

Victor BK3: Ch2

Book 3: Chapter 2: Rellia

Victor stepped out of the coach, stretching his back and squinting in the bright, midday sun. Two days had passed since his duel, and he felt rested—so much so that he was feeling antsy, like he should be going somewhere. He'd decided to get things started by visiting Rellia. Thayla had tried to talk him out of it, and when that hadn't worked, she'd tried to come along with him. Victor had insisted he needed to face this alone, though. He wasn't sure why, but it felt right, and a small part of him just wanted to do something on his own, even if it might be stupid.

Victor noticed the coachman standing nearby, and he nodded, handing the man a few Energy beads. Edeya had ordered the ride for him and advised him what to pay the driver to stick around for his return trip. "I don't think I'll be very long," he said.

"Never you worry, sir. I'll be right here when you're ready to depart." The coachman nodded curtly, then turned to climb back onto his driver's bench. The coach was much more like what Victor had imagined Lam's would be like. It was small, black, and pulled by two roladii. It hadn't been nearly as comfortable as Lam's, either in its appointments or in the smoothness of its ride. The large, spring-shocked wheels did their best, but Victor had been jostled and jounced rather severely during the short trip through town.

He nodded and turned to regard the ap'Yensha estate. It sat in a wooded copse, not unlike Captain Lam's, though it was significantly smaller and newer looking. "Damn, Lam hadn't been kidding about how great her place was," he muttered as he walked toward the gates. A liveried footman approached, spear in hand, his partner watching his back from the closed, white-painted, rolling gate. Victor could see more guardsmen up the drive and near the doors to the white-washed villa.

"Your business with the ap'Yensha?" the footman asked, speaking in a strange, lilting accent that Victor hadn't heard before.

"I'm here to see Lady Rellia. I'm Victor Sandoval." He strode forward, not stopping or flinching away from the guard.

"Of course, sir. I've standing orders to show you through," the guard said, quickly lifting his spear and standing aside. He nodded to the guard by the gate, who pulled it to the side, opening it at least twice as far as Victor would have needed in order to walk through comfortably.

"Thanks," Victor said as he passed by. He strode up the cobbled drive to the door, wondering if he should have had the coach drop him inside the gate—he supposed they would have waved it through when he announced his name. "Ah, fuck it. I can walk a bit."

Victor kicked a nut or fruit pit or something off the cobbles, sending it skittering into the shrubs lining the drive. He glanced up, wondering where it came from, and saw a tree with branches arching over the cobbles, some sort of red plum-like fruit hanging from it. On an impulse, he

jumped up and snatched one of the fruits. He wiped it on his gray shirt sleeve and then took a deep sniff of it. It smelled tangy and sugary, and he shrugged, taking a bite.

Juice sluiced out of the fruit at his bite, dripping down his chin, and the tart but sugary meat crunched under his teeth, very much like a plum indeed. Victor grinned at the unexpected treat and chewed the rest of the meat off the pit while he walked. He wiped his chin on his sleeve, trusting the material to clean itself, and tossed the pit into the shrubs as he nodded to the servants standing at either side of the double doors. “Hello, men,” he said.

“Hello, sir. Might I enquire as to your destination in the estate?” the Ghelli on the left asked. Victor gave him a good look, wondering at his pink skin and tiny wings. Was he a Ghelli? He knew there was a lot for him to learn about this world, but it felt like every time he started to get a grip on things, he’d realize there were ten more things he didn’t know.

“I’m here to see Rellia.”

“The Lady is resting, sir. She sustained an injury recently,” the guard said, pulling off a face that perfectly said, “I hear what you want, and I’m very sorry, but you can’t have it.”

“I’m Victor Sandoval. She asked me to come.” Victor rested a hand on Lifiedrinker, though he kept a neutral expression.

“Ahh! I should have realized! My apologies, sir! Please follow me, and I’ll show you directly to Lady ap’Yensha.” The guard looked like he’d swallowed a frog, his face turned so red, standing out brightly over his pale pink neck. Victor almost felt sorry for the guy, so he nodded his head and smiled genuinely.

