

Victor BK3: Ch23

Book 3: Chapter 23: Persi Gables

On their twelfth day of travel, Victor began to smell, on the wind from the east, the scent of Lake Beliss. He knew from his previous time in Persi Gables that the lake was more like an inland sea, maybe comparable to one of the great lakes in North America. It had a distinctive smell, and though they were too far away to catch the fishy odors of the docks district, there was a tang to the air that felt different in his nose.

“We were lucky,” Valla said from her saddle, riding a dozen feet to Victor’s left.

“Oh?”

“Yes. We could have been caught out in a storm. I’ve worried about the skies, gray and threatening, but nothing falls.” She gestured to the steel gray, perpetual cloud cover they’d ridden under for the last two days.

“Is it cold enough? It doesn’t feel that cold to me. Or do you mean rain?” Victor had been quite comfortable, in fact, enjoying the lack of sun and the sweat that came with it.

“When the winds stir up, and the storms roll in, the temperature drops quickly. As I said, we’ve had a lucky journey. We’ll pick up the Northern Highway soon and can follow that into the city.”

“Is that an official name? The Northern Highway?” Victor asked, easing Thistle closer to Valla and Uvu with a nudge of a knee.

“Yes. The empire shared the cost of its creation with the city-state. It runs north from Persi Gables to Gelica and south toward the sea.”

“Right. Edeya was telling me about that—Persi Gables isn’t part of the empire?”

“No. Ridonne tolerates the city’s independence because the city council pays a tax to the empire. They say it’s a mutual defense pact—the legion even has barracks in the city.” Valla scanned the low rise off to the north and said, “We should ride up that hill. It’s the only chance you’ll get of a full vista of the city—soon, we’ll be in the woods that surround the walls.”

“Cool,” Victor said and clicked his tongue, urging Thistle to the right and up the slope. The climb was deceptively long, and the hill seemed gentle enough, but when Victor looked back to see Valla following him, he was surprised by how much elevation they’d gained. By the time he came up to the top of the rise, he could see the ground falling away before him toward a sparse, deciduous forest with mostly bare branches, just a few brightly colored leaves clinging here and there.

Over the tops of the trees, he saw the distant walls of Persi Gables. They were high and washed-white, though many buildings within stood taller. It didn't look as big as Gelica, but it was far larger than Victor ever imagined medieval cities to be. "We're not really in a medieval world, though, are we?" he asked Thistle, scratching his neck.

"Persi Gables differs from Gelica in that they don't allow construction outside the walls. If you want to live outside to hunt or farm, you need to travel ten miles to the north or south, where villages are permitted."

"Why?" Victor frowned at the cluster of civilization, wondering what their reasons might be—defense, perhaps?

"Their agreement with the Empire. Persi Gables is sovereign over the land within her walls and 'the ten miles of uninhabited lands outside.'"

"Huh," Victor frowned and rubbed at his chin, staring out past the distant city to the blue-gray horizon of water—Lake Beliss. "Well, do we go into the city or straight to the location on your map? I'm not sure I want to bring Thistle when we confront the, well, you know, the guys doing the summoning."

"You should secure lodging. Do you want to stay at Lady Rellia's estate? Lam's?"

"Nah, I'll get a hotel, er, an inn. I don't really want to announce my presence yet. I know you've been checking in with Rellia, and I've been messaging Lam, but if you don't mind, let's keep my exact location in the city between us. Is that weird? I'm not trying to be sneaky; I just kinda don't want to deal with them trying to meet with me and involve me in all sorts of campaign business. We've still got months until spring."

"My orders were to stay near you and to make sure you survived to report to Persi Gables in the spring. I can do that without divulging your exact location." Valla had become more and more verbose during their journey, either growing more comfortable with Victor or with herself. Victor figured it was probably a mixture of the two.

"Cool. Well, since you're making that sacrifice, I'll pay for your room."

"I have sufficient funds for lodging," she snorted, and Victor thought he almost heard a chuckle bubbling beneath the words.

"Hey! I'm just trying to be polite."

"Acknowledged."

"Well, I take it that's the North Road?" Victor pointed to a wide, flat ribbon of brown heading out of the woods and then north through the plains.

"The Northern Highway. Yes, that's it."

“Not much traffic,” he said, scanning the road for as far as he could see, only spotting a couple of figures far to the north that might have been people or animals.

