

Victor BK3: Ch12

Book 3: Chapter 12: A Hunter's Farewell

“No,” Victor said flatly. “I’m serious, Chandri—I don’t want a tattoo of that monster on my face.”

“Well, what about just his claws or something? You know, to symbolize him?” Chandri asked, looking rather crestfallen. She held a needle and a little jar of ink that she said she’d “made in a special ritual.” Victor studied her face, reaching up to turn it to the side to get a good look at her tattoos. They were all black, but the tiny figures of deer and boar-like animals were cleverly shaded with lots of detail. She was talented, he supposed.

“Does it have to be on my face?” Victor didn’t know why, but he didn’t want to be reminded of that asshole every time he looked in the mirror. “You know he wasn’t even the toughest cabrón I’ve ever fought. Like, fucking Rellia was tougher than that thing.”

“Rellia?” Chandri asked.

“Hah, I guess it’s cool that you don’t know who she is.” Victor smiled

“I’m sorry you didn’t track your earlier victories, but I could help you if you want! I have other inks we can use, too!”

“Oh, God. Let’s just start with this one, and then we’ll see, all right? You didn’t answer me, though. Can I have it somewhere I don’t have to look at it all the time?” Victor gestured vaguely at his shoulder or leg.

“Sure, this is for you, Victor. There aren’t any rules.” She smiled at him in a way that seemed to involve her whole body—she leaned forward, her eyes sparkled, and everything about her posture just said, “I think you’re great, and I’m glad to be here with you.” Victor loved how open and genuine she was, and he couldn’t help but smile back.

They were sitting to one side of the formerly-barricaded, ruined hall. The front door was open wide, and a large window near the opposite side was cleared, allowing bright light and fresh air into the hall. Tellen and the surviving hunters were preparing the bodies of the fallen—he wanted to hold a vigil that evening and “send their spirits home.” Victor had surmised it involved a pyre because Chandri had volunteered him to help build it when she’d finished his “hunt-trophy.”

“All right,” he said, shrugging out of his still-shredded ringmail vest. He was bummed that the garment seemed to have met its match—Jikrak’s horrible claws had proved too much for it. The man-monster had torn one half of the garment, along with Victor’s flesh, to ribbons, and it seemed the Energy that had once imbued the magical armor was gone. Not one link had repaired itself since

the battle. Victor lifted the still-heavy vest and sighed sadly, putting it into his storage ring.

The shirt he wore under the vest was also shredded and showed no recovery. “Close your eyes,” he said, with a laugh, then pulled it off. He didn’t bother with the buttons—the thing fell away without any effort when he pulled.

“Ancestors!” Chandri hissed when she saw his torso. He wanted to think she was exclaiming about his muscles, but he knew better—his torso, shoulder, and arms were crisscrossed with pink and white scars like someone had used him as a practice dummy for a squadron of sword students.

“Yeah, I kind of already wear a lot of trophies from my battles, I guess.” He laughed off her concern, running a hand over the freshest scars on his shoulder and side. “They don’t hurt, don’t worry. When I Berserk, my cuts heal up pretty good. These aren’t even that bad! You should have seen me before I advanced my race the last time. One of my arms didn’t even work properly because my bone had healed sorta crookedly.” He caught himself embellishing facts, realizing he was trying to impress her.

“I see the pink scars there, where you’re rubbing. Is that where the demon cut you last night?” Chandri asked, reaching out to gently run her fingers over his shoulder. Her touch was feather-light, but little tingles of electricity ran through Victor as she traced some of the scars.

“Yeah. I caught his other arm and was holding on with both hands. He went crazy slashing into me while I squeezed,” Victor said, grinning savagely.

“I’ll make your hunt-trophy here, on this shoulder. All right?”

“Yeah, sounds good to me, Chandri,” Victor said, stretching out his legs and leaning onto his other hand so his shoulder faced her more directly. They were sitting on a pile of tanned hides, and Victor felt comfortable and relaxed. “Hey,” he added, “I still have that bottle of booze your dad gave me. Let’s have a drink while you work, hmm?”

“Yes! I could use it! I was so stressed and excited last night I hardly slept!”

