low as he untied his lead and started walking away from the wagon. Thistle followed him obediently, hardly needing any pressure on the loop of rope tied around his neck.

“It’s good that you speak to him. Use his name as much as you can—it helps to trigger the skill.”

“Trigger the skill?”

“Yes, have you learned any skills in this world? I think you must have, or you’d be dead.”

“Yeah, lots of weapon skills and, I guess, my cultivation drill.”

“Well, when you learned your weapon skills were you eating soup?” Chandri’s voice, scratchy as always, held a touch of humor.

“No, I was using the weapon—practicing with it. I get what you mean now.” Victor smiled. He knew Chandri was irritated to have someone so clueless to teach, and he knew she was teasing him, but he didn’t mind. He’d always been like that, though—some people might say he was too willing to take shit from

girls, and he figured it was true. He'd been in plenty of fistfights with smartass dudes, so why was he so chill when a girl was messing with him?

“Something to do with nature, I guess,” he said, grinning at Chandri's puzzled look. To throw her further off guard, he said, “Hey, I love how you use turquoise and other beads to brighten up your leather. You think you could teach me to do something like that?” He slapped a hand against his black ringmail shirt.

“I don't think . . .” she started to say, then shook her head. “No messing around, Victor! My father may need us to hurry!”

Victor suddenly realized she wasn't so much irritated at his cluelessness as she was worried about her father. “Right, sorry. So what's next?”

“Well, the beast—I'm not using his name on purpose because I want him to feel more familiar with you—is very docile around you. That's good. He follows you nicely and seems relaxed. He has horns and those big black hooves for a reason, believe me! He could probably fight off a boyii pack by himself, yet he acts like a holbyis around you.” It took a minute for Victor to remember what a holbyis was, then it clicked—they were the colorful, sheep-like animals.

“Right, so that's all good. What next?”

“Hand me his lead, then get some of his feed out of your container.” Chandri held out her hand, and Victor noted she had about ten different rings on her fingers. He wanted to ask her about them but didn't want to irritate her further, so he put it off. He handed her the rope and pulled a handful of the vidanii feed from his dimensional pouch. “Good. Now stand about ten feet away and call to him, using his name. Let him sniff at the feed first.”

Victor did as she said, holding his closed fist full of grain up to Thistle's snout and allowing him to snuff at it. He started to try to pry Victor's fingers open with his fuzzy black lips, and Victor laughed. “Not yet, boy,” he said as he started to walk away. Chandri had to haul on the rope to keep Thistle from walking with him.

“Good! He already wants to go with you,” she grunted.

When Victor was ten or fifteen feet away, he turned and opened his hand full of grain and called out, “Come here, Thistle!” The big animal dug in his hooves, and Chandri laughed as he dragged her over to Victor, gobbling up the handful of feed in just a pair of seconds. “Tienes hambre, Thistle?” Victor softly asked, scratching between the vidanii's horns as it snuffed up the food.

“I'd say he's already an expert at coming when you call him. That's good, but it might make the next part harder. You have to teach him to wait until you call. I'll help at first, holding him as a reminder, but we want him to learn to stand still until you call him, too. You should use the same command with him each time—something like ‘stay’ or ‘wait.’”

“All right,” Victor said.

“So, show him the treat, say your command a couple of times, and if he starts to follow, I’ll tug on the lead. If he keeps coming, you must walk him back, without giving him the treat, and then tell him the command again. This might take some work . . .” Chandri said, her voice trailing off and her smile fading as she remembered why they were doing this.

To Victor’s glee and Chandri’s relief, it didn’t take long at all. Victor only had to correct the vidanii two times before Thistle waited to be called, and then he repeated the trick several times. “I think he gets it!” Victor said, unable to keep from smiling as Thistle slobbered the grain out of his palm.

“No skill yet, though?” Chandri asked.

“Nothing yet.”

“All right, try it a few more times without me involved. This time call him but don’t give him the treat. Make him do it a few times before you reward him.” Chandri walked back toward Victor’s wagon, and he did as she said. The first time, when he got Thistle to come to him but didn’t reward him right away, the animal kept nudging his huge nose into his shoulder, trying to lift his hand with the feed in it, snorting and shaking his head as though to figure out what was going on.