“Don’t worry, man. I won’t say anything.” Victor glanced at the other guard, an older, Ardeni with dark blue skin and gray-flecked, red hair, and said, “Your buddy won’t either. Right?”

“About what, sir?” The Ardeni asked, winking at his companion.

“Nice,” Victor held out a fist, but the Ardeni just looked at it and he put it down. “All right,” he said to the first guard, “Let’s go.”

“Sir!” the man said, pulling the door open and waiting for Victor to step through. The interior of the ap’Yensha estate was very richly appointed but in a different style than Captain Lam’s estate. While Lam favored marble and plaster, the ap’Yensha home had dark hardwoods on the floors of high-traffic areas with thick, plush carpeting in the rooms that Victor could see. The walls were covered with art, some of it eye-catching in its depiction of nude men and women. Victor wondered if they were real people—relatives or friends of the family, or if they were simple depictions of beautiful bodies.

The guard moved quickly past him and said, “Please follow me, sir!”

Victor nodded and followed the man up a flight of stairs, through a long hallway, and then down another hallway that, if his mental image of the exterior was correct, took them into one of the wings of the estate. The guard moved quickly but constantly checked over his shoulder to ensure Victor kept pace. He stopped in front of a pair of glass-paneled, French-style doors and tapped delicately on the glass with a ring he wore. He put his hands behind his back then and waited, turning to nod nervously at Victor.

A moment later, Victor saw a woman approach through the glass. She opened one of the doors, poked her head out, and said, "Yes? She's resting."

"I have Victor Sandoval here," the guard said, nodding to Victor, who smiled at the girl. She was young; he could see that much, though she wore a neat uniform that looked almost like it belonged in some sort of military. Her long-sleeved white shirt was buttoned severely at the neck, and her trim, black pants had a blue stripe that ran down the sides. Her boots were polished to a brilliant sheen, and her sea-foam hair was tied back in a very tight bun. She turned her matching eyes on Victor and nodded.

"You may go, cadet," she said to the guard, and Victor did a double-take. Was she the boss? "Come in, Mr. Sandoval. The Lady has been waiting for you." She stepped back and pulled the door open wide.

"Oh, uh, thanks," Victor said and strode into the room. He'd been able to tell from the exterior that it was brightly lit, but now that he was inside, he could see the curved windows surrounding the room and the open glass doors leading out to a sunlit balcony. The room held a lot of furniture, but most of it was covered with sheets.

"Excuse the room, please, it's closed for the season, but Lady Rellia wanted to take advantage of the unseasonably warm weather. She's sitting just outside."

"Um, thanks," Victor said, looking at the woman, at her light-blue skin and frowning face. "I guess I don't know your name."

"Captain Valla. I'll be here. If I'm needed." She spoke in clipped, short phrases and simultaneously sounded polite and threatening.

"Right. Thanks, then, Captain Valla," Victor said and walked toward the open doors and into the sunlight. While his eyes adjusted, he held a hand out to block the sun and looked around. He saw Rellia right away, reclining on a wooden-slat lounge chair. His eyes went directly to her foot, some part of him wondering how she'd dealt with the injury. Her silky, white pantleg was pinned up over the stump, and the other foot was naked, with no shoe or sock.

Rellia had a matching white shirt tucked into her pants. Her red hair hung down one side of her head in a ponytail, and a white hat shielded her face from the sun. She sat up when Victor strode

onto the balcony and smiled at him. When he studied her face, he couldn't see any signs of malice or deception—the smile was natural and seemed to be reflected in her eyes. “Hello, Victor. Thank you for coming.”

“Well, I had my doubts. I had some friends tell me I was crazy to come here, but I figured you and I had a connection they couldn't understand. We've both held each other's lives in our hands, haven't we? I don't feel like you're going to do something to me, at least right now.” Victor took a step toward her, wondering if he should feel some rage at the sight of her. Nothing stirred in his gut, though.

Rellia frowned slightly, perhaps taken aback by Victor's lack of niceties, “We have, Victor. The only difference is that I tried to take yours, and you let me live. My shame had started to fade, but now I feel it again, freshly surging. Would you please sit down? There's a chair against the wall there; pull it over. My neck hurts looking up at you.”