“Excited?” Victor asked with a chuckle.

“Yes! I knew you would win, and I knew today would be a good day. I was mostly stressed because I felt so horrible for the hunters who died through the night. They were so terribly wounded, Victor. Even Tellen’s best healing draughts didn’t save them.”

“Dios,” Victor said, taking the bottle of cheb-cheb from his storage ring, “It sounds like you had a worse night than me. Sorry, Chandri.” He pulled the cork on the bottle, breaking the wax seal with his thumbnail, and offered it to Chandri. “You first.”

She took the bottle and put its mouth to her black-stained lips, and took a long pull, breathing out syrupy, eye-watering vapors into Victor’s face. A little of the red-brown liquid ran down her chin, and she scrunched up her eyes at the strength of the liquor. “Great Mother! That one bites! Your turn!” She pressed the bottle into his hands and produced another bottle of alcohol. Victor raised an eyebrow while he took a swig of the cheb-cheb, and she grinned, reaching up to pour the other bottle on his shoulder.

“You need a bath, but this will do for now,” she laughed, scrubbing his skin with the torn-up shirt he’d removed. Victor spluttered out some of the cheb-cheb as he matched her laughter, enjoying her ministrations more than he wanted to admit. How long had it been since he even kissed a girl?

He thought about it while Chandri let his shoulder dry, getting her needle ready. He hadn’t kissed a girl since he last went to Marcy’s house. It felt like an entirely different life. Hell, it was a different life! He had a sudden urge to lean forward and steal a kiss from Chandri, and he almost acted on it, but then he saw Tellen and his hunters kneeling over the corpse of one of their friends, and he sighed and took another swig. This wasn’t the time.

He listened to Chandri talk about hunting and training roladii while she worked on his tattoo. While her little needle hummed with Energy, and he felt the tickle in his skin, he imagined taking her for a long ride on Thistle. He envisioned a trip like they’d just taken, but without the pressure and worry of going to rescue her father’s hunting band.

Did he really like her that much, or was he just lonely? Was her situation any different from Thayla’s when it came down to it? He’d told himself he wasn’t getting closer to Thayla because he was going to leave. What about Chandri? Wouldn’t it hurt her if he left her behind? “Damn it,” he sighed, letting his frustration leak out.

“What?” Chandri asked. “I do something wrong?”

“Nah, you’re fine, chica. I’m just annoyed at my circumstances.”

“Things will look up, Victor. You’re with us now, and that’s not all bad, is it?” Chandri asked, her lips quirking up at the corners while she concentrated on her work.

“No, not at all. I’m happy to be with you right now.” Victor determined to quit worrying so much about the future and try to enjoy what he could in the moment. He took another swig of cheb-cheb and offered the bottle to Chandri.

“No thanks! I’m already floating a little. You want to be able to make sense of this mark, don’t you?”

“Yeah, I guess,” Victor said, setting the bottle down and allowing his mind to drift again. He thought about many things, but he found his mind circling a particular worry that was itching at the back of his mind, and he finally forced himself to confront it. In the spring, there were a lot of people expecting him to lead some sort of conquest of a distant land. What an impossibly absurd situation!

He thought about Rellia, and he smiled at the memory. One minute they’d been trying to kill each other, and the next, she’d been telling him that her life depended on their partnership. “Fucking nuts,” he said.

“Still dwelling on your crazy life?” Chandri whispered, her concentration apparently very absorbed by whatever detail she was working on.

“Yeah,” he chuckled again. “I guess I have a problem with talking to myself.”

“No, I do it all the time, too, especially when I’m out alone on a hunt. I talk myself through my problems sometimes or just keep myself company by narrating what I’m doing and what I’ll do next. It’s kind of crazy, really.” She paused and sat up straight, stretching her neck by pushing on her chin with the palm of her hand.

“This hard work? Want to take a break?” Victor asked.

“No, silly! I’m almost done. Hold still,” she said and reached down to dip her needle into one of her jars of ink. Victor hadn’t even noticed that she’d gotten more jars out.

“Hey, this seems like you’re making something a lot more complicated than your marks!”

