

Victor BK3: Ch8

Book 3: Chapter 8: To Hunt the Hunters

It wasn't long before Vellia started to stir. Victor hadn't touched her or the knife still loosely clasped in her hand, though he sat and watched her closely, Lifedrinker still resting on his knees. He'd noted, with pleasure, that the axe had recovered part of one of her old Heart Silver veins from her recent feast. He figured she was about halfway back to her old glory already, and he knew that if he got a chance to do some real fighting, she'd bounce back even faster.

Vellia grunted, slowly pushing herself up so she could pull her knees under herself, sitting there next to the cold firepit, looking around in a bit of a daze. When her eyes fell on Victor and his axe, they narrowed in understanding. "You . . ." she started, then cleared her throat and tried again, "You could have been wrong. What if there'd been another shard? I'd have been no closer to solving my problem—the delay could have killed me and my kin."

"Well, there was no way I was giving you and your 'kin' the insane shard I had. I guess we lucked out, huh?" Vellia glanced down at her hand, still gripping her knife, and suddenly it was gone—stowed into some dimensional container, no doubt. Victor smiled and stood, slipping Lifedrinker into her loop. He held out a hand for Vellia, and the woman took it, allowing him to pull her to her feet. "What will you do now?"

"I don't know. My life has revolved around Belikot for so long . . . I'm too nervous about it to say I'm free. I suppose I must see what my brothers and sisters will do."

"Are they? I mean, are they really your brothers and sisters?"

"No. I use the term loosely—we consider each other family because there are so few of us. Some are related to me, though. Nephews or cousins . . . one niece. Horol and I had no children, and now he's gone . . ." she trailed off, eyes down, apparently not wanting to look at her husband's killer at that moment.

Victor sighed and said, "I'm sorry, Vellia, but I didn't start that fight."

"I know. I . . . we were foolish and cruel to attack you that way. We're not good people, Victor." Her eyes pooled with tears, and she shook her head, taking a step away from him. "We've done so many things in Belikot's service, so many things that were wrong. Some of us felt trapped and wanted a way out, but some enjoyed it. I fear there will be a reckoning—it's going to come to blows when we regather. My people are spread to the four winds, looking for a solution to our problem, but as they feel what I just felt, when they realize Belikot is no more, they'll return to the pocket realm, and I fear our numbers will dwindle even more."

“Really? Let me guess: you’re one of the good Naghelli, one of the ones that hated working for Belikot?” Victor snorted, unable to keep a bit of a snarl out of his voice.

“No, Victor. Not good. Perhaps not evil, though. I swear to you: my freedom will be spent atoning. I’m going to take this chance you’ve given me, and I’m going to help those Naghelli who feel as I do to slay the others, and then we’re going to spend the next hundred years mending our souls.” She wiped her eyes and performed a bow, so formal and elegant that Victor felt the scowl leave his face, and he nodded to her.

“Well, I wish you luck, Vellia. I hope there are more ‘not evil’ Naghelli than the other kind, and I hope you can think of a way to do some good in this world.”

“I’ll tell you now, Victor; we will win. Kethelket is among the Naghelli that feel as I do, and he’s the greatest swordsman to walk this world in three hundred years.” She reached up to her neck and unfastened her necklace, holding the silver chain and the ruby as large as Victor’s thumbnail out to him. “Please take this,” she said.

“You don’t need to give me anything.” Victor kept his hands by his sides.

“Please! I’m attuned to this gem, Victor. Should you need to find me for any reason, simply hold it in your hand and think of me. It will connect us—you’ll sense where I am, and I’ll sense that you’re looking for me.”

“Uh, and what about the other way around? Can you find me as long as I have this thing?”

“No! I wouldn’t give a gift with thorns.” Vellia scowled, her purple-stained lips pressed in a thin line. “It won’t work unless you hold it and activate it as I described. It’s inert otherwise. If you don’t trust me, have the witch among the Shadeni examine it.”

“How do you know about Oynalla?” Victor took a step back.

“I lingered here, watching your friend and her daughter while I waited for you to come out of the wagon. I heard many things about your plans.” Vellia shrugged, still holding out the ruby.

