

Victor BK3: Ch1

Book 3: Chapter 1: Aftermath

Victor sat in the shadows of the ready room, holding Lifedrinker's cold metal against his forehead, desperately wishing he could hear her voice again. Though the handle was warm, and she seemed to vibrate ever so gently against his flesh, no lilting, feminine voice sounded in his head, and he said, "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry, chica. I'll make it up to you, I promise. I'll wake you up again."

A shadowy figure approached down the long hallway leading to the pit. At the same time, the door to the stairway leading up to the grounds opened. Thayla burst through the door, Lam right behind her, and she charged over to Victor, grabbing him into a tight hug. He was sitting while she stood to the side, arms around his neck, smashing his head into her stomach. "You scared us to death, Victor!"

"Ungh," he grunted, reaching up to gently push her away so she'd loosen her death grip on his neck. "I didn't mean to scare you. I thought I was dead too, to be honest."

"How'd you come back from those wounds? It seemed she'd pretty much gotten you to spend all your Energy," Lam said, coming to stand before him.

Victor was about to answer, but the shadow coming down the passageway resolved into the form of the arbiter. He strode forward into the ready room and held out his hand. Victor's belongings were arrayed there in his palm, Gorz hanging from one of his fingers. "I already gave Rellia her belongings. Some part of me wondered if you were bringing her down here to finish her off. I was pleased to find her sitting alone in the passage."

Victor reached out to take his rings, pouch, and necklace, then said, "You think she'll mess with me?"

"You showed her a great mercy," Captain Lam said. "Rellia can be a cold bitch, but she's known for her honor, well, her pride, at least. It's one of the reasons she felt she had to punish you—for her family's so-called honor. I can't predict how she will respond to this loss."

"Your friend is right," said the arbiter from the depths of his hood. "The ap'Yensha clan holds a grudge, but they also honor a debt. Rellia owes you a great debt, and, along with that, she no longer has the Empire's laws on her side."

"Thanks, Arbiter," Victor said, holding up his fistful of jewelry, then he started putting on his rings.

"You're welcome, Victor. Congratulations. I'll leave you to your celebrations." He turned and walked through the door instead of the tunnel. Apparently, he was done with his officiating and wanted to leave. Victor didn't blame him.

"Well, how did you do it?" Lam pressed as soon as the door closed.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker and started to answer, "I didn't," he had to stop because his throat got thick, and his eyes began filling with moisture. He looked down and took a deep, shaky breath. "Lifedrinker," he started, but again, his throat closed up, and he shook his head, staring at the floor.

Thayla reached out and rubbed the back of his neck, her warm, strong fingers smoothing out some of his tension, "It's all right. You don't have to talk about it right now."

Victor took another shuddering breath, then cleared his throat, spitting a wad of bloody phlegm onto the stone floor. "Sorry," he said when he realized how gross it was. Then he said, "Lifedrinker saved me. She gave me most of the Energy she'd been gathering to make herself conscious." He cleared his throat again and rubbed at his eyes with one hand, the other refusing to let go of Lifedrinker.

"Really?" Lam asked. "I didn't even know that was possible."

"She spoke to me," Victor started, then shook his head, rubbing at his eyes again. "I'll tell you guys more later. Can I please wash some of this blood off now?"

"Damn right, you can! You've achieved something amazing tonight, Victor. With or without your axe's help. Thayla's daughter should be in my coach by now. Let's head out, and then we'll go back to my estate to celebrate." Lam held out a long, pale hand, and Victor took it, letting her haul him to his feet. Despite her lean figure, she was strong and solid, and he admired how her fingers wrapped around his wrist like a band of iron.

"How's it feel?" Thayla asked, taking hold of his other arm.

"What?" Victor asked, looking over his body. Had one of his wounds not healed when he went berserk?

"To be free! To not have anyone hunting you!" They walked together to the door and started up the steps as Victor answered.

"I'm glad I'm free, but there's still plenty to worry about. That asshole from Persi Gables that sent his goons after me? Remember? Belikot? All the people I've met that are still fucking slaves? And then there's Lifedrinker—I don't feel like I can celebrate."

"That's shit, and you know it," Lam said, turning back to look at the two of them. "You helped Thayla get free. You helped her find her daughter. You earned your freedom and dealt with a serious threat tonight. You need to take the wins when you get them, Victor."