“The weather is threatening, and it’s barely past dawn. I’m sure some countryfolk are on their way with goods to sell, but we’ve beaten the crowds.”

“Ah, the benefits of riding all night like lunatics!” Victor chuckled and clicked his tongue. Ever ready to move, Thistle started toward the road, walking down the grassy, miles-long slope. Valla followed him, a rumble coming from Uvu’s chest. Victor couldn’t tell if it was a growl or a purr. The cat hadn’t ever shown any aggression to Thistle, but he still worried it might try to pounce on his trusty steed from some sort of instinct.

“Hey,” he shouted over his shoulder. “Last stretch of open plains, and it’s downhill! Let’s race!” With that, he stood slightly in his stirrups, leaning forward, clicking his tongue, and twitching his reins. Thistle didn’t require much in the way of direction—he seemed to know what Victor wanted most of the time, and their desires coincided nicely at that moment. The big vidanii bucked once and then broke into a mad charge down the slope, kicking up clods of moist soil and grass as he veritably flew over the ground.

Victor howled and whooped, and as they thundered over the flat section of plains before the road, he turned to see that he’d left Valla and Uvu in the dust, easily a quarter-mile behind him. “Fuck yes, Thistle! Let’s go, boy!” There was a culvert and berm before the road, and Thistle sailed over it, leaping a good twenty feet. He landed on the hard-packed dirt of the road, sliding on his hooves, and then he was charging again into the sparse, manicured woods outside the city. His hooves were even louder, even more like thunder, on the road.

They’d only charged into the woods for a few hundred yards before Victor saw a large wagon ahead of him and several people and roladii, so he slowed, pulling on the reins until Thistle stopped, and then he pivoted and waited for Valla. To his surprise, after a few minutes, she came crashing out of the forest to the right, leaping over the underbrush near the side of the road.

“Woah! Trying to take a shortcut?” he laughed, and Valla, face flushed with the thrill of the ride, laughed with him, the first real laugh he’d heard out of her in days.

“I think Uvu wanted to try to circle you; I couldn’t force him back to the road!” She reached up and gave the big cat’s ear a tweak, and he opened his mouth, exposing six-inch canines as he yawned and chuffed.

“Hah, on the hunt, I guess.” Victor turned Thistle back toward the city and began to ride, at a relaxed trot, toward the group of travelers ahead. He soon saw that the wagon was loaded with farm goods, and the roladii were also burdened with

sacks of vegetables, piles of fur, and packaged meats. “On your way to market?” he called as he edged around the group, and one dark-haired Ardeni woman called back from beside her roladii.

“Aye, early to market, early to the tavern!” She laughed, and many of the others around her joined in.

“Well, I hope you get good prices!” Victor waved and hurried around them onto the open stretch of road leading through the woods. He could just make out a faint glimmer of white in the distance, and he knew it was the city gate. He heard Valla speaking loudly to the farmers, but he couldn’t make out her words. A moment later, she caught up to him.

“They think it’s going to storm tonight. Snow.”

“Oh? Looks like we made it just in time.” Victor thumped Thistle’s shoulder and said, “Good idea, only sleeping every other night, Valla.”

Passage through the gate was painless at that hour. The guards on watch had the gates wide open, and when Victor and Valla rode up, there wasn’t anyone ahead of them. Victor had a sudden feeling of Deja Vu when he saw the gate—its high portcullis, its steel doors, some twenty feet high, flung wide, and most of all, the guards with their polearms and green and black livery. This was the gate where he’d first entered the city, the gate through which his abductors had brought him to sell.

“I recognize this,” he said.

“Well, weren’t you in the city for quite a while?”

“Yeah, but not the gates. This is where I was brought through, in my first few minutes in this world.”

“It makes sense,” Valla said, and perhaps because of the guards standing nearby, she seemed to have fallen back into her old habit of not elaborating.

“Why?” Victor asked, rolling his hand as if to say, “Keep going.”

“Oh, the map indicates the summoning circle is east and north of here. Not far from the walls.”

“Oy! Are you two coming through or what?” the guard on the left asked, a large Vodkin with sleek, black fur.

Victor glanced left and right, then behind him, pointedly staring up and down the empty road, then said, “Is there some kind of hurry?” He still wore his armor, and when he frowned down at the guard from Thistle’s back, the man backed up a step.