“Sure.” He glanced where she'd indicated and saw a hand-crafted wooden wheelchair sitting next to stacked patio chairs. Victor walked over, picked up one of the chairs, a matching piece of slatted wood furniture, and carried it over to Rellia's side, turning it so that he faced her when he sat down. The chair creaked, straining under his bulk, but held up. He leaned back, admiring how the slats contoured to his form, pressing into his lower back. “Comfortable,” he said, giving her a crooked grin.

“They ought to be for what we paid. The craftsman is something of a local celebrity. He made my wheeled chair there, as well.” She paused, appeared to gather her thoughts, and then looked at Victor, her head resting comfortably now that he was sitting down. “How are you, Victor? That fight couldn't have gone easily for you. I'm sure you have allies that are angry that you spared my life.”

“Well, they might be angry, but none of them have given me any shit about it yet.” Victor cringed at his words and wanted to slap himself on the head, but instead, he kept talking and resolved to try not to sound like a street kid for once in his life. “I mean to say that no one has objected to my decision.”

“That's surprising,” Rellia said, smiling at Victor's choice of words.

“You seem different than when I imagined this conversation,” Victor said, shifting, trying to get Lifedrinker's haft to lay along his leg so that her head wouldn't dig into his side. He finally gave up, lifted her free of his belt, and rested her on the ground, haft leaning against his chair.

“How did you imagine things?” Rellia asked, watching him struggle with his axe.

“I didn't think you'd be exactly friendly or smiling.” He gestured to her foot. “You know, after everything. I'm actually surprised I don't feel some rage right now. I'm looking at you there, and, if I don't dwell on the shit you put me through, you know, sending hunters after me, making me fight you in that pit, and all that was

lost because of it," he paused, took a deep breath, staring at her, and noting the way her face scrunched and her smile faded, "well, if I don't dwell on it, I can almost look at you and not feel any anger." He huffed out a big breath, trying to even out his heartbeat, which had sped up.

"I'm sorry, Victor," Rellia said, her voice soft and her red eyes staring at him, trying to get him to look into them. Victor complied, staring into those ruby irises, and he could see doubt, worry, sadness, and a little fear, but he didn't see any lies. This wasn't the Rellia ap'Yensha he'd been imagining. She wasn't at all like people said she was. For that matter, she wasn't much like the woman who'd menaced him with a rapier just a few nights ago.

"The fuck is going on?" he asked before he could stop himself. "Who are you?" he didn't mean the question literally, and Rellia knew it. She frowned, her happy demeanor falling away, and she spoke, her eyes starting to grow watery.

"I'm Rellia ap'Yensha, the head of an ancient household, and I have a thousand kinfolk who expect me to act, speak, and live a certain way. I had ten uncles and aunts hounding me to track you down and regain the honor of our family because you killed my nephew. A nephew pursuing his own illicit venture without my backing or knowledge, I should add!"

"I heard he was your favorite nephew," Victor said, watching her face.

Rellia's scowl deepened, and she spoke so forcefully that spittle flecked her lips, "Lies! I hardly knew the fool, and when I did see him at family functions, he couldn't make eye contact with me, let alone earn my favor!" Victor wasn't a human lie detector like someone in a bad VR, and his experience with reading people was limited by his young age, but he'd had quite a few people screw him over, and he felt like he was getting a feel for when someone was fucking him. Right now, he felt like Rellia was trying to be honest.

"So your hands were tied? You were acting on behalf of your family? You're an innocent victim?" Victor asked, gesturing to her foot.

"I didn't say that, Victor. Didn't I say I was sorry? When I went into that arena, I wanted to humiliate you the way you'd humiliated me! Do you have any idea the hell my Uncle Tam put me through when you killed the expensive bounty hunter I hired? Or when I'd announced to the family that you'd been captured by that old fool Vodkin, only to never hear from him again?" She paused, breathing rapidly, glancing around, perhaps searching for the right words.