"Yeah," Victor said, considering her words, and nodded. "Yeah, I guess so. Still, I just want a bath and a bed tonight. You guys celebrate for me, alright?" They'd reached the top of the stair and, as Lam opened the door, were greeted by a crowd of people who seemed to have been waiting for him. They burst into

cheers, and Victor, standing behind Lam, with Thayla still holding onto his arm, frowned, drawing his dark eyebrows down in a glower.

“I didn’t know they’d be here,” Thayla said. “When we came through, it was empty.”

Victor grunted, still glowering around, but Lam held up her hand for quiet. When the crowd settled, waiting to see what they’d say, Lam spoke loudly and clearly, “Victor appreciates your adulation, but he’s had a very hard-fought victory. He’s not up for a celebration. Feel free to call upon him at my estate!” She waved, then grasped Victor’s hand, pulling him through the crowd and out onto the lawn where more people milled about. “Really!” Lam hissed, “the magistrate needs to have an easier path out of this place!”

Lam pushed her way through the crowd, and Victor and Thayla followed in her wake. Victor kept his eyes down, finding it easy to ignore the cheerful, boisterous people if he simply didn’t make eye contact. Soon they were past the bulk of the party, and Lam led the two of them over the dimly lit lawns to the gates where her coach was waiting. Victor hadn’t seen it before, and it wasn’t what he’d expected.

The coach was white with blue trim, and it was long, shaped more like a van than the stagecoach he’d imagined. It had six wheels with glittering metal spokes and tires made of something he couldn’t guess at, but they were thick, blue, and looked more pliable than a car’s tires. Strangest of all were the animals pulling it—tall, red-furred, stag-like creatures. There were three of them, and they each sported a pair of long, spiral horns. “Nice,” he said, his earlier stress momentarily forgotten.

“I won this coach in a dungeon, believe it or not,” Captain Lam said. “It’s enchanted to fold in on itself. If I wanted, I could pack it up and slip it into a backpack.”

“Seriously?” Lam nodded, and Victor continued, “That’s pretty damn cool. What about those antelopes?” He gestured to the horned creatures.

“Oh, I bought those. They don’t fold up with the coach, unfortunately.” While she spoke, a coachman came out from behind the vehicle and opened a door in its side. Three steps folded out as the door opened, and Thayla hurried into the coach, eager to see her daughter.

“What are they called?” Victor asked.

“What?” Lam asked, one foot already on the steps.

“Those animals,” Victor gestured toward them again.

“Oh, they’re called vidanii. They’re from the plains far, far to the north of here.” With that, Lam hoisted herself into the coach, and Victor was left standing outside with the coachman. He stood there for a minute, breathing in the night air, still not a hundred percent sure that he was alive. Hadn’t he pretty much died

in the fight? Was all this some kind of dream? He moved a hand to rest on Lifedrinker, remembering the sound of her voice in his head and the way she'd shown him her love and trust.

"Sir?" the coachman asked.

"Yeah?"

"Will you be joining the captain inside?"

"Right," he grunted and pulled himself up the steps and into the dim interior.

"Victor!" a small, high voice called. Victor followed the sound to see Deyni sitting on her mom's lap. Another woman sat next to Thayla—a yellow-haired Ardeni with bright matching eyes, a long, sharp nose, and thick, full lips. She was beautiful in a way, though she had deep frown lines around her eyes, and Victor could tell she'd had a tough life. She held one of Deyni's hands in a tight fist and regarded Victor with a glowering brow.

"Hey, kiddo," Victor said, climbing the rest of the way into the coach and sort of falling into a seat next to Captain Lam, facing Thayla and her friend.

"It's a fast, comfortable coach but not really made for people as tall as we," Lam said to him with a wry grin.

"Told you he wasn't in jail," Thayla said to her daughter and smiled at Victor.

"That's right, niñita," Victor smiled at the little girl, suddenly conscious of all the dried blood on his face. "Sorry, I'm a mess right now."

"He needs a bath, mommy," Deyni said, and Victor was surprised to see she spoke to Rhessa. Thayla tried to cover it, but he saw the frown that touched her lips. He tried to make eye contact and let her know he understood how frustrating that must be, but she hid the emotion too quickly, looking toward Deyni to avoid his eyes.

"He sure does," Rhessa said, then she looked at Victor and said, "I'm Rhessa. I've been looking after Deyni for Thayla while she was, um, away."