“No big hurry, I s’pose.”

“Let’s go find some rooms,” Victor said to Valla, and then the two of them started forward.

“Oy! ‘Old up, there, friends,” the guard said as they road under the portcullis.
“What’s your business in town?”

“Shopping,” Victor said.

“Visiting family,” Valla said.

“Some of both,” Victor nodded to Valla.

“You got means for lodging?” the guard on the other side asked. He was much shorter, though just as stocky as the Vodkin—a Cadwalli with long, black goat horns that made wearing the uniform, conical helmet of the city watch impossible.

“Do you jest?” Valla asked, raising an arched eyebrow. As always, she was impeccably dressed in her standard uniform—striped, close-fitting pants, high-collared, magically pressed, white shirt. More than that, she rode on a saddle and mount that probably cost more than the average person’s home. She patted Uvu’s shoulder and continued to stare. The guard glanced from Valla to Victor, then shrugged.

“Enjoy your stay.”

Victor followed Valla through the city’s narrow streets and markets that were just waking up—merchants were busily setting up stalls and pulling their carts into place. Uvu cleared the way for them several times by roaring in spite of Valla’s admonishments. Roladii and other lesser beasts were quick to trot out of his way, oftentimes upending carts and sending goods rolling. Merchants cursed and complained, but they didn’t make eye contact with Victor or Valla, and the two of them made quick progress.

“Where we going, by the way? You have a place in mind?” Victor asked after they’d made their sixth or seventh turn and crossed yet another market square.

“An inn run by an old legion quartermaster. He’s a good man and discreet.”

“Cool,” Victor said, looking around, wondering how many of the streets they rode down he’d been led through in chains on his way to one pit fight or another. He wondered if he should go see Yund, walk into the Wagon Wheel and kick his ass. “Maybe fucking Ponda, too.” Victor chuckled; he didn’t know why, but he really didn’t hold a grudge against Ponda. He felt like the big Vodkin had been as fair as he could be while still working for Yund.

“Still,” he said to Thistle, “Yund doesn’t run a very nice setup. There are people sitting in cages in their underwear right now, wondering if they’ll live through the night.”

“What?” Valla asked, turning to him.

“Hey, I know I can’t right all the wrongs in this city by myself, but there’s one place I’d like to visit before we head out to investigate the summoning circle.”

“All right.”

“Like, let’s stable these guys, then I want to go. Today.”

“Understood.” Valla didn’t argue or ask him if he was sure; hell, she didn’t even look at him. She just agreed, and Victor found that kind of refreshing. She might have her own motives for doing things, but she wasn’t constantly second-guessing him.

“You’re a good traveling companion, Valla.”

“You’re a good sparring student,” she said, and Victor laughed.

“Is that how it is? All right, Valla, all right.” She still hadn’t turned to look at him, so he couldn’t tell if she was smiling, but he imagined she was.

A short while later, they arrived at the inn. It was a tall, narrow building sandwiched between a forge and a stable building. High, red stone walls rose up to a peaked, cedar, or whatever wood in that world looked like cedar, gabled roof. The sign above the open, double doors read, “The Soldier’s Rest.”

A Shadeni boy rushed out of the stable toward Victor, and an older, stoop-backed Ardeni walked carefully toward Valla. As the boy approached, he heard the other stablehand say to Valla, “I have advanced Animal Handling. Your terashii is in good hands.”

“Sir, I’ll take care of that vidanii!” The boy said, standing to Victor’s side.

“Oh?” Victor asked, hopping down and lifting Lifedrinker from her loop in the saddle. “You can’t even reach his back. How will you brush him properly?”

“I have a stool in the stable, sir! I’ll be good to him!” He spoke earnestly, reaching out to rest a hand on Thistle’s haunch, and Victor didn’t detect any sort of flinch or alarm from the animal. He shrugged.

“All right, how much?”

“It’s complimentary for people staying at the inn.” The boy gestured toward the tall stone building. Victor nodded but reached into his ring and took out a few Energy beads, holding them out for the boy.

“Make sure he eats well and gets plenty of space in there.” He gestured with his head toward the stable. The boy nodded and took the proffered beads.

“Many thanks, good sir!”

