

Victor BK3: Ch21

Book 3: Chapter 21: A Sudden Farewell

When Victor saw Captain Valla leaning against her mount a few dozen steps away from the backside of the longhouse, he had to stop and do a double-take. “Thayla, you weren’t fucking around—she really has a saddle on that tiger!”

“Tiger?”

“That big fucking cat!”

“I don’t know what it’s called, but yes, she rode into camp on it.” Thayla shrugged and tugged his arm, eager to get closer to the captain; she’d been annoyed that Valla wouldn’t relay any of her news until Victor was present to hear what she had to say.

The animal wasn’t like any tiger from Earth, but it certainly had a resemblance, down to the stripes, though they were yellow on dark, blue-gray fur. More than that, it was huge. Victor had never seen a tiger up close. In fact, if pressed, he doubted he could say with certainty that they weren’t extinct—he’d only ever seen them in VRs. Still, he knew they didn’t get that big; he figured this thing was two-thirds as tall as Thistle and probably quite a lot longer. “Especially with that pinche tail,” he hissed between his teeth as they walked up.

“Victor,” Captain Valla said, standing up from where she’d been leaning against the cat. She was, as always, dressed smartly in her uniform pants and high-collared, perfectly pressed white shirt, and he wondered just how the hell she kept so clean after being on the road for, presumably, weeks.

“Hi, Captain Valla. What brings you out this way?”

“I bear messages. From Lady Rellia. Also, Polo Vosh stopped me as I was leaving Persi Gables. He sent a package for you.” She stood perfectly straight, her hands clasped behind her back. As he and Thayla got closer, he noticed that Valla was quite tall, easily a head taller than Thayla, and in his experience, that was unusual—Shadeni were usually taller than Ardeni. He supposed part of it was her shiny military boots. Still, she was rather imposing, especially with a twenty-five hundred pound cat behind her.

“Really? Polo knew you were heading my way?”

“Yes.” She stood stock still after uttering the clipped response, and Victor only figured out after an awkward silence that she wasn’t going to say more.

“Well, let’s have the messages first, huh?” he said, stepping closer, and then her big cat lifted its head and glared at him, a low rumble starting in its chest.

“Shush, Uvu!” she said, turning to thwap him on his big, black nose. He chuffed and turned away, laying his head back down on his front paws with an annoyed

yawn. Victor caught a glimpse of his long canines and didn't fancy the idea of tangling with the creature. "I have two messages and accompanying materials. Are you fine with this lady hearing Rellia's words?"

"You mean Thayla? Yes, Valla, you can speak in front of her."

"Very well. Ahem," she cleared her throat and looked into the sky over Victor's shoulder as though to concentrate. "Victor. I hope Valla finds you well. Things progress well here in Persi Gables. I've raised a full regiment of five companies, each comprised of two hundred soldiers. Hostility abounds in my family because I've kept my promises to you. House ap'Yensha no longer traffics in contracts for indentured servants, and I've sold off our share of the Greatbone Mine. I'd be dead by now if not for the enormous investment I've put into our expedition. If I were killed before it could bear fruit, our family's debts would take a hundred years to clear. I've sent a Far Scribe book with Valla so that we might better keep each other updated until spring. Yours, Rellia."

Again, Victor stared at Valla for a moment before he realized she was done speaking. "That it?"

"Yes. There is a second message, though it's written." She produced a scroll and held it out for Victor. He stepped forward to take it, frowning toward the big cat's front end, ready to react in case it decided it wanted to taste him more than it wanted to obey Valla. Once it was in hand, he backed up a step and looked back at Valla, locking onto her light green eyes.

"Why did one message come verbally and one written? This shit's strange."

"The lady grew tired of my presence," Valla said with a shrug.

"Huh?"

"What does that mean?" Thayla added.

"She wanted an excuse to send me. Any messenger could have brought you scrolls for a price. She thinks I don't know her mind, but I do." Again Valla shrugged.