“All right, give it here,” Victor grunted, reaching out and snatching the necklace. Vellia smiled, her face lighting up with the expression. Victor thought she looked a hundred percent better already than when she’d first come out of the shadows to speak to him.

“You’re looking better. Your wings are glowing again.”

“Thank you, Victor! I won’t forget this debt I owe you. I hope we meet again soon, but if we don’t, I wish you bright moons and a swift blade.” She bowed again, and then, to Victor’s amazement, she seemed to shimmer, and then she was gone, another shadow among the trees, flitting away faster than his eyes could track.

“Neat trick, that,” Victor grunted, tucking the ruby necklace into a pocket under his ringmail vest.

When the eastern sky lightened, Victor hitched up the vidanii and resumed his travel toward the sunrise. He’d been on the road for nearly an hour before Thayla popped her head out of the top hatch and asked, “Didn’t want to have some breakfast together? Why don’t you pull over and come in? Rhessa cooked up some eggs, and I opened a jar of fermented veggies I bought in Gelica.”

“Fermented veggies?” Victor pulled a face, but when Thayla just nodded, smiling, he shrugged and pulled the wagon to the side of the road, really just a slightly grassier spot without the ruts he’d been following. After applying the brake and softly telling the vidanii he’d be right back, he climbed through the hatch after Thayla.

The fermented veggies turned out to be peppers and root vegetables that tasted like spicy pickles to Victor. Rhessa was quick to point out that they weren’t pickled, though, saying the fermentation made them taste that way but was a lot healthier. Victor shrugged, eating quite a load of them with his eggs. “Not bad,” he said halfway through, “I feel like I could eat pretty much anything and be healthy, though, what with my attribute enhancements and everything.”

“Probably,” Thayla said. “Not everyone has as many racial advancements as you do, though. Some of us need to be careful about the junk we put into our bodies!” She glared at him pointedly, nodding toward Deyni, who, as usual, was copying Victor bite for bite.

“Right! I always eat what’s good for me because it helps me grow big and strong!” Victor flexed an enormous arm and made a snarling face at Deyni. She giggled and copied him, growling fiercely. “That’s a girl! Eat those eggs, and soon you’ll be bigger than your mama!” Rhessa laughed from the kitchen, where she was washing some plates. “Hey, Deyni, I heard you had some names for my vidanii! Lay ‘em on me!”

“Lay ‘em . . .” Thayla started to say, but Deyni caught Victor’s meaning and interrupted.

“I have four names! You have to pick two!”

“All right. I’m ready!” Victor took a massive bite of eggs and chewed them noisily while staring at Deyni.

“Cloud, Starlight, Thistle, and Swiftwind!” Deyni said, speaking softly, almost reverently.

“Oh, my!” Victor said, rubbing at his chin. “Those are great names! I have a question, though, that might help me decide.”

“What?” Deyni asked, her voice hushed to match Victor’s conspiratorial tone.

“Do you know if they’re boys or girls?”

“Ancestors!” Thayla laughed, shaking her head. “Victor! One of them is a boy, and one is a girl! Even Deyni saw that!”

“Well, excuse me for not checking out the animals’ equipment right away!”

“Hush, mama!” Deyni said. “Victor, now you know, what names do you like?”

“Well, for the girl, I absolutely think Starlight is the way to go. As for the boy, I think Thistle fits. Starlight and Thistle! What a pair!” Victor didn’t think any of the names were bad, but he did think those two had a nice ring.

“I knew he’d pick Starlight,” Thayla said, nudging Deyni.

“It was my favorite name for the girl! I saw how the stars were reflected in her big eyes!” Deyni smiled to herself and resumed eating her breakfast.

As they traveled over the plains, ever eastward, Victor saw fewer and fewer stands of trees, and they hardly passed any other travelers. Every now and then, though, he’d come upon some people walking on foot, sometimes leading pack animals. Very few of them seemed interested in any small talk, and the most he tended to get out of them was a “safe travels” or some commentary on the weather or the state of the road. Toward midafternoon he came to a narrow, barely discernable track peeling away to the south, and he stopped the wagon to consult his map.