“Be good, Thistle,” he said to the vidanii, moving around the scratch his nose. Thistle huffed and pressed his big damp nose into Victor’s shoulder, making him laugh. He produced a blue, crisp, apple-sized fruit that he’d stored away back in

Gelica, and Thistle munched it noisily. “He likes treats,” he said to the boy, and the kid nodded, bowing his head as Victor handed him the reins.

He saw that Valla was waiting up the short flight of stone steps by the inn’s doors, and he gave Thistle one more pat, then climbed them, two at a time, and, together, they walked in. The common room was quiet at that hour, though a few patrons sat around one of the long wooden tables eating breakfast. It was a bright room, especially with the doors flung wide the way they were. High, plaster ceilings with wooden beams drew the eye to the far wall where an ornate banistered stairway led up to the guest rooms.

“Captain Valla?” a deep, scratchy voice asked. Victor followed the sound to his left, where a white-mustached Ardeni man polished a gleaming wooden bartop. He wore an apron, but Victor could see he was very fit—a man who’d not seen a lazy day in his life. The top of his head was devoid of hair, but his amber eyes were bright and shrewd.

“Sergeant Hine.” Valla strode forward and stretched a hand over the bar, and the man enthusiastically took it.

“Wonderful to have you in! You won’t be staying at the ap’Yensha estate?”

“No. This is Victor. He and I will be staying here a while, and we’d like that kept discreet.”

“Not a problem, not a problem,” Hine said, reaching a hand out toward Victor.

“Good to meet you, Sergeant,” Victor said, striding forward and crushing the man’s hand in a firm grip. Hine squeezed back without a complaint, favoring him with a large smile.

“That’s a warrior if I saw one. Legion?”

“No. He’s on a different path,” Valla answered for him. “Still, he’s a good fighter and a good ally to have.”

“Very good, very good. Excellent. One room or two, Captain?”

“Two, but neighboring.”

“Excellent. I’ll show you up myself. Shall I put it on the ap’Yensha account?”

“Yes,” Valla said before Victor could respond.

“Good, good. Follow me up,” Hine said, and he walked around the end of the bar toward the stairway. Victor and Valla followed, and he led them to the third floor, down a narrow hallway with impeccably clean white plaster walls and polished hardwood floors. “Four rooms on this floor. I’ll give you two the front corner suites. The rear suites are vacant, so you shouldn’t be bothered.”

“Very good. Thank you, Sergeant,” Valla said, standing before the two closed doors at the end of the hall.

“Do you want me to show you in?” For the first time, he seemed a little unsure, awkward even, and Victor could see why—it felt like Valla was dismissing the man.

“We’re good, Sergeant,” Victor said, stepping in. “I think we’re both pretty road-weary, so we just want to kind of get unpacked and unwind a bit. We’ve got a lot of business to handle in town.”

“Oh, yes, of course. Well, here are your keys. He held out two identical-looking keys, labeled “31” and “32.”

“We’ll speak soon, Sergeant. Thank you,” Valla said, taking the keys. She stared at him until he nodded and turned, but, to her credit, she did smile pleasantly at him the entire time.

“Uh, well, it seems like he’s friendly with you. I thought you didn’t have any friends in the legion.”

“I don’t. I met him after I served. He’s a good friend to the ap’Yensha clan.” She held out the key labeled “32,” and Victor noted it was for the door to his right.

“Let’s meet out here in half an hour, and then we can take care of your first objective.”

“Good with me.” Victor took the key, a brass, many-toothed design, and pushed it into the lock above his door handle. Twisting it produced a satisfying thunk as the bolt slid open, and then he opened the door and went in. He wanted to tell Valla that she’d probably offended the innkeeper when she’d sent him away so abruptly. He didn’t really get it—she’d seemed friendly and affable when she’d first spoken to the guy, but then she’d just awkwardly shifted gears like she had a checklist she was moving through.

“Well, not my problem,” he said, pulling Lifedrinker out of his belt loop. “I mean, I want to give her advice, but it’s not like we’re that close, you know?” The axe vibrated in his hand, and he chuckled, looking around the room. A spacious bed sat near the front window, and the curtains were pulled wide, giving a view down the street via which they’d approached the inn. Many more people were out already, and it seemed like a totally different place than the one he’d been paraded through as part of Yund’s pit-fighting chain gang.

