

## Victor BK3: Ch25

### Book 3: Chapter 25: Reconnaissance

While he waited for Yund's fighters to assemble, he took a look in the man's storage ring. His mind reeled at the clutter, and he cursed while he tried to make sense of the contents. At first, he was stymied by the piles of hundreds of clothing items, but he mentally nudged those all into a corner of the space, away from the other contents. Then he had to sift through dozens of personal items from beard oil to toothpicks, from novels about lusty women to letters Yund had written to people and never delivered.

Notably missing from the jumble was any sort of real wealth. Victor didn't find more than a handful of Energy beads, nor did he find any valuable weapons or armor. If he were given the ring, not knowing who it had belonged to, Victor would have guessed it was from a man very down on his luck. After much digging, he finally came up with two contract binders. One was very thick, and one relatively thin, and when he flipped through them, he realized why—the thick binder held the contracts of Yund's deceased fighters, and the thin one held the contracts of his current stable.

"Drag him over here, please," Victor said to the group of fighters holding Yund in place. As they complied, tugging and pulling him to the tune of yelps and curses, a thin line of sickly, filthy, barely clothed individuals started to trickle into the practice hall from the holding pens. When Yund was pulled prostrate in front of Victor, he said, "Yund, where's your money?"

"I'd have told you, Victor," he gasped, clearly in pain from bruised and bent limbs. "I'm broke! I've made a few bad deals and wagers, and I owe a lot of money to some bad people!"

Victor snorted. "Bad people, Yund? Talk about the pot insulting the kettle." Victor ignored Yund's protestations and looked out over the crowd of gathered fighters, his eyes darting to the female faces, hoping to see his old cagemate, Belsa. He didn't see her, though, and he spoke up, loud enough for them all to hear over their muttering and conversations, "Any of you know Belsa?"

Silence met his words as they all turned to stare at him, some with fear in their eyes, others with hope. Victor let his gaze travel from face to face, and finally, a tall, scarred Shadeni with one long black horn and the stump of another raised his hand and said, "I knew her."

"Knew?"

"Aye, sir. She died some time ago in a five-man melee."

"God damn it," Victor growled, grinding his teeth together. He hardly remembered the girl, but he remembered being kind of an asshole to her. She was really the only other person left at the Wagon Wheel that he'd hoped to see. Suddenly, despite his victory and Yund cowering at his feet, the whole thing just felt kind of pointless, kind of empty.

Again, he glanced at Yund, searching for the anger he'd need to smash the man into a pulp, but he couldn't find it. All he felt was empty sadness, a hollow ache, and he wondered if he'd made a

mistake coming there. If he'd never come back, he could have at least imagined Belsa might have won her way free. He might have imagined that Yund had met justice at the hands of his own fighters. Now he was responsible for the scummy asshole, and nothing about squashing him like a bug felt good to him.

He closed his eyes, listening to the muttering crowd, some of them asking their neighbors what was wrong with him, others suggesting they make a run for it. Victor tried to tune them out and focused on his memories of the last week or so in his cell at the Wagon Wheel. He tried to remember Belsa's face, and though he strained, he kept picturing women from Tellen's clan—Chandri, Chala, and so many others. In a gut-wrenching moment, Deyni's face flashed into his mind, and he growled, opening his eyes and lifting a foot as though he might stomp the life out of Yund.

The pit boss cowered and writhed and looked so pathetic that Victor's smoldering rage faded away, and he put his foot down. Belsa was gone, and killing this asshole wouldn't bring her back. He sighed, shaking his head, and, intending to have one of them hand out the contracts, asked, "Who can read?"

Several people raised their hands, but a thin man with the wings of a Ghelli strode forward and said, "Victor?" Sudden recognition washed over Victor's face, and flashes of memories ran through his mind—a shared drink after a pit night, encouraging words, a man standing tall against a stronger opponent, and a whispered confession about terrible crimes and the lengths a man would go to for justice.

"Sarl!" he said and stepped forward to clap the smaller man into an embrace. He didn't know why he hugged him—maybe it had something to do with not finding Belsa alive, maybe it was just relief that at least one person who'd been friendly to him was still at the Wagon Wheel, one person could stand witness to his return.

"We thought you were dead," Sarl said, laughing and pushing Victor back with strong, wiry arms.

"Almost, man, almost. A few times!" Victor said, wincing sheepishly at memories of hectic battles. "Anyway, I turned things around a bit, and now I'm here to help you all out." Victor held up the binder of contracts.

"Ahh! I see. Well, you can't just kill Yund and give us our contracts—the magistrates would put a price on our heads."