"I thought I was hunting down a mad dog, mind you. I thought you'd slaughtered my nephew in an escape attempt—only yesterday did I hear the real story from Captain Lam. Ancestors! I wish I'd spoken to her sooner. You know she tried to contact me on your behalf several times. What a fool I was!" A tear slid down

one of her cheeks, and she swiped it away angrily, as though her eye had betrayed her.

“What are we doing here?” Victor asked after several moments passed, the silence beginning to fill the air awkwardly. “Are you trying to make me see your side? Are you trying to make me your friend? I don’t think that’s going to happen, Rellia. You and I are from the polar opposites of society, and I don’t think I could ever get along with someone who runs slaves and hires bounty hunters and whatever other kinds of shit you get up to.”

“Slaves? Do you mean the contracts we buy? The people in the mine? Listen, Victor, I . . .” she paused, then shook her head. “You’re right. I could spend the whole day trying to explain the pressures I’m under and the lessons I was raised with. I could make a million excuses, but it boils down to me being born into a family with far too much. Not only that, but I was raised to run a large portion of it, maintain it, and grow it. It’s not a clean business, and I won’t lie to you anymore. There are things I’ve approved that I’m not proud of. Victor, don’t you see? You’ve given me a chance to do something right for a change. Something good!” She leaned forward, both of her hands reaching out for his left hand.

Victor started to pull his hand back, but he stopped, imagining for some damned reason what it would be like if someone did that to him. He let his hand rest still, and she grasped it with both of her smaller, blue hands, her fingers surprisingly gentle and warm. He looked her in the eyes again and said, “What do you mean?”

“Because of your victory and because you showed me such mercy, I was able to meet with Captain Lam without losing any face. Yesterday, after I spoke to her, I figured it out. I figured out who the liars in my family were. At least with regard to this situation. For the first time in a long while, I have some leverage over some of the older, ‘silent’ powers in my clan. My uncle Tam is on the run, metaphorically at least, and several of the Old Powers in Tharcray have taken my side and given me leave to do some house cleaning. They’ve also given me permission to reward you, Victor.”

She still held his hand in hers and squeezed gently while she spoke, emphasizing her enthusiasm. Victor couldn’t lie to himself—he liked how her hands felt on his, and he was worried she was charming him or something, so he pulled it away, a slight frown marring his face and his heavy black brows narrowing. “Old Powers? Tharcray? You’ll need to explain a bit more.”

“I’m sorry, Victor, I forget about your history. It was only yesterday that I learned about how you came to this world. Tharcray is the capital of the Ridonne Empire. It’s thousands of miles to the east and north, and when I say ‘Old Powers,’ it’s a name that only people of my political class would understand—they’re members of my family that have distanced themselves from the day-to-day of our

existence. Most of them are very old, some would say ancient, and they spend much of their time away, either in the capital or off-world.”

“Huh. So there’s you and your aunts and uncles who run things. Then there are the older, ‘silent’ members of your family, and, finally, there are the, um, ‘Old Powers?’”

“You see what I have to contend with? The world sees me as the head of this clan, but it’s more like a public face than an actual head. Enough about my family, though, Victor. I’ve wanted to ask you this since you carried me into the tunnel after our fight: why didn’t you kill me?” The sudden change in topic, to one so grim and fraught with emotion, caught Victor off guard, and his eyes narrowed further as he began to wonder if that had been her intention.

“Do I have to have a reason?” he asked, enjoying the show of being obstinate.

“Please, Victor? Who else can you talk with about this? I’m alive because you chose not to act like me. You fought through your rage to stay your axe. Why?”

Victor picked up Lifedrinker and held her crossways in front of him. He ran a hand over her warm, living, hickory handle. Little glimmers of light seemed to flare to life in the path of his hand, brightening the dark wood. “She used to be conscious,” he said, indicating the axe.

“It’s an impressive weapon. Beautiful, even,” Rellia said, clearly feeling like she was indulging some sort of distraction.

“When you cut my throat, she gave herself to me. Filled me with her Energy and her love. It cost her almost everything she’d gained, her consciousness.” He paused, tapping the side of his head, and stared hard at Rellia, looking into her red irises and trying to see a reaction. Rellia, for her part, narrowed her eyes, clearly trying to understand what he was saying but perhaps not grasping the full import of his words.