“Not really! Just a little bigger and more colorful. Shh, now,” she said, bending to the task. Victor did as she asked and grew quiet, suddenly thinking about his oldest living friend in this world—Vullu. He resolved to try to track the gruff but kind Cadwalli down when he got to Persi Gables. He wasn’t sure Vullu would still be around—he’d seemed pretty depressed when he’d left the Wagon Wheel, and hadn’t he said something about traveling? Still, Victor determined to look for him; it would be nice to catch up with him and tell him about his adventures.

“Done!” Chandri said. “I’d put some healing ointment on it, but your body is healing almost as fast as I move the needle!”

“Oh, yeah. One of my abilities lets me boost my vitality a bit. I was trying to outdrink you so I could get you to tell me all your secrets . . .” Victor trailed off, hoping Chandri would get the joke, and she grinned and slapped his shoulder where she’d just made the tattoo. It stung a little, but not much.

“I’ve got some secrets for you, but not right now,” she whispered, her breath hot on his ear. She laughed and then fished around in her storage pouch and pulled out a mirror set in a handle that looked like polished bone. She held it out so Victor could see his shoulder and said, “It’s a reflection, so reverse everything in your mind.”

“Right,” Victor said, still recovering from the way her breath had tickled his ear. He blinked a couple of times to bring himself back to reality and looked into the mirror.

There was his shoulder—tan and crisscrossed with scars, and there was Chandri’s beautiful work—he saw a severed hand with six blades that looked very much like the real-life Jikrak’s hand, blood pooling under the severed end. Opposite the claw were six spears adorned with turquoise and with gleaming points. Behind and above the other images was a broad, gloriously orange and yellow sun.

“It tells the story, see?” Chandri said, pointing to the claws. “You killed the monster, and, with the dawn, six hunters were saved.”

“It’s beautiful, Chandri,” Victor said. “Thank you! It means a lot to me.”

“Hush! Thank you! There are six spears on your arm because that’s how many hunters you saved. Tellen, my father, will come home thanks to you.” When she hugged him again, Victor basked in the warmth of it, but more than that, he soaked in the feeling that he’d done something genuinely good. He’d risked himself to save some friends, and it had paid off. It felt very damn good, and he resolved, right then and there, that he’d try to recreate that feeling as many times as he could in this life.

“All right, let me get a shirt on before your dad comes over here and beats me up,” Victor laughed, pushing her back a little.

Grinning, Chandri said, “How did you know about all the boys Tellen has chased from my tent?” She laughed at Victor’s mock outrage, then stood and said, “I’m going to go see if he needs help with the preparations. We’ll build the pyre soon, right?”

“Yeah, right. No problem,” Victor replied, pulling out a brown and gray, knitted sweater he’d bought in Gelica. The weather was turning chilly, and he enjoyed the cozy feel of the thick garment. Once he was sitting comfortably and saw that the others would be busy for a while yet, he pulled out the belt he’d looted from Jikrak. It was heavy—kind of like the sacks of precious metals he’d found in the dungeon, but the links seemed strong, and they gleamed differently in the light than silver did.

He trickled some Energy into it, and his mind flooded with understanding, accompanied by a System message:

Dragonsteel Belt of Energy Absorption - Prerequisite for use: Advanced tier Core or higher. This belt will absorb Energy attacks aimed at the wearer. It will absorb a total of 4500 points of Energy before it needs to process the absorbed Energy and reset, becoming inert for up to twelve hours.

“Shit!” Victor hissed. “Well, that’s pretty damn cool, I guess.” His Core was still at the “basic” tier, and from his understanding, he’d need to work through the entire “improved” tier before he’d be at “advanced.” “Something to look forward to,” he sighed, slipping the belt into his storage ring. Looking at his ring, he snapped his fingers and fished the black ring he’d taken from Jikrak out of his pocket.

When he bonded to it, trickling some Energy into the dark metal, he became aware of an immense storage space, even larger than his other dimensional containers. More than that, his mind started cataloging the thousands of items held within. At first, Victor thought he’d hit the jackpot, and he had, in a sense, but it wasn’t quite what his first impression had indicated—the ring was entirely filled with items that looked suspiciously like construction materials.