"While she was traveling!" Deyni said.

"Right, sweetie," Rhessa said.

"I've heard a lot about you. Nice to meet you." Victor started to reach out a hand, but then Lam shifted impatiently next to him.

"What's going on with this coach?" she asked, pulling a cord on the ceiling. A little door opened near the front of the coach, and the coachman's face appeared in a window.

“Ma’am?” he asked.

“Why aren’t we moving yet?” Lam’s voice was sharp, almost angry.

“There’s a gentleman here, trying to impose his presence on your guest. I’m working on getting him to leave.” The coachman, a middle-aged-looking Shadeni, spoke with perfect poise, not the least stressed by Lam or, apparently, whatever was happening outside.

“Which guest? What’s the man’s name?”

“He’s claiming to be the brother of Rellia ap’Yensha, and he wants to speak to your guest, Mr. Sandoval.”

“Open the door,” Lam said. The window closed, and Victor could hear the coachman moving out of the driver’s compartment. “Do you want to speak to him?” Lam asked, looking at Victor.

“Not really, but if it gets things moving, I guess I can.”

“I can talk to him if you want . . .” Lam started, but Victor was already getting up and moving back to the door, stooped over to keep from smashing his head. A moment later, it opened, and he crouch-walked down the steps back to the flagstones. The coachman ducked his head in a show of respect, and Victor stood up straight, once again breathing deeply in the clean air. After he’d filled his lungs, he looked down at the Ardeni man that stood, his free hand fidgeting with his lapel, a folded envelope in the other, waiting for Victor’s acknowledgment.

Victor could see the man’s resemblance to Rellia. He looked older, though, softer, and his eyes weren’t nearly as sharp. He cleared his throat and held out the envelope. “My sister insisted I give you this before you leave. I think she’s afraid you’ll disappear into the universe before she gets a chance to contact you again. Quite a show you put on there. Thank you, by the way, for not killing my sister. Oh, dear! My name is Roth. Roth ap’Yensha.”

Victor reached out and took the envelope. “Right. Got it. That all?”

“That’s all! Sorry to hold you up. Please pass my apologies on to Captain Lam.” The man actually bowed slightly and backed away. Victor didn’t reply but turned and climbed back into the coach, clutching the envelope tightly in one fist. When he fell into his seat next to Lam, he turned to her.

“He’s sorry for holding you up.” As he said the words, the coach lurched and started moving.

“Well? What did the little twit want?”

“To give me this,” Victor said, holding up the slightly crumpled envelope.

“Did you read it?” Lam asked.

“Not yet,” Victor looked around the coach. Deyni looked like she was asleep in Rhessa’s arms, and Thayla sat staring at Victor, though her eyes were a million miles away. He turned back to Lam and said, “Should I?”

“Yes! Ancestors know what someone like Rellia thought was so important!”

“All right,” Victor said, peeling the wad of pressed green wax away from the envelope’s flap. He pulled it open to reveal a handwritten note:

Victor,

My missing foot throbs terribly as I write this to you from my room at Magistrate Thiv-dak’s estate. I don’t say that as any sort of accusation but just as an illustration of the state of my mind—how can a foot that no longer exists throb so?

You showed me two kindnesses tonight. One, you allowed me to live. Two, you lifted me from that pit of shame and shielded me from the eyes of my peers. The first I could imagine you did because you might be weak, foolish, or misguided. The second, Victor, the second could only mean that I’ve been very wrong about you.

My honor will not allow me to live with the debt you’ve placed me in. I beg of you: please come to see me when you’ve had time to rest. I’ll be at my estate in Gelica until the month’s end. I trust you to allow my obsequious, sentimental letter, written in pain and humiliation, to remain between us.

With gratitude and ever in your debt,

Rellia ap’Yensha

“That’s fucking weird,” Victor said, folding the letter closed and stuffing it back into the envelope.

“What did she say?” Lam asked, her bright, glittering, green eyes boring into his.

“She wants me to come see her. Says she’s in my debt and needs to make things even.” He shrugged and slipped the envelope into his ring. It seemed to him that Rellia had asked him to keep the tone of her letter between them, and he didn’t have a problem with that. At least not yet.

“This could be very good, Victor. Having such a powerful family feel like they owe you something is a boon.” Lam turned away from him and was staring up at the ceiling of the gently bouncing coach, clearly fantasizing about what he, and she through him, could get out of Rellia.