“So that’s why you didn’t die?”

“Yeah, and looking back, logically, I feel like I should have been even angrier at you when Lifedrinker,” he patted the axe, “lost so much to save me from what you’d done. Still, in the moment, I blamed myself. I took from her. I drained her to keep myself alive. She’d given so much, she’d shown me how she felt, and I was overwhelmed by the selfless love she felt for me. I didn’t—I don’t—deserve it.” Again, he paused, looking up at the pale blue sky and taking a deep breath.

“So that’s half the reason I didn’t kill you—the emotions I felt because of Lifedrinker’s sacrifice. The other half is that when you were crawling, gasping, bleeding out into the sand, you reminded me of a woman that showed me genuine kindness. She was the first to do so in this world, and I couldn’t tarnish

her memory by butchering you. Rellia? I'm being honest with you. I'm sharing something that I feel like I couldn't tell anyone else. Don't betray it."

"I won't, Victor! I swear, on my Ancestors, I have only the desire to repay you. I want to make amends for what I've done. What my family has done. Now that I know your story and see what you've been through in this world, I can't find any ill will toward you, no matter how deeply I search my heart. Do you believe me?"

"I do, but I've been a fool before. I hope you won't make me one again." Victor managed a crooked smile, inhaling deeply through his nose.

Rellia smiled back at him and held out a hand, "Could you help me up and pull that wheeled chair over? I'd like to show you how I'm going to repay you."

"Sure," Victor stood, slipping Lifedrinker into her loop, then reached down to pull Rellia into a sitting position. He knew damn well she didn't need his help to sit up, but he figured she was just playing a part. Once she was sitting with her feet over the side of the lounge chair, he pulled over her wheelchair and held it steady while she stood on her good foot and pivoted to sit down.

"Captain Valla will be apoplectic that I didn't call her for help but just smile and nod as we go by. The room we're heading to is just out of this one down the hallway."

"Isn't there some sort of magical remedy for your foot?" Victor asked as he wheeled her toward the open doors.

"Yes, don't worry about that. I have a clan Artificer working to make me a silver foot as we speak. It's a temporary fix, I hope—if I can advance my race a few more times, I'll grow a new one."

"Well, that's good, I guess. Silver, huh?"

"Naturally," Rellia said with a chuckle. As they moved between the sheet-covered sunroom furniture, Victor saw Captain Valla stand up from a small table she was working at and stride over. She did, indeed, look angry, her green eyebrows drawn together in a deep scowl.

"Lady! I was available! To help you!"

"Yes, of course, Captain. Go back to your books, please. Victor will aid me for now." Rellia waved toward the little table where the captain had been sitting. Victor smiled at the woman and nodded, wondering how she managed to keep her clothing so perfectly wrinkle-free.

"Very well, Lady. May I ask? Where you'll be?"

“The map room, Valla, just down the hallway. I’ll scream should something untoward happen.” Rellia wore a wry smile, and Victor realized she was teasing the uptight captain. “Straight ahead, Victor, through the doors, please.”

Victor followed Rellia’s directions out of the room and down to a set of doors that opened into a high-walled room. Each wall was covered in maps, and a table at the center had another huge topographical map built into its top. “Gorz,” Victor said in his head, speaking to his amulet for the first time in quite a while, “Can you take in these maps?”

“Yes, I can. I’ll study them while you continue to speak to the lady, Victor.”

“Thanks, Gorz.” Victor thought, annoyed at himself for forgetting about the spirit until he’d wanted something from it.

“Please wheel me over to the map table, Victor,” Rellia said. Victor complied, and when he pulled her chair up to one side of the table, Rellia stood, hopping on her good foot and leaning on the table. “Stand beside me, please, so I can show you where to look.”

“All right,” Victor said, moving next to her, trying to take in the massive map, following the blue lines of rivers with his eyes, and wanting to reach out and feel the bumpy mountain ranges.