"Oh, right, so she said only you could deliver me the first message or some shit?"

"Correct. She said she didn't want to 'put our expedition details, including troop numbers, in writing.'"

"I guess the stuff about her family wanting her dead was kind of sensitive . . ."

Victor said as he dug his thumbnail under the purple wax seal on the scroll.

Victor,

Since the day after our fight when I spoke to Lam and learned about your origins, I've been fascinated by the story. It shouldn't surprise you, then, to learn that I sent some of our house investigators ahead of me to Persi Gables with the simple instruction to discover what they could about the circumstances of your summoning. Just a day before I gave this message to Valla and sent her on her way, one of those investigators came to me bearing fruit.

It seems there is a cabal of sorts operating out of Persi Gables—a group of sorcerers who gain power by summoning strong Energy users from other worlds. What they do with those they choose to keep, I do not know, but it is well understood that their castoffs, for lack of a better word, are often sold into slavery of one form or another.

Victor, my investigator retraced the various transfers of your old contract and learned from a man named Yund the name of the cabal agent that first sold you. A little more digging revealed that you were summoned using biological material from a particularly gifted student from Fainhallow Academy. Strange, don't you think? More than this, though, he learned the location of this group of sorcerers, or at least the site where they perform their summoning rituals.

I've given Valla a map and a list of names should you want to investigate your origin further. I would caution you, though, Victor: these people are quite powerful—summoning people through rips in the fabric of reality isn't something done by novices. More than that, they were expecting success, even had you been more powerful at the time. Overpowering a person's will, assuming they have any sort of developed Core, is no mean feat.

In anticipation of our next meeting,

Rellia ap'Yensha

"Shit," Victor said after reading the letter. Thayla had been trying to read over his shoulder, but the disparity in their heights made it difficult, and she reached for the scroll. Victor handed it to her but turned to speak to Valla, "Why would she give me this?"

"An excellent question. I find the distraction from our campaign rather troublesome." Valla still stood, straight as an arrow, hands behind her back.

"Right." Victor sighed, rubbing his hand through his hair, looking out over the plains to the west, the sun still bright and low behind him. It was beautiful, really, the long azure blades of grass rippling in waves as the crisp morning breeze passed over them. The deep shadows of the forest to his left drew his eye, and he searched among the blue, green, and fiery branches as though he might find an answer to his unspoken question: should he go try to find some answers about his summoning? Should he put a stop to these assholes?

"She did this as a show of good faith, Victor," Thayla said, rolling the scroll up.

"Yeah, something like that, I guess," he said, digging his thumbs into the meat at the base of his neck.

“She’s trying to show you that you’re not just a means to an end to her. I mean, that’s what this letter indicates, but how much of it is calculated, I don’t know.” She held the scroll out to him, and Victor took it, slipping it into his ring.

“Logical,” Valla said, nodding curtly to Thayla.

“Anything else?” Victor asked.

“Yes,” Valla replied, producing a large polished wooden box. She grunted as she removed it from whatever dimensional container she’d had it in and lurched toward the ground, setting it with a thud on the grass before Victor. “Your package from Polo Vosh.”

The box was nearly a perfect square, though it was a bit taller than it was wide. Victor squatted in front of it, looking for a clasp or hinges, but saw that the top was meant simply to lift off. He did so, revealing an interior padded with pillowed, burgundy silk and a dark gray helmet nestled within. It reminded him of an ancient Viking helmet. It seemed to glower at him from within the case, brooding and heavy. “Huh,” he said, reaching in to lift it out, and he was startled by its weight. “Madre, this thing’s fucking heavy,” he hissed, straining as he pulled it forth.

“Yes, I noticed the weight.” Valla’s face didn’t betray any emotion.