The two most numerous materials in the ring, making up more than half of the total volume, were massive mounds of rectangular stone blocks and hundreds upon hundreds of hardwood beams and boards. There were other things—doorknobs, doors, plaster, roofing tiles, banisters, the list went on and on. It was mind-boggling to Victor that so much could be in that ring. He finally came upon an item that explained everything: blueprints for something called “A Great Hunter’s Hermitage.”

Victor looked through the blueprints briefly, confirming his suspicion that the construction materials in the ring were everything he’d need to build the “hermitage.” The sketches on the blueprint made it look sort of like a squat fort with an asymmetrical shape, the right side rising three stories while the left half was a single story. The materials had interesting names like “Gray Spire Marble” and “Gith Valley Mahogany.” All in all, it was an interesting find, and Victor was sure it was valuable but not something he wanted just then.

“That fucking creep was going to build this here and hunt people?” He wasn’t sure he was right, but Victor remembered Jikrak saying something about not being from this world or planning to rule this world. He’d been full of himself, that was for sure, Victor thought, slipping the ring back into his pocket.

“Dammit,” Victor said, feeling somewhat cheated. He’d expected Jikrak to have weapons, potions, treasure, and maybe even artifacts of great power.

“Construction shit.” He shook his head ruefully.

“He might have had another ring on his other hand,” Chandri said, startling Victor.

“Hey! You trying to give me a heart attack?” Victor stood up and gave her a little shove, and she playfully shoved him back.

“Maybe! If you startle that easily, you must need some hunting practice!”

“Hmm, maybe.” Victor shrugged. “You might be right about his other hand, though. You think we should dig it out?”

“One of the hunters broke up the stone, trying to see if he could get more claws. It’s like the demon’s skin and clothes became mixed with the rock—they were completely ruined. If you broke up the stone to get at his fingers, I think any rings he was wearing would break apart, also.”

“Oh well,” Victor shrugged. “Maybe someday I’ll build a, what was it? Hermitage! Maybe I’ll build a hermitage in the wilderness someday.” Chandri looked at him with questions in her eyes, and he took a minute to explain what was in the ring.

“It might not be what you hoped for, but it sounds valuable, Victor. In any case, we need to get the pyre built. Are you ready?” Victor nodded, and the two of them spent several hours scouring the ruins for wood. Chandri showed Victor how the clan built their funeral pyre, which reminded him of when he and some friends made a bonfire in the wash near his friend Anthony’s house. They’d partied long into the night until one of Anthony’s neighbors called the cops, and they’d run, laughing and whooping, through the desert to another friend’s house, where they’d all crashed on couches.

This pyre wasn’t for partying, though, and when it was finished, and Tellen and his surviving hunters carried out their dead, one by one, and laid them atop the bone-dry wood, Victor and Chandri stood to the side, silently contemplating their mortality. Or, at least, that’s what Victor thought about, and he figured Chandri must have had similar thoughts.

As the sun dipped behind the western hills, Tellen held a torch to the pyre, and it burst into flames. Victor had felt some Energy when Tellen lit the torch, and he felt more of it in the roaring flames that consumed the fallen hunters, and he wondered what sort of spell this was. As he thought about fire magic, he became aware of a deep, resonating hum, and then he realized some of the hunters were singing. A moment later, a higher-pitched humming joined the song, and Victor saw that Chandri and the two female hunters had also begun to sing.

He wanted to sing with them, but as the hum became words, words that he didn’t recognize, even with the System Language Integration, Victor just stood still and listened, watching the fire. The song was hauntingly beautiful, and he felt Energy rising with it and more Energy from the fire, and then he saw the ghostly, ethereal forms of the hunters flowing with the smoke and sparks that flickered into the night sky before fading away.

Victor wondered if he was imagining things, but the wispy, smoke-like figures continued to float out of the flames and into the starry sky, even after he blinked his eyes rapidly. “Holy shit,” he breathed, not loud enough for anyone else to hear.

He wanted to participate, to send those hunters off somehow, and inspiration hit him. He cast his Manifest Spirit spell, but rather than rage Energy, this time, he fed his pack some inspiration-attuned Energy. Suddenly, around the pyre, shimmering white-gold fragments of Victor’s spirit took the shapes of his coyotes, and the bright-eyed, luminous creatures sat on their haunches, lifted their snouts to the sky, and they howled.