Victor stepped back and grunted, looking at Yund. "I wasn't going to kill him, I don't think. I was going to take your contracts, though. I don't give a fuck about the laws regarding slavery here, but I don't want you all to suffer for my actions. Well, what can I do?"

The crowd erupted in snarls and outbursts. Words like "Kill him!" or "Cut off his fingers!" or "Just let us run for it!" rose up out of the noise, but Sarl held up a hand and whistled shrilly.

"Quiet!" Victor added to the whistle, and everyone settled down.

"Victor, if you really want to help, we need someone else to buy the contracts—someone better than Yund."

“Oh, shit. Yeah, I could do that.” He nodded.

“It’s a lot of money for some of us, Victor,” Sarl said, shaking his head.

“Yeah, I got it, Sarl. How do we make this legal?”

“You and Yund have to sign off on the sale with the correct payment going to him in front of witnesses.”

“All right, everyone, sit down and get comfortable. We’ll do this right.” Victor pointed at two men standing close to Yund’s ruined office. “Bring us one of the mess hall tables and get some pens or something from Yund’s office.”

After that, Victor spent the next hour working through each contract with Yund. He told the big pit boss to sit at the table across from him, and then it was just a matter of Sarl writing the sale notations at the bottom of each contract and Victor and Yund signing. After each contract was finished, Victor stacked it to his left and placed the correct number of Energy beads in front of Yund.

Some sales were absurdly cheap—one was only three beads. Others were “expensive,” ranging from a hundred to one that was just over five hundred beads—Sarl’s. All told, Victor spent over a thousand beads paying off the fighters’ contracts. Each time they completed a sale, Victor had two of the fighters sign as witnesses, and at the end, he gave Yund back his ring and let him keep the beads. He didn’t like it, but he didn’t like the idea of murdering or robbing the guy and having some overzealous magistrate take it out on him or Yund’s former slaves.

“Yund, I’ll keep these guys from killing you for exactly five minutes. If I were you, I’d get running,” Victor said when the contracts were all settled.

Yund blanched and looked around at the thirty-three pairs of hate-filled eyes, snatched up his ring, and ran for the door. Some of the fighters started to give chase, but Victor bellowed after them to stop. His smoky, purple-black coyotes were still lurking in the corners of the room, and Victor willed two of them to pursue Yund until he’d cleared the alley. With that done, he turned to the gathered fighters and stood on the table.

“First, you should know that I’m about to sign over your contracts to you. You’ll all be free.” A ragged cheer greeted his words, but just as he’d suspected, some of the faces didn’t look so happy—they looked lost, doubtful, or even afraid.

“Second, I want you to know that I have work for any of you that have no place to go.” Another, more heartfelt cheer broke out.

“I have powerful allies, and we’re putting together an army. In the spring, we’ll launch a campaign to claim lands in the Untamed Marches. Any of you can join and receive food, equipment, and a salary, or you can leave, go your own way and accomplish your own goals.” With that, Victor sat down and began signing off all the contracts. As he finished each one, he handed it to Sarl, and the Ghelli gave it to the correct fighter.

When he was finished, Victor set down Yund's magical quill and looked around the room. The crowd was thinner than before, but he still counted twenty-four fighters standing around. He looked at Sarl and said, "What about you? What will you do?"

"I'll stay and serve in your new army, Victor."

Victor smiled and reached out a hand. Sarl took it in his strong grip, and the two of them grinned at each other while they shook. "I'm putting you in charge of these fighters, then. Give me a minute," Victor said, then took out his Far Scribe book and began to write a note to Lam.

Captain Lam,

I'm sending you a group of twenty-five fighters I liberated from my old fighting stable. They're all free men who've chosen to join our cause. Their leader is a former nobleman named Sarl, and I'd like him to remain in command of these soldiers in our campaign force. Please enlist, equip, and house these fighters, placing them, as a unit, in our ranks where you deem most appropriate.

-Victor

He snapped the book closed and then turned to Sarl, "Okay, Captain Lam knows to expect you. I'm not sure where her estate is in the city—I just got here myself. If you ask around, though, I'm sure you'll find it."

"Just like that, Victor? Your fortunes truly have changed. Thank you, my friend." He turned to the ragged, filthy fighters and said, "Keep your contracts to hand! I'm sure we'll be challenged walking through the city like this."

"Yeah," Victor said, "hold on." He dug into his dimensional ring and pulled out a hundred more Energy beads. He handed them to Sarl and said, "If you guys want to stop and get cleaned up and maybe buy some clean shirts and pants, that would be fine."

"You heard the man! Line up!" Sarl yelled, and Victor smiled, watching him get the rough group into an orderly line, barking orders. Sarl's background as a disgraced nobleman suited him well as a sergeant.