The dark gray helmet was rounded at the top, with a thicker band around the crown. It had heavy cheek guards and a glowering eye and nose guard that would cover about half of the wearer’s face. The eye holes were wide enough to allow good visibility, but they were angled in such a way that the helmet just looked angry. “It seems pissed off,” Victor said, chuckling.

Grunting, he lifted it to his head and was surprised that it wasn’t too small. As it settled onto his head, though, and he had to strain to hold his neck straight, he knew it was too heavy and unwieldy to be of any use in a fight.

“Bond with it,” Thayla suggested.

“Right,” Victor trickled some Energy into the metal, and suddenly, it conformed to the shape of his skull, the soft leather padding cupping his bones snugly and the visor holes lining up perfectly with his eyes. More than that, Victor felt its weight grow more comfortable, spreading down over his shoulders and arms and even down his back to his legs. It was like it had somehow distributed its mass over his entire body.

Kethian Juggernaut Helm. Artificed for: Damage Resistance, Weight Distribution. Crafted from Imperial Keth Bedrock Magma. Crafted by: Tek’vah, slave to Keth.

“What the hell?” Victor looked from Thayla to Valla, both of whom gave him quizzical expressions. He told them about the message he’d received upon bonding with the helmet, and their confused looks only deepened.

“I’ve never heard of the Keth Empire,” Thayla finally said with a shrug.

“Perhaps Polo Vosh received this item from another world. Or the System.”
Valla, too, shrugged.

“Well, it looks like good head protection,” Thayla finally said, standing on her tiptoes to reach up and rap her knuckles against it. “Good choice from Polo. Too bad he didn’t get to you earlier—you might not have lost your pretty face to that bear’s claws.

“Hey, now!” Victor laughed, giving Thayla a shrug.

“Your scars do not make you ugly,” Valla said, and Victor quickly glanced at her, but her face was stoic.

“Um, thanks.”

“I was teasing him, Valla.”

“Regardless. Victor, I’m instructed to make camp near you. Rellia wants me to report regularly via the Far Scribe book she sent. Will you be remaining here much longer?”

“Uh. Let me get back to you on that, Valla. I need to talk to Thayla and some others. You could give me the book. I promise to keep in touch, and that way, you can get back to your life. I doubt you want to follow me all over the place.”

“I have my duty. It matters not whether I perform it here or elsewhere.” Again, Victor looked at her face for any sign of emotion. Though her words often indicated some displeasure, her expression was neutral, and her posture hadn’t altered at all.

“Well, do you want to come in with us?” Thayla offered.

“Thank you, but I’ll attend to Uvu.” She gestured to the enormous cat.

“Right,” Victor said with a nod. “Thayla, let’s go talk to Oynalla, hmm? Do you know where Tellen is?”

“Yes. I’ll get him and meet you within,” she said as they started walking away. “You’re thinking of leaving early, aren’t you?”

“Thayla, this is huge. I mean, I’ve come to terms with not being able to get home, but I’d sure love to get some answers. More than that, I’d like to fucking let these pinche mother fuckers know how much I appreciate what they’ve done for me!” Victor’s voice had grown heavy with anger as some of his rage affinity leaked into his pathways. He’d been thinking about returning to Persi Gables to punish Yund—how stupid! Yund was an asshole, sure, but the real culprits, the origin of Victor’s suffering, had begun with the ones who’d summoned him.

Victor wanted answers, and he wanted some justice. Maybe he could never go home, but he might be able to help some other poor slob from experiencing what he'd gone through. They were back to the front of the longhouse when Thayla turned to him and grabbed his shoulders, looking at his eyes, set back behind the thick metal openings of his new helmet.

"Victor, I understand. I just . . . well, I just was hoping we still had a couple of months together. I'm afraid I'll never see you again." Her voice had grown small, and Victor realized he wasn't the only one who needed people in this world to care about. He wasn't the only one who needed connections.

"Thayla, I'm not going to let that happen. It might take some time, years even, but I'll get back to you. You and Deyni are important to me. Hell, this whole clan has treated me like family. You know you're just as important to me as I am to you, right?"