“Good boy, Thistle. Good boy! One more time, now. Wait, Thistle! Wait!” he said as he backed away. Every few steps, when the animal’s leg moved as though to take a step toward him, he’d say, “Wait, Thistle!” When he stopped, a good twenty paces distant, he stared at the big vidanii for several seconds before saying, “Come, Thistle!”

Thistle practically charged over the grass to him, sliding to a halt in a shower of torn-up grass and rich, dark soil. Victor fed him his treat and then whooped as a message appeared in his vision:

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Animal Taming - Basic.

“I got it!” he called out to Chandri just as a small swarm of little, golden Energy bubbles materialized in the air and surged into him.

“Yes!” Chandri whooped in return, dancing in a circle with her fist in the air. Victor realized she’d been pretty stressed about this process, probably fearing it would take him a lot longer. She ran over to him and Thistle and said, “Now look into your mind, think about your skill, and see if you can realize everything the System just gave you!”

“I . . .” Victor started, but then he understood what she meant, that he did feel like he knew a lot about animals that he hadn’t before. He knew what sorts of food different types of animals would like to eat. Some of it was stuff he’d known before—he’d known about carnivores and herbivores, but Victor had the names

of grains in his head, for instance, that he was sure he'd never seen. He pulled out a handful of the vidanii feed, and he knew it was a mixture of oats, something called winter grain, and chopped bits of "blue tundra grass."

More than that, he knew all sorts of sounds that common domesticated animals liked. He could click his tongue in a way that might calm down a skittish roladii. He knew sounds to make for his vidanii, too, and as he thought about it, the depth of knowledge started to freak him out. "Fucking-A, it's like I've got a wiki about animals in my head."

"Don't try to think about it all at once. Sorry, I shouldn't have told you to do that—it can be overwhelming, huh? Just let the knowledge come out as you need it. If you continue to improve your Animal Taming skill, the System will begin to focus on the animals you work with. For now, do me a favor and think about riding your vidanii." She looked up at him, her eyes squinting against the afternoon glare of the sun, and her breath held expectantly.

Victor did as she said, thinking about riding Thistle, and he was suddenly aware of all sorts of understanding. He knew the optimum set-up for his riding gear—that he'd need a saddle blanket, saddle, stirrups, reins, and a bridle. He knew that if he tried to use a bit with a vidanii, it wouldn't go well. More than that, he knew what to do with his legs and knees. He knew the kinds of sounds he should make when trying to get the animal to turn or speed up or stop. He knew he'd probably be very sore for the first few days, but if he had a high vitality attribute, it wouldn't be too bad.

"I'm going to need some riding gear," Victor said.

"Good! You think you know what to do now?"

"Yes, and I think it will go well—I can boost my vitality to around one-eighty."

"Oh, Ancestors!" Chandri laughed. "Most Shadeni learn before they're even tier-one, so something more like ten or twenty vitality. You'll be fine! As for your gear," she gestured back toward his wagon in the distance. He hadn't realized just how far they'd wandered away from it in his efforts to train with Thistle, nor had he realized that a small crowd had gathered around the blue and black vehicle.

"I see Thayla, Oynalla, Rhessa, Deyni, and a few others. I suppose this is what goes for entertainment around here?" Victor took Thistle's lead and started walking toward the crowd.

"Of course! They're hoping to see a giant ride a great, horned plains runner from the distant north. Wouldn't you want to see such a sight?" Chandri laughed. "See that man on the blanket with all the leather and scraps? That's Berset-dak—he's probably the best leatherworker in the clan, and I'm sure Oynalla has enlisted him to make your riding tackle."

“Will it take him long? I think we should try to get started today, don’t you?” Victor asked as they walked toward the little crowd sitting in the grass near his wagon.

“Yes, I’d like to leave as soon as possible! I don’t know everything Old Mother saw, but if she thinks we need to seek out Tellen, I’m sure it’s important. As for your saddle, I doubt it will take Berset-dak long. He’s probably altering parts for a roladii saddle. I’m not certain, though. My leather-working talents only extend as far as my own vests. She gestured to her tasseled, beaded vest and continued, “I don’t even tan the hides—Shivena does it for me.”

“That’s cool,” Victor said absently, his mind wandering as he thought about what Oynalla had said about Tellen—something was trying to make him its prey. He glanced at Chandri, saw her glance away like he’d caught her looking at him surreptitiously, and he smiled, bumping her shoulder with his elbow, “Hey, we’ll find him.”