Victor left the Wagon Wheel feeling much better than he had earlier. Sarl's presence and advice about legally handling the contracts had changed the sour twist in Victor's gut into a glow of warmth in his chest.

When he retraced his steps out of the alley, leaving Sarl to manage the group of fighters, he carried Lifedrinker in his hands, partially expecting trouble from Yund or Ponda, but he worked his way back to the busier streets of Persi Gables without incident. "Well, gorgeous," he said to Lifedrinker as he put her back in her loop, "that's what happens when you lead a dirty life—you don't feel too excited about running for help when someone fucks your shit up."

When he got back to Sergeant Hine's inn, it was late afternoon, and Captain Valla was sitting in the common room waiting for him. "Victor!" she called, her voice cutting through the noise of conversations, clinking dishes, and a man strumming a stringed instrument in the corner. Victor smiled at her and then made his way through the light crowd to the corner table where she sat and pulled out the chair, sitting down with a grunt.

“How’s it going?” he asked, scooting back the chair so he could stretch out his legs, his feet crossed at the ankles near Valla’s chair.

“Well. Lady Rellia will update our book when she’s found answers from the thief. And you? Was your old business settled?” As she spoke, Valla waved down a server, and the apron-clad Ardeni nodded to her, indicating he’d come over when he could.

“Yeah, pretty well settled, I’d say. My old demon was sort of pathetic, really. I ended up letting him live, and with a fatter stack of beads than he deserved. I doubt I really changed much about what’s going on in this city, but at least I helped out a few people, including one old friend.”

Valla held up her cup, presumably filled with liquor, and said, “To small victories, then.” She took a sip and held the cup out to Victor, and he grinned, taking it. When he looked into the cup, he saw the telltale red of the wine Valla seemed to enjoy, and he took a drink. It wasn’t bad, and he smiled at her, then downed the rest of the cup’s contents.

“Hey!” Valla laughed.

“What? Don’t tell me that was your first cup. I need to catch up somehow, don’t I?”

“A mark well scored.” She laughed again. “Well? Do you want to hunt out the lair of those responsible for your arrival in this world, or would you like to rest?”

“Wow! Really tempting my impulsive side, aren’t you? C’mon, Valla—I would think a captain from the legion would know that the best time to fuck with your enemies is early in the morning. I learned that playing VR sims.”

“Yes. You’re right, Victor, and you were right about the amount of wine I’ve had to drink. I’m a touch annoyed from my visit with Rellia, and I feel like lashing out at something.”

“Oh?” Victor knew something was up because Valla rarely called Rellia by her first name. “What happened?”

“Well, it started when I wouldn’t tell her where we’re staying. I told her I’d promised to keep people from bothering you, which further irritated her, and she said she’d just find the answer from the thief and that I was being stupid . . .” Valla smiled as the server dropped off another cup and a pitcher of wine. After he walked away, she continued, “Anyway, you don’t want to know all of it. It’s stupid.”

“Eh, I guess I’m being kind of selfish, expecting you to keep secrets like that. If it’s causing you trouble, tell Rellia whatever you want. I’m not promising to stick

around the city after we've dealt with a couple more things, though—like the summoner assholes you mentioned earlier.”

“It's fine, Victor. Our issues go farther back than my dealings with you.” She paused and filled their cups from the pitcher. “Let's forget about Rellia, hmm? Shall we have a few drinks and then retire early? We can rise before dawn and visit the location of the summoner's hall.”

“Sounds fucking perfect,” Victor said and picked up his cup.

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When Victor woke very early in the morning, he was glad for his enormous vitality and improved body. He must have drunk a gallon or two of wine the night before, yet he felt excellent. He was a little annoyed at himself for spending the evening drinking instead of cultivating or working on his new Energy weave pattern, but he was only human and figured it was good to let off some steam now and then.

He pulled out the little pocketwatch he'd purchased so long ago when he was scratching out an existence deep beneath the earth and saw that it was just two hours past midnight. Nodding to himself, he stood up, used the bathroom, and then got dressed. Fully armored and with his axe loose on his belt, he left his room and gently tapped on Valla's door. Three heartbeats later, the handle silently turned, and the door opened an inch to reveal Valla's seafoam green eye. “Ready?” she asked in a voice so low, Victor wasn't sure she'd spoken.

“Yeah,” he whispered. She pulled the door open, stepped out, and silently latched it. Then she moved past Victor and led the way out of the inn, ghosting down the hallway, and Victor noted she wore black pants and a dark military cape over a mail shirt. It was the first time she'd worn something other than her military pants and perfectly starched white shirt, and it felt weird to Victor, like when your favorite cartoon character didn't wear their usual outfit.