“I don’t like it,” Thayla said. Victor looked at her and saw that she’d focused her attention on him, whatever she’d been brooding about forgotten for the moment.

“Well, I don’t much like it either. That bitch almost killed me.”

“Just remember that if you go see her,” Thayla said. “Speaking of seeing people, are you still going to travel with me to see Oynalla? I think it will be good for me and Deyni to spend time with Tellen’s people.”

“Yeah, of course. Nothing’s changed as far as that goes. C’mon, Thayla, cheer up.” He could see she was irritable, and if he had to guess, he’d say she was bothered about how close Deyni was with Rhessa and how the girl treated Thayla like a visiting relative, not her long-lost mother.

“And me?” Rhessa asked over Deyni’s head. “Will these Shadeni hunters be welcoming to an ex-criminal Ardeni?”

“Yes, I’m sure they would. We can talk about this later, though. I’m sorry I brought it up—I’m not sure where my head was.” Thayla sighed heavily and looked toward the window at the rear of the coach, eyes going distant again.

“We’ve had a rough day. Sure, Victor is the one who did the fighting, but everyone was on edge all day, some of us more than a day. I think we’ll all do better after some rest,” Lam said, affecting a much different tone than when she’d suggested a celebration just a short while ago.

“Truth,” Victor said, leaning his head back in the comfortable seat, letting his eyes close.

The rest of the coach ride passed by in a blur for Victor. He drifted in and out of sleep, and no one else spoke. Deyni’s soft breathing served to lull him deeper and deeper into his own slumber, and he was somewhat startled when he heard the door being opened and felt Lam stirring next to him. He exited the coach to find Edeya standing with six of Lam’s house guards. She held a spear, and her soldiers were warily watching the shadows of the treeline near the wall of Lam’s estate.

“Congratulations, Victor!” Edeya said with a bright smile, moving past him to help Rhessa and Deyni down from the coach.

“Thanks. What’s with the high alert?”

“I told her to have the house on battle footing. I didn’t know how certain people would respond to the fight,” Lam said, then turned to the guards and continued, “Move to your patrols. There’s no current threat.”

“Huh. All right, well, I’m going to my room. That cool?”

Lam looked at him with an amused smile and an arched eyebrow and said, “I’m beginning to understand your slang, I think. Yes, that would be cool, Victor. Go and get yourself cleaned up and have a much-deserved rest.”

“Thanks,” Victor turned to Thayla, who’d reclaimed her slumbering daughter from Rhessa. “Come talk to me in the morning, okay?”

“Sure. We’ll come by for breakfast, all right?”

“Perfect, but not too early!” Victor smiled at her, then turned, waving to everyone gathered around the coach, and made his way up the cobbled path to the front entrance of Lam’s estate. Servants held the doors open, the lights were on, and Victor could see wait staff lurking in the side hallways. He wondered if they were ready to throw a party if that’s what Victor had wanted. “Not tonight,” he said, reaching up to rub at the crusty blood in his hair, massaging his temple.

Victor bathed, fell into his bed, Lifedrinker in one hand next to him, and slept. His slumber was fitful at first, and he kept waking with weird impressions of dreams he couldn’t remember. After a few hours of tossing, though, he eventually found deeper sleep and didn’t stir until the sun was bright on his face, shining through the open curtains of his balcony.

He dressed, opting for one of his new pairs of pants and a blue button-up shirt he’d bought while shopping with Thayla. They’d been a handful of Energy beads, but, just like his favorite black pants, they were self-cleaning and self-repairing. Moreover, the tailor who’d sold them swore his enchantments were superior to those on Victor’s old pants. Victor didn’t care if they were superior; he’d just been asking to make sure they were as good—he couldn’t imagine any pants going through more than his original pair, and they were still holding up fine.

His nose alerted him to company before he heard the knock at his door. The unmistakable aroma of bacon was wafting under the door when he approached and opened it. Thayla stood in the hallway with Deyni and one of the house staff. A cart laden with breakfast foods drew his immediate attention, though, and he smiled, licking his lips. “Damn, that smells good. Get in here!” He opened the door wide, and Thayla came through, tugging Deyni along.

“You talk funny, Victor,” Deyni said as they waited for the Ardeni woman with Lam’s household uniform to push the cart over to the table. The woman started to set the table, putting out silverware and arranging the food trays.