“Warrior!” Oynalla’s unmistakable voice called out as they came close enough to speak. “Come! Let Berset-dak take some final measurements. He was able to start work based on your beast’s sister animal.”

“He measured Starlight!” Deyni called, running forward to take Thistle’s lead. She looked up to Victor, eyes wide with excitement, and asked, “Are you really going to ride Thistle? Do you think I could learn to ride Starlight?”

“I’m sure you could!” Victor said, picking up one of her long, black braids and tickling her nose with the end of it. “You can learn anything you want, munchkin. The sky’s the limit,” he glanced up and then back at her with a grin. “Or maybe it isn’t!”

“You’ve a strange way of speaking, Victor,” Chandri said.

“That’s not the first time I’ve heard that. Didn’t you tell me that already?” He laughed, and before Chandri could reply, an older, grizzled hunter had walked over with a long, flexible strip of leather. It was marked with tiny lines, and Victor assumed he used it for measuring. Victor held out his hand and said, “Nice to meet you. I’m Victor.”

“Hmm,” Berset-dak said, “we’ve met. I was at the Ban-tok’s fire when you first came to our camp. Please hold this beast still while I make some measurements.”

“Right, sorry. That night’s a bit of a blur,” Victor said, then he pulled Thistle’s nose down toward his shoulder and scratched him around his horns and ears. He seemed to love that more than any other kind of scratching, and he pressed

his head into Victor, grunting and huffing out big steamy breaths while Victor scratched. Berset-dak nodded and began to move around the vidanii, taking the various measurements he'd need to get Victor's riding tack right.

"Just a little larger than the female. The buckles will be fine. Let me measure you for the stirrups, Victor," he said, coming over and holding his leather measuring tape against his hip and down his leg. "Hmm, I'll charge Oynalla extra for all the leather I'll need!" He laughed and then went back to his blanket, stacked with beautifully tanned leather, and Victor could see that he'd already finished the saddle and was just making some final adjustments to the straps.

Victor followed after him and said, "I'll pay for this! No need for Oynalla to . . ."

"Nonsense, warrior," Oynalla said. "He was only teasing you—you go to save our Ban-tok and his hunters. We'd give you a dozen saddles for such a service."

"All right," Victor said, nodding. "I appreciate it."

While Thayla and Rhessa talked to Chandri about animal taming, and Deyni begged her for lessons, Victor squatted near Berset-dak's blanket and watched the man work. His hair was very short, peppered with gray, just like his beard, and Victor thought he looked as though he'd spent most of his life outdoors. Victor shook his head at how obvious that observation was, glancing around the camp and the great expanse of the sky overhead. Berset-dak's long, wiry fingers expertly pushed the hooked needle he used to stitch the leather, and Victor could feel little surges of Energy from the process.

"Are you using a spell or a skill or something?"

"Aye, of course. I'm a Leather Artisan, and I have some class skills that make my work more durable and, of course, increase the speed with which I can craft things. If you tried to make a saddle like this, I think you'd be at it for weeks, even with my guidance. I can do one in a day."

"Pretty fuckin' cool," Victor said, under his breath, admiring the rich, dark leather. It had an undertone of red, and the stitchwork was beautiful, straight, and even with tiny seams. "What kind of leather is that? It looks kind of red."

"This is from some huldii Tellen hunted up in the hills around Greatbone. They were small, but Tellen said they moved fast and had more fur than the huldii down by the forest. No matter, though, Shivena scraped it all off when she treated the hides." Berset-dak finished a stitch, cut the leather cord with a small, hooked knife, and then tied it off. "That should do it; let's see how it all fits! You carry the saddle."

Victor picked up the heavy, richly oiled leather seat, noticing that Berset-dak had made it longer than a standard riding saddle with a secondary set of shorter stirrups, no doubt anticipating Victor's need to take Chandri with him. Marveling at the quality of the leatherwork, he turned back to Thistle. As he started toward the animal, though, a youthful, familiar voice called out, "Wait, Victor!

I have your saddle blanket!" He turned to see Chala, Chandri's little sister, running toward him with a bundle in her arms.

"It's a custom," Oynalla said, walking close to Victor and steadying herself by holding onto his elbow again. "In our Clan, when a hunter goes on her first hunt, a friend gifts her with a saddle blanket she made."