Victor couldn’t be sure—he’d passed quite a few dirt tracks that didn’t seem to go anywhere—but this one was roughly in the right area, if he was gauging their speed correctly, so he turned down it, following it as it skirted the slope of a low, but massive hill. When they finally rounded the hump of the hill, and its far slope fell away before them, Victor stopped the wagon again to take in the breathtaking view.

The grass changed in hue, from pale green to more of a blue as the elevation fell away, and, beneath the gray skies, filled with clouds and late afternoon light, it was easy to imagine he was looking at an ocean of water, not a grassland. Far in the distance, almost impossibly thin and faint, he thought he saw a darker line that might be a forest. “Or it might be some kind of mirage, like you see in the desert, for all I know,” he said to the vidanii as they snuffled at the cool air. “What’s that you say, Starlight? Did Thistle fart again? You’re a naughty boy, Thistle!” He laughed and gave the reins a light switch, getting the animals moving again.

They traveled over those grassy plains for two more days, stopping early on the second day to wait out a storm from inside the wagon. As the fat rain droplets had begun to fall, Victor had unhitched the vidanii and hooked them each to long leads so they could move about and graze—Bernale had extolled the animals’ toughness, saying they could weather almost any sort of storm, be it rain or

snow, so he didn't worry too much about them while he and the others sat in comfort within the wagon, eating soup and playing dice games.

After the storm, Victor savored the brisk, fresh air when he drove the wagon out. He'd brushed the vidanii, smoothing out their rough, short hair and making sure it was dry, and they hadn't appeared any worse for the wear. The animals seemed invigorated by the weather, and Victor decided to give them their head, urging them on with gentle switches of the reins and whooping exuberantly as the wind rushed through his hair and past his ears.

It was during that morning sprint when Victor made first contact with Tellen's clan. He was barreling down the barely-visible track, laughing and bouncing, when two figures stood up from the grass, not a hundred yards distant, bows with arrows knocked and drawn.

"Whoa!" Victor called, pulling on the reins, and the big vidanii snorted and began to slow but still moved too fast for the wagon to be stopped before he arrived at the bow-wielding hunters. "Whoa!" Victor called again, pulling harder on the reins and squeezing the wagon's brake handle. This time the animals dug in their heels, ripping up the soft, grassy soil and sliding to a halt a good twenty yards before the hunters.

"Hello!" Victor called. He was reasonably sure they were Tellen's people—they wore the beaded leather and had their long, black hair pulled into braids as he'd seen on his earlier visit. "Like Thayla," he said, snorting at the obvious observation.

"You're riding into our territory, traveler," said the wiry Shadeni man on the right.

"Yeah, that's the idea. I'm Victor. I'm here to see Tellen and Oynalla." As Victor spoke, the hunters lowered their bows, and the woman on the left laughed.

"I told you, Geng! How many pale people the size of a giant do you think there are?"

"Hey now," Victor said. "I'm not that pale!"

"She means you aren't red or blue; you're like a big Ghelli . . ." the man started to say, but Victor interrupted with a laugh.

"Nah, I know what you mean. No worries. So, is the camp nearby?" As he was speaking, Thayla poked her head out of the hatch.

"Why'd we stop?"

"I think we're almost there," Victor said, gesturing to the two hunters.

"Yes, Victor, friend of Tellen. I'll guide you in," the man named Geng said, whistling shrilly. A moment later, a roladii, fat and gray and maned with orange and red feathers, came charging out of the tall grass to the west. The hunter

mounted and started trotting the funny, two-legged bird-lizard off to the east. “Come, follow me if that wagon can handle a few bumps!”

Victor glanced back at Thayla with a grin, “Better hold on!” he said, then he clicked the reins and started the wagon through the grass, chasing after Geng and his roladii. The two vidanii had no trouble matching the rolling gait of the roladii, and Victor actually had to pull back on the reins a couple of times to keep the spirited animals from trying to overtake it. They ran like that for fifteen or twenty minutes, then Geng slowed down, and Victor saw why—they’d reached a secondary watch line, and several hunters stood up from the grass to wave them through, and at least one of them recognized Victor because he whooped out a hello.