“I do talk funny, Deyni! I’ve heard that from a lot of people! Excuse me, miss. You don’t need to set the table. We’ll take it from here.” Victor smiled and opened the door for the servant, who looked a little disturbed, like she was breaking some sort of rule, but she nodded and hurried out of the room. Victor closed the door, sat at the table, and started stuffing his face straight from the platters.

“Ancestors! Deyni, don’t learn your manners from Victor!” Thayla laughed. She didn’t sit down right away; instead, she looked around the room, and her eyes lingered on Victor’s bed for a moment. Victor followed her gaze and realized he’d left Lifedrinker on the mattress. He grunted and stood, hurrying over to pick her up and slip her into the loop on his belt. “You slept with your axe?”

“Don’t start,” Victor said, unwilling to endure any teasing about Lifedrinker.

“I’m sorry, Victor. I wasn’t thinking.”

“No worries. Sit down and eat, or I’m going to eat your portion. Come on, Deyni! Get up here and eat some bacon!” Victor picked up the little girl, plopped her into a chair, then sat down and folded an entire piece of buttered toast into his mouth. Deyni didn’t need much encouragement. For some reason, she watched Victor and mimicked his choices—when he slathered jam on some toast, she followed suit. When he picked up a sausage and ate it with his fingers, so did she. Thayla watched the two of them with bemused resignation.

“Eat some fruit,” Thayla said to Deyni, giving Victor a pointed look.

“Mmm, fruit!” Victor said, scooping some of the cubed melon onto his plate. Deyni reached for the bowl, doing the same. “Madre! I wish they had some chorizo and tortillas, though!”

“Are you going to see Rellia?” Thayla asked, kind of startling Victor with the abrupt topic change.

“Yeah. I don’t know why, but I want to hear what she has to say. You know, if she’s being real. Like, if she really wants to pay me back for sparing her, maybe she can help with Lifedrinker somehow.” Victor shrugged, sitting back in his chair and patting his stomach. “Damn, that was just what I needed!”

“You look better than last night,” Deyni said, smiling at him around a mouthful of melon. She had long, black hair like her mother, but hers wasn’t braided. Instead, it was held in two pigtails on the sides of her head. Victor thought she was the cutest person he’d met on Fanwath. He reached forward and, very gently, pressed her button nose with one of his big fingers.

“I had a bath, cutie.” Victor smiled and rubbed a hand through his rough, short hair.

“Do you feel like you can talk about that a little more?” Thayla asked, like a dog with a bone, refusing to change the subject. “I’m curious how it went with Lifedrinker. One minute you looked,” Thayla glanced at Deyni, then continued, “out of it. The next minute you were glowing like a red torch and, you know, berserking again.”

“Yeah, don’t worry; I’m not as emotional as last night. I mean, the feelings are still there if I think about it, but I’m good. Well, Lifedrinker gathers Energy from things I fight. You know that, right? She’d been gaining a lot, and you could see how she was changing. She’d even spoken to me a couple of times. She gave up a lot of that for me—let me pull it into myself, and I healed with it, enough to cast Manifest Spirit and Berserk and finish things.” He lifted Lifedrinker out of the loop at his belt, holding her so her black metal head was visible to Thayla.

“She insisted. I tried to resist, but she,” despite his earlier bravado, Victor felt his throat tightening and his eyes getting watery, and he finished quickly, “she said she loved me, and she trusted me to help her recover.” He put Lifedrinker back into her loop and covered his emotions by stuffing another sausage into his mouth.

“She gains Energy only from, you know, things you fight?” Thayla asked, clearly trying to avoid talking about killing things in front of Deyni.

“That’s right. I can channel Energy into her, but it’s just a temporary boost—it makes her do more damage to things I chop.”

“All right, well, when you go speak to Rellia, Deyni and I will do some shopping. I know of a pretty good Artificer I can speak to. Maybe there’s a way to speed things up with Lifedrinker. You know, a way to help her gain Energy without you having to,” again she glanced at Deyni, “chop so many things.”

“That would be cool. Thanks, Thayla.”

“Cool. Cool? Cool, cool,” Deyni said softly, scooping up another piece of fruit and shoving it into her mouth.

“See what you’re doing?” Thayla asked, an arched eyebrow aimed at Victor.