"Her first hunt?" Victor asked.

"Or his, warrior! Open your mind!" Oynalla tsked.

"I made this blanket last summer, Victor!" Chala said, between gasps, as she came running up. Her face was painted fiercely in white and blue angles, and Victor leaned down to look into her eyes. They were lighter than Chandri's, more pink than maroon, and had tiny blue flecks in a spiral pattern around her pupils.

"Thank you, Chala! This will bring us a lot of luck. I'm sure of it!" he took the offered bundle, and when he held up the blanket, dark gray with blue and white concentric squares, he whistled. "It's beautiful!"

The girl beamed at the praise and said, "Please take care of my sister!"

"Are you kidding? She's the one taking care of me!" He held out a fist, and when she looked at him quizzically, he said, "Pound it. With your fist, silly."

"Ahh!" Chala made a fist and punched his knuckles, grinning when he mock-wincing at the pain.

"Nice one! Chica feroz!" He laughed and, using knowledge he couldn't explain, put his new saddle blanket on Thistle's back.

When the blanket was nice, smooth, and even, Victor lifted the saddle he'd set down and put it on top of it, applying the cinch straps and the breast collar, speaking softly to Thistle the entire time. When he was done with that, he turned to Berset-dak and took the bridle and reins he was holding, carefully securing them to Thistle's head.

"See the loop I made you for your axe?" Berset-dak asked, pointing to the ring of thick, worked leather near the back of the saddle.

"Oh, nice! Thank you, Berset-dak." Victor pulled Lifedrinker from his belt and slipped her into the one on the saddle. Then he turned and looked around the gathered people. "I feel like Chandri and I need to go now. Isn't that right, Oynalla?" Victor felt some urgency, deep in his belly, and he wasn't sure if it was because of what Oynalla had told him about her vision or if it was truly his gut speaking to him. Either way, he wouldn't be able to relax until he and Chandri were making their way toward Tellen.

"You're right, warrior. Come, all, make a circle." Oynalla said, motioning for the small crowd to gather around Victor and Chandri, who'd stepped forward and

stood next to him. When Oynalla, Thayla, Rhessa, Deyni, Chala, and even Berset-dak had linked hands around them, Oynalla spoke again, "Ancestors!" Suddenly Victor felt a surge of Energy, powerful spirit Energy that reminded him of inspiration, but it was more focused, more pointed. It came from Oynalla, surging into the air around Victor and Chandri, and she said, "Guide these hunters to their quarry! Bless their arrows and blades, and bring them home!"

The Energy seemed to seep into his pathways, and Victor allowed it, fearing nothing malicious from Oynalla. As it filled him, he felt driven, ready, and sure that he could accomplish the quest she'd set before him. He grinned somewhat wolfishly and said, "Thank you. See you all soon!" Then, Victor turned, put his foot into the stirrup, set perfectly for his height, and hoisted himself into the saddle. He reached down, took Chandri's hand, and effortlessly lifted her up behind him.

"Good luck, Victor!" Deyni called.

Victor smiled at her, then locked eyes with Thayla, and she clearly mouthed, "Be careful!" He nodded to her, then turned, flicked the reins, clicked his tongue, and Thistle started trotting off into the grass. "Go east," Chandri said into his ear. She was leaning against his back, arms around his waist, and Victor could tell she was under the influence of Oynalla's spell, just as he was, because she hissed, "Fast!" and squeezed her arms tight.

"Hold on, then!" Victor yelled and leaned forward, touching his heels to Thistle's flank and flicking the reins again. Thistle didn't have any trouble knowing what he wanted, and suddenly the great animal surged forward. The wind was racing through Victor's hair, blowing tears out the corners of his eyes, and he and Chandri were bouncing, trying to match their up-and-down motion with the animal's heaving, rolling stride. Victor knew that if he didn't do so, he'd have one hell of a sore ass in a short while.

"Ancestors!" Chandri screamed with glee. "He's twice as fast as a roladii!" She gripped Victor's stomach tightly, and he felt her motion as she lifted herself in her stirrups and let herself down as the beast moved. Trusting in her experience, Victor tried to match her movements, and soon the ride became much more bearable. He laughed as the wind continued to howl past his ears, and the grasslands flew by in a blur.