The streets were quiet and cold, and their breath plumed forth as they strode through the dark, cloudy night toward the gates. “Do you think I need to cover up my armor?” Victor asked, gesturing to his scaled shirt and his helmet.

“No, they're not shiny. That dull gray metal looks dark enough in this light—clouds hide the moons.”

“Right,” Victor said, and they continued. On their shadowy trek through the city, they encountered few people. Valla told Victor that there was a loosely enforced curfew after midnight. The few guards who challenged them, though, were quickly satisfied when Valla announced herself and said she was on official clan ap'Yensha business. Victor just followed her silently, allowing her to clear their passage. Occasionally he saw figures in the shadows that seemed to slip away before they came near, and Valla suggested that they were probably up to no good, themselves.

The gates were open, but the portcullis was down, and Valla had to threaten the gate captain on duty with Rellia's wrath before he finally agreed to let them out the sally port built into the portcullis. "Why are they so fussy about people leaving at night?" Victor asked as they walked away from the city.

"We could be criminals running from a robbery or murder for all they know. People have always been warier during the dark, wee hours—it stems from our past before we knew how to work Energy or build fires to banish the monsters that lurk in the shadows."

"Yeah, I guess."

"Can you run?" Valla asked, giving him a sidelong look.

"What kinda question is that? I look like I can't run?"

"Well, you're so large. When I picture you running in my mind, it looks more like you falling forward. Show me, then!" she said and started jogging. Victor chuckled and sprang after her, easily matching her pace and surprisingly nimbly. He used Sovereign Will to boost his agility, making his feet more graceful as he followed her steps and tried to avoid making noise. They only ran down the road for a few minutes before they turned up a well-rutted path into the trees. Valla looked at him over her shoulder and said, "The map says the structure's about three miles into these woods."

Victor nodded and followed after her, glad he wore a belt to keep his scale shirt from flopping and bouncing as he ran. He lifted Lifedrinker from her loop, though, and as he liked to do, he carried her crossways in front of himself. The forest was dark, and the shadows clingy, and Victor began to have trouble seeing where to place his feet, so he cast Inspiring Presence. He didn't want to give them away by creating a light, but the spell was almost as good. Everything grew clearer, and he knew exactly where to step. He grinned broadly as Valla looked back at him with an appreciative nod.

After just a few minutes of jogging, Valla held up her hand and slipped off the trail into the soft, damp mulch between the trees. The ground was coated with frosty layers of fallen leaves and needles, and it was a trivial matter, inspired as they were, to slip between the trees noiselessly. They were no longer jogging, but the two moved quickly, parallel to the trail but twenty yards away from it. With Victor's inspiration, the shadows weren't so heavy, and they could see the gap in the trees where the trail ran, making it easy to navigate in the correct direction.

They traveled that way another ten minutes before Valla held up her hand again and crouched behind a thick trunk, motioning for Victor to join her. "Did you see the light?" she asked when he crouched down next to her.

"No, I was watching you," he grunted in amusement at himself and added, "I mean to see where to go."

“Right. There’s a dim light ahead. I think from a window.”

Victor nodded and slowly stood up, gradually moving his head around the trunk to take a look. As his eye cleared the obstruction, he saw a yellow rectangle ahead about twenty or thirty paces through the woods. He watched it for a moment, and then a shadow shifting to his right alerted him to the presence of a darker shadow among the trees by the trail. He knelt, and, barely allowing air to flow past his lips, he whispered, “A watcher by the trail. Close to where the window is.”

Valla nodded and seemed to consider something for a minute, then held out a hand in which a bundle of dark, smoky fabric appeared. “The thief’s cloak,” she whispered, handing it to Victor.

“Why me?” he breathed.

“This is your quest. Take it,” she whispered. He shrugged and took the bundle. He could see the long ties near where the shoulders were, so it wasn’t a complicated equation to figure out how to put it on. He swung it over his shoulders, hooked the ties together in a bow, and pulled the hood up. Victor looked to Valla for approval, and she mouthed, “Bond.”

Victor nodded and ran a trickle of Energy into the cloak.

\*\*\*Cloak of Shadow Imp Hair. This cloak has been crafted from the hairs of a Yohathian Shadow Imp. The imp’s natural ability to blend with shadows has been preserved by a master artificer and will aid the wearer in doing the same.\*\*\*

“Cool,” he hissed, and Valla nodded, giving him the thumbs up. Cloaked in shadow, Victor slipped around the tree, Lifedrinker held in one hand, head down, back by his side, obscured by the cloak’s magic. He glided through the forest, tree to tree, aiming for a point to the left and behind where he’d seen the lurking watcher. When he was sure he’d passed the point where he saw the movement, Victor slipped up behind a tree and watched the shadows, waiting for the figure to move again.