It wasn’t long after that when the tents came into view, and their tell-tale smoke lines drifted into the blue sky. Victor drove the wagon to the edge of the camp, then set the brake and hopped down, smiling at the small crowd of Shadeni that had gathered around. He saw quite a few children who seemed excited by his appearance and the sight of the wagon and the vidanii. Victor figured any chance to see some animals other than roladii was a special time for the kids.

“Victor!” said a scratchy but cheerful woman’s voice, and he looked over the crowd to see Chandri making her way toward him. Meanwhile, the wagon’s door had opened, and Thayla climbed down the steps, Deyni in her arms. “Thayla!” Chandri called as she pushed into the little clearing at the center of the crowd. “What’s this? Some sort of Ardeni wagon? Come, Thayla, you know the Shadeni don’t need such things!” Her smile and twinkling eyes gave away the fact that she was just teasing, but Thayla bristled nonetheless.

“Blame Victor! I tried to talk him out of it!”

“I like the wagon, mommy!” Deyni said, squirming to be let down.

“Who’s this then?” Chandri asked, squatting in her colorful leather clothing to get a better look at Deyni.

“Deyni!” the little girl said, thumping her chest proudly.

“That’s my berserker apprentice,” Victor said with a chuckle.

“Oh? I see! Fierce!” Chandri said, grinning and holding out a fist for Deyni to punch. “My father is hunting,” Chandri said, and Victor thought he saw some unease in her eyes as she glanced around, but then it clicked—she’d called Tellen ‘father,’ and that was new. She was probably still nervous about using the term openly.

“When do you expect him?” Victor asked.

“Oh, tomorrow or the next day. Oynalla waits for you, though. She told me to be sure you bring your daughter, Thayla.”

“All right, can you show me where to park the wagon? I’m going to be staying a little while, I think.” Victor gestured behind him at the shiny, lacquered blue and black wagon and realized it stood out like a sore thumb in the camp of canvas tents and mud-bricked buildings. Still, he grinned and said, “She’s beautiful, isn’t she?” He turned to Chandri and winked.

“Oh, sure! Beautiful, Victor, beautiful,” she turned to the crowd and laughed, saying more loudly, “Isn’t Victor’s wagon pretty, everyone? Make sure you tell him how pretty it is!” Suddenly everyone was smiling and laughing, coming closer so they could look up at Victor and pat him on the shoulders, saying how lovely his wagon was. Victor laughed along with them, then hopped up into the driver’s seat.

“Wait!” Thayla said. “Rhessa is coming out in a minute.”

“Victor!” Chandri called. “Go around to the west edge of the camp, behind the sweat lodge. You’ll see some spots between the other tents there. Also, even though your wagon is silly, I love your vidanii! Those are some wonderful beasts!” Chandri laughed and hoisted Deyni up into her arms and walked over toward Starlight, and Victor could hear Deyni telling her about the vidanii and how she’d named them. He heard the wagon door thud a moment later as Rhessa climbed out and closed it.

When Victor looked toward the motion and saw Thayla’s friend, he was surprised to see the blue-skinned Ardeni wearing a leather vest, pants, and boots. More than that, her long, bright red hair was braided into plaits, much like Thayla’s. She glanced around nervously, and Thayla said, “This is my good friend, Rhessa. She’ll be staying with me—she’s like another mother to Deyni.”

Chandri smiled and reached out to clasp Rhessa’s wrist, “Hello, cousin! It’s been a while since we’ve had one of the Dreamer’s children with us.” Victor had no idea what that meant, and when he looked at Thayla with a questioning expression, she didn’t notice him. He decided to ask about it later and clicked his tongue, just barely twitching the vidanii’s reins.

The animals started up, moving gently toward the crowd, and the gathered people split, allowing him through. “I’ll meet you by the sweat lodge and guide you to Oynalla’s tent!” Chandri called after him. He waved acknowledgment, then flicked the reins again, letting the vidanii show off a little as they pulled him out into the grass and around the scattered tents.

He circled the camp, coming up on the far side, and the sweat lodge was easy to spot—a squat, broad, mud-bricked building with a central smoke stack. It looked just like the one in the other camp. Victor found a wide, open space between a couple of tents and parked the wagon.