The sound was not what regular coyotes sounded like—their voices harmonized into an ululation that brought goosebumps to Victor’s skin, and the hunters took inspiration from it, lifting their own songs to match the note, and soon most of them had tears freely streaming down their cheeks.

After the song was finished and the fire had burned to coals, Tellen broke out casks of ale, and they all sat in a circle in the center of the hall and told stories about the hunters that had died. Victor didn’t have any stories to share, but he listened, and he laughed and cried with his friends, and he felt like one of them, if only for a short while, and it warmed his heart. Like all the others, he drank too much and fell asleep there on the piled furs. Chandri lay down in front of him, and at some point in the night, he woke to pull her close, savoring her warmth, and he slept very soundly.

Victor, Chandri, and the hunters took nearly a week to return to the camp. Some of the hunters were wounded in ways that slowed their ability to walk, and Victor let them take turns riding on Thistle. However, someone had to keep the animal walking on a lead, or else he would outpace the others in his absent-minded perpetual hunt for the perfect piece of grass to eat.

Tellen was impressed by Thistle and grateful that Victor was happy to walk with them rather than ride ahead. They spoke a lot on their journey, and Tellen gave Victor much advice about how to hunt animals, process their hides, prepare their meat, and a million other things that Victor didn’t entirely absorb. Victor had always been better at learning things by doing them, and when one of the hunters shot a bird or small animal, he volunteered to skin and dress the meat and even cook it, so long as Tellen or one of the other hunters would help him.

Victor nearly dropped the ladle he’d been using to sample his feyris stew one evening when a System message appeared in his vision:

Congratulations! You have learned the skill: Cooking - Basic.

No one else was surprised, and they laughed at his wide eyes when he started exclaiming about all the things he understood now. He knew that certain spices didn’t mix well, for instance, but more than that, he knew all sorts of herbs to use with various types of cooking, even things that weren’t from Earth, like ground werdwort. He understood that and so much more. For instance, he knew how to tell if certain cuts of meat were ready to eat and how it was easier to peel a jellipur if you boiled it first.

“Hah! Thayla’s gonna lose it when I cook her something that actually tastes good!” Everyone laughed at that, but Chandri had a strange look in her eyes. Victor found out what was bothering her the next day when they were walking ahead of the line of hunters. She walked next to him and spoke quietly so only he could hear.

“Are you going to stay with Thayla? Will you become a father to Deyni?”

Victor was caught by surprise, and he looked down at Chandri and opened his mouth but closed it again, thinking about his words for a minute. “No, I don’t think that would be fair to Thayla, Chandri. I love her, and I care about what happens to her, and she deserves to find someone who wants to live the life she wants. I’ve come to realize that I may find moments of peace in my life, like this, for instance, but I’m not built to stay in a life like that. I crave adventure, and part of me craves violence. I’m a Berserker, Chandri, with the blood of battle-loving titans in my veins, and I’ve come to accept that.”

“So you and Thayla aren’t lovers?” Chandri asked, and Victor wondered if she’d heard a word he said.

“No, Chandri, we’re not,” he laughed. She laughed too, and Victor knew she’d heard him and respected his words, but she still liked him, and that felt good.

“Victor,” Tellen called from behind him. “Poyla can walk by now,” he gestured to the huntress riding Thistle behind him and continued, “Why don’t you and Chandri ride ahead? We’re getting close to the camp. Tell them our story, so I don’t have to when I get there! I’m tired and want to celebrate with a feast, not talk for hours and hours.” Tellen laughed and helped Poyla down.

Victor shrugged and said, “Sounds good to me, Tellen.” Then he hopped up on Thistle and reached a hand down to Chandri, “Shall we?” When she took his hand, he pulled her up, looked down at Tellen, and said, “All right, we’ll hurry, but don’t get too jealous when you see how fast Thistle runs!” He laughed and clicked his tongue, touching Thistle with his boots, and soon they were racing over the grasslands, the wind whistling in his ears and blue-green grass flying by in such a blur that he could imagine he was charging over an ocean.