“I suppose we didn’t see this part of the city. Well, and we were always out at night,” he said, still talking to the axe. “I don’t think I’ll feel any better if I kill that dude, but I wouldn’t mind putting him outta business.” He moved through the room, stepping over the lovely embroidered pale-green rug into the bathroom,

where he saw that there was not only a brass tub but also a stone-tiled shower in the corner. “Oh, fuck yes! I haven’t had a shower in a while, beautiful,” he said, laying the axe on the counter.

He took off his helm, setting it on the counter next to the axe, then his armor, grunting as he pulled it over his head. Then he stripped down to his birthday suit and turned on the shower tap. It sputtered for a moment, but then hot, steaming water started to jet out of the brass showerhead, and Victor almost laughed in his anticipation. “God, yes! This is going to feel good.”

He stepped into the hot water, groaning in pleasure as it rolled over his scalp, down his shoulders, and back. He laughed as he rubbed his fingers through his hair, but as his laughter died down, he heard a scraping sound, like someone dragging metal over tile, and he quickly rubbed the water out of his eyes. A figure stood in his doorway, cloaked in black, and in its shadow-clad hands was Lifedrinker. To his horror, Lifedrinker blinked out of existence, clearly stowed in a dimensional container.

“You mother fucker!” Victor roared, his rage suddenly off the charts. He exploded out of the shower, and the shadowy figure turned and took a step, trying to run, but not before Victor, naked, wet, roaring, and speeding like a freight train, smashed into its back. He felt the lithe bones of the figure bend and collapse as he hit it, and the two crashed and rolled onto the floor, accompanied by the cracks of more bones and wood as Victor drove them into the bed’s footboard, smashing through it, ripping the feather-filled mattress in the process.

The thief, as Victor’s rage-fueled mind had come to think of the figure, screamed in agony, and the sound, filled with despair, pain, and the weak wheeze of terrible wounds, calmed Victor enough for him to pull back and flip him over. He reached down and jerked his shadowy hood away from his head, revealing a young, Ardeni man’s face, bloodied and bruised from its impact with the bed. “Get her out. Right fucking now!”

“Her?” the man gasped.

“The fucking axe!”

He held the man by his throat, squeezing just enough not to kill him. He saw him fumbling with his left arm, grimacing and sobbing, unable to straighten the broken limb. Giving up, the thief used his other arm, holding it toward his chest, and then Lifedrinker appeared, falling through his broken fingers to clatter onto the floor. Victor thrust the man away, sending him smashing back to the ruins of the bed, then he picked up Lifedrinker and held her to his head.

“I’m sorry, beautiful. I’m sorry. I’m sorry,” he said, his rage replaced by worry. Was the axe okay? Had her spirit suffered? He knew dimensional containers were horrible places for conscious beings.

“My pain was brief, my faith rewarded,” the axe sang, crystal clear, chiming in his mind, and nothing but love and pride coming through with the words—no anger, no suffering.

“Oh, thank God,” Victor said, hugging the axe to his chest. He looked down at the thief, little more than a child, really. His cloak looked to be made of shadows, shifting and kind of misty on his shoulders. “You’re fucking lucky,” he said. The thief didn’t respond, and Victor prodded him with his toe, but he didn’t move. “Fuck,” he said, bending to jostle his shoulder.

Suddenly the door burst open, splinters flying from the frame. “Victor!” Valla said, striding into the room to take in the scene, her wicked blue sword before her. She looked at Victor standing naked, holding his axe, and the crumpled form of the thief amidst the ruin of the bed. “I heard the crash and acted with haste,” she said, glancing away from him.

“He was stealing my shit when I was in the shower. I might have overreacted, but he put Lifedrinker into a dimensional container, and I lost it. Jesus, I hope I didn’t kill him,” Victor added, frowning down at the kid.

“I’ll see to him. You could, perhaps, clothe yourself.” Valla said, stepping forward, eyes trained on the thief, and Victor nodded, turning back to the bathroom. He was pulling on his pants when Valla called, “He’ll live. He bears the mark of Clan ap’Dreysha—a den of thieves and assassins if ever there was one. They’re at direct odds with Lady Rellia.”

“Ap’Dreysha?” Victor asked, but before Valla could respond, pounding feet could be heard in the hallway, and then Sergeant Hine and two burly city watchmen were crowding into the room. From the bathroom, he saw the guards, heard them questioning Valla, and he sighed and buttoned his pants, “So much for a relaxing shower.”