While he waited for Chandri, he unhitched the vidanii and tethered them on long leads. He’d just finished up when the young Shadeni woman called out, her scratchy voice unmistakable, from near the sweat lodge, “This way, Victor.” He gave Thistle a final pat and started toward her, and Chandri continued, “Thayla’s already with Oynalla, but I got an earful for not bringing you right away. I don’t know what’s got her all worked up, but I haven’t had her chase me with a stick like that since I was younger than Chala!”

“Oh really?” Victor hurried his steps, falling in beside Chandri as she led him on a meandering path through the tents.

“Yes! It’s funny because she acts like she knew you’d be here today. Did you speak to her spirit?” The way Chandri mentioned “speaking to her spirit” so nonchalantly caught Victor by surprise, but he figured it must be a difference in cultures. Here, in this camp, they respected Oynalla and her skills with spirit magic. It made sense that the Old Mother might have mentioned Victor’s abilities—especially to Chandri, who treated the woman as a mother figure.

“A few days ago, but I didn’t say anything about when we were coming.” Victor shrugged.

“Well, she sees things. Don’t think too much about it. There it is,” Chandri said, pointing to the familiar red and yellow stained canvas tent. “I’ll see you later, Victor.” She paused and directed Victor’s gaze between two tents toward the center of the camp. “If you go straight that way from Oynalla’s tent, you’ll find ours. Come to our fire tonight if you want—I’ll cook something good.”

“All right, thanks, Chandri. I guess it depends on what Oynalla has in store for me, but I’ll try to come by.”

“Good!” She smiled, her little animal tattoos crinkling around her eyes, and then she walked off with a short wave. Victor walked toward Oynalla’s tent, and he wasn’t surprised when the flap opened at his arrival, and the old woman stood scowling at him.

“Hurry up, warrior! We have much to discuss and little time.” She waved a hand, gesturing for him to come inside, and Victor quickened his pace, ducking low to slip through the opening.

“What’s the emergency? How’d you know we were going to be here? I thought the wards we bought blocked your scrying!”

“Hush! Sit down! Let Oynalla speak!” She gestured to the furs piled around the center of her tent, and Victor saw that Thayla, Deyni, and Rhessa were already inside, though sitting together on a different pile of furs in the far corner of the space.

“Hi, Victor!” Deyni called out and nearly spilled a small wooden cup of steamy liquid she held. Thayla quickly steadied her hand, then touched a finger to her lips in the universal signal to be quiet.

“Yes, hush, for now, child,” Oynalla said. “I have to speak to this warrior and send him on his way—he has an important quest.”

“What?” Victor said, feeling a twinge of alarm.

“Sit, Victor!” Oynalla said, trying to push him toward the furs nearby but only succeeding in making herself grunt comically. Victor didn’t want to antagonize her, so he sat down and waited for her to explain herself. “Good!” she said, heaving a deep breath and sitting down across from him with a loud grunt. “I didn’t scry you, warrior. I have rituals to see portents. They’re usually vague and hint at the weather, the movements of the herds, or some other mundane thing, but two nights ago, I had a very clear, very dire vision!” She paused to stare at him, perhaps to ensure he was listening.

“Go on!” he said, “I’m listening!”

“I saw Tellen and his band hunting something strange—a beast they didn’t know. I watched them from the Spirit Plane, and I saw that they were fooled! The hunters were being hunted! Then I saw you coming to the camp, warrior, and I knew what must be done. You must find Tellen and make him see his folly. You must become the third hunter in the chain!”

“Oynalla, I want to do what you ask. I want to help, but how can I find Tellen? I’m not a tracker.” Victor frowned, feeling agitated, like he had to act immediately, but he had no idea what to do. Should he just charge off in the direction Tellen had gone hunting and hope for the best? “Do I just hope to get lucky?”

“Victor, if you would hush, you’d hear all of Oynalla’s vision. I saw you, unmistakable figure that you are, hunting for Tellen, and you rode a great horned creature. At your back was one of ours, the girl, Chandri. She can track her father, warrior.”