“Look here, this is Gelica,” Rellia said, pointing to a black dot next to a long, thick blue line. “This river is the Rill Catcher. It flows from the World Breaker Mountains in the north, all the way to the Great Western Sea.” She traced the line of the river in illustration. “We’re on the western edge of the Ridonne Empire,” she continued. “If you follow an imaginary line straight east from here, you’ll pass through, roughly, the center of the Empire and end up here,” again, she pointed, this time to a body of water about the size of her palm, “at the Starfall Sea.”

“Okay . . .” Victor said, not sure why he was getting a geography lesson.

“South of the Starfall Sea and the city-states around it, you’ll come to another mountain range, the Granite Gates. They’re called that because they border the Empire, shielding it from the frontier lands known as the Untamed Marches. Ridonne claims the right of sovereignty over the Marches, but no one, at least no one civilized, lives there.” Rellia tapped a section of the map beyond a high, raised mountain range, shaded in dark green and extending away for nearly half-again the area depicted by the Empire.

“So, what’s this got to do with me?” Victor asked, feeling like a cliché.

Rellia, still leaning on the table, pushed herself straight and turned to face Victor, smiling. “About a hundred years ago, the Emperor decided he should make efforts to expand the Empire’s sphere of influence into the Marches. He chose a hundred noble families and gave each a Writ of Conquest—

legal authority to go into the Marches and claim their own sovereign land, requiring only a de facto trade and mutual defense agreement with the Empire.”

“And your family was one to get a writ?” Victor guessed.

“That’s right, and that’s where you come in. Victor, I’ve been given permission to give you a fifty percent stake in our writ. Any land you conquer—you will personally own half of it!” She slapped the table in emphasis, her breath quick with excitement.

“Hold on, Rellia. I don’t know shit about conquering lands in some distant frontier, and I have to ask the obvious question: If it’s such a good deal, why haven’t any of the hundred families done it yet?”

“You’re asking the same questions I’ve asked ever since I was a little girl, and I learned about the Marches! Why haven’t we moved in? We could be far removed from the Empire, free from the burden of its taxes and living in a country of our own making! My father told me before he died that the families didn’t have the stomach for it. He’d explain that the expense of moving a large force through the Granite Gates was prohibitive alone and that pushing into the jungles of the Marches was a suicidal errand in futility.”

“Huh.” Victor studied the map, not speaking more.

“And that’s only half of it—if the rumors are to be believed, the System itself will challenge any conquering force that moves in that direction.”

“The System? Why?”

“I don’t know. A right of passage? A way to force us to prove we’re worthy of taking on the stewardship of those lands? A chance to force us to grow stronger, killing each other and feeding it Energy? My father believed that the System would send armies from another world there to fight any people that came to claim those lands.”

Victor started to say something but just grunted, imagining tall mountains with narrow passes and jungles filled with monsters and hostile armies. “At least you aren’t holding anything back,” he said, staring at the vast green expanse of the Untamed Marches on the map. “Are you?” He turned his gaze to her and narrowed his eyes.

“I want to help fund an expedition. I want you to lead it, and, as I said, you’ll become lord of your own lands if you have any success at all.” Rellia reached out a hand, grasping Victor above his elbow, and stared into his eyes, “You’re a conquerer, Victor. You can do this if any man could. I have soldiers who want to seek you out and swear fealty to you just because of the accounts of your fights spreading through the city’s taverns. Imagine how people will flock to our banner once you’ve fought some real battles in the field!”

“Our banner?”

“This would be a joint venture, Victor. Like I said, you’ll get half, but house ap’Yensha will claim the other half. You’ll have an ally in the Marches, someone who will stand with you against the untamed borders and, should you need it, against the Empire.” Her voice was hushed as she said the last, as though she feared to speak out against the Empire, even in her own home.

“Really? You have a problem with the Empire?” he asked, letting his eyes drift over the large, black-bordered section of the map that represented Ridonne.

“This isn’t the best place to speak of such things, but, yes, Victor. I’m placing my life in your hands by saying this, you know. If one of the Imperial Inquisitors caught wind of my . . . discontent, they’d haul me away for questioning. Victor, there’s a rot in Tharcray, the insidious disease of corruption that spreads through the rulership of our people. I want to take land in the Marches because war is coming, and I’d rather our clan wasn’t at the center of it.”