He barely breathed as he leaned into the trunk, just a dark spot against the frosty, knobby bark, and he watched, patient as a glacier. The minutes ticked by, and Victor began to worry that Valla would become impatient, but then his watching was rewarded—a shadow just a few feet away from him shifted, and he saw a pale hand lift a water skin from a belt. Now knowing where to look, Victor saw a Ghelli man sipping from the skin. Victor slipped around the trunk, and before the watcher could cry out, he snaked an arm around his shadowy neck and held Lifedrinker’s gleaming blade up in front of his hood.

“Don’t make a fucking sound,” Victor hissed, squeezing his massive arm around the watcher’s skinny neck. The watcher rapidly tapped on his arm, grunting snot through his nose as he struggled to breathe. Victor loosened up slightly and hissed again, “Stay quiet, or I’ll pop off your head.” He swiveled so he could see the yellow rectangle, and from this angle, he could see that it was a window in a large, barn-like building. Victor, still holding the watcher’s neck tightly, walked



backward, pulling him along, putting some more trees between them and the building.

When he'd moved past a dozen or more trees, Victor slightly loosened his arm and hissed, "Whisper answers to my questions, and you might not die tonight."

"Yes," the watcher wheezed, sucking air through his nose.

"How many more are out here? How many in the building?"

"No more outside. I don't know who's within—maybe no one," the Ghelli answered, coughing loudly.

"Quiet! I said, whisper, you dumbass," Victor squeezed his arm tight again, silencing the man's coughs. The man rapidly tapped his hands on Victor's arm, and Victor let him go so he could breathe.

"Sorry," the man wheezed, then took deep breaths.

"Who are you?"

"I'm," suddenly, Victor felt a gathering surge of Energy from the man, and then he said, "Let me go!" His voice was resonant and strong, and Victor felt his arm start to relax, but then he realized what was happening, and he asserted his will, forcing his arm to flex tight, and this time he didn't fuck around—he squeezed until the man began to flop and flail, and then went limp.

"Did you kill him?" Valla's whisper came from behind a nearby tree.

"Nah, but he's out for a second. Help me bind him up. I think he's one of those mind casters you and Hine were telling me about."

Valla immediately slipped forward and jammed a rolled-up wad of cloth into the watcher's mouth, then she tied a gag around it. "Flip him over," she said, and Victor obliged. Valla bound his hands with a length of rope that constricted and tied itself, then she did the same to his feet. "Take him for questioning or investigate further?" she whispered.

"I want to see what's in that barn. It seems . . . familiar."

"I'll watch him," Valla said, but then the watcher inhaled sharply through his nose and started to writhe. Valla pulled a glass vial from her dimensional container and flicked the cork out with her thumb, holding the vial under the watcher's nose as green vapors began to float out. He got one whiff of the vapors, then the thrashing stopped, and he slumped down, unconscious. Valla looked at Victor and nodded.

Victor nodded back and, still cloaked in shadows, slipped through the trees toward the barn. When he came to the last clump of trees before the clearing where the building sat, he studied it for a moment, making sure there weren't any watchers around it. When he was satisfied, he slipped forward toward the little window set in the center of the left of the two double doors. He reached the

side of the building, slid along the rough planks, and then, ever so carefully, he peered through the dusty glass with one eye.

Suddenly he was transported back to when he'd first arrived in this world. He was weak, small, and unable to move as a powerful mage pointed at him and told him to be silent. Victor blinked furiously, banishing the memory, and took in the room he saw through the glass—the wooden interior of the building. Planks lined the floor, painted with an elaborate spell pattern. Posts were arranged in a circle around the pattern and carved with thousands of runes, each carefully inlaid with some rich, gleaming metal. A dais stood before the spell pattern, and at its center was a lectern holding a thick tome.

“Fucking hell,” Victor said, still reeling from the memory. He started to reach for the door latch when flickering orange light reflected off the glass, he felt immense heat at his back, and a massive concussion blew him through the door to sprawl on the floor in a scatter of embers, fiery splinters, and glass. His cloak was crackling and smoking as it burned, so Victor flailed, ripping the garment off his neck and flinging it away. He rolled to his side, reaching out to grab Lifedrinker from where she'd fallen, then a tall, gray-robed figure stepped into the smoking ruin of the doorway.

“Curiosity is often met with disaster!” the figure boomed, holding out hands that were gathering another ball of seething, hungry fire.