"Okay. Well, hug me for real, then. Hug me so I'll remember it," she said, reaching up under his arms to pull him close. Victor hugged her back, chuckling at her sudden sentimentality.

"I'm not going just yet, you know."

"Yes, well, after the whole clan knows you're leaving, I doubt I'll get another minute alone with you." She squeezed him for another solid minute and then extricated herself, and Victor saw that her eyes were moist. His throat felt suddenly thick, and the fact that he was leaving really hit home. She'd known before he did. "I'll get Tellen."

"Right," he nodded, then went into the longhouse, making his way down to Oynalla's room. The old woman was sitting in front of her tea kettle, sipping her cup, and when she saw Victor, her smile was broad and knowing.

"So, my visions told me true? You're leaving to chase down a thread from your past?"

"You knew?"

"It wasn't as clear as some of my auguries, but it was clear enough. Sit down, then." She pointed to the furs across from her, and Victor grunted, lowering himself. "Remove that monstrous hunk of metal from your head, warrior! I promise I won't hit you with anything heavy," she said, brightening the mood with a cackle.

"Oh, right," Victor chuckled, lifting the helmet off his head. He grunted as it suddenly assumed all of its weight in his hands, and he almost dropped it, lurching forward toward the tea kettle. "Pinche . . ." he hissed under his breath, slipping the helmet into his storage ring.

“Good; now, before the others arrive, let’s talk about what you’re to work on,” Oynalla said, offering him a cup of tea.

“Okay.” Victor took the tea and sipped; it was hot, bitter, and precisely what he’d been expecting. He grimaced and waited for Oynalla’s next words.

“You must continue to build up your Core. Never let your fear affinity outgrow your others!” She glared at him until he nodded. “I’ve drawn you a weave to practice—your trapped spirit and I spoke for a while and came up with a clever way to combine your fear with your rage.”

“Gorz?”

“Yes. Did you forget I had him?”

“Well, for a while, yeah. I’m not the best friend a trapped spirit could have, I guess.” Victor sighed, growing weary of listing his faults to people.

“Nonsense. He’s just a fragment of a spirit. He hardly knows time’s passage when he’s not being spoken to.” Oynalla scoffed and slurped at her tea.

“Oh, well, that makes me feel better. I mean, he told me something similar, but I always feel like he’s downplaying things, you know?”

Oynalla just grunted and reached into the folds of her leather, beaded coat and pulled out his amulet, tossing it to him. He caught Gorz and slipped him back over his neck, tucking him down inside his armored shirt. “Victor! It’s good to be back with you!”

“You too, Gorz. I’ll catch you up on what you missed when we get on the road.”

“The pattern we made for you will be difficult to form, but you must practice it each night before cultivating. Once you’ve mastered it, I believe many doors will open for you,” Oynalla said, picking up where she’d left off.

“All right, um, will it be another new attuned Energy? Like my courage weave?”

“Exactly. And once you’ve created it, you should use it with your existing spell patterns to see what new abilities you can uncover.” She sat back and stared at the beaded curtain behind Victor, and he turned to see what she was looking at. A moment later, they flew into the air as Deyni burst into the room.

“Victor! Is it true?” she wailed, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Oh, gosh. Deyni, I . . .” Victor started, but she interrupted him.

“You promised, Victor! You were going to teach me to ride Starlight!”

Stunned by her outburst, Victor didn’t reply immediately, but then Thayla rushed into the room and scooped up her daughter. “I’m sorry, Victor. She heard me talking to Tellen. She’s so sneaky!”

“Listen,” Victor said, standing up with a grunt. He reached for Deyni and was relieved when the little girl didn’t resist him. He pulled her away from Thayla, held her against his chest, and softly said, “Deyni, I’m sorry. I didn’t plan things to happen this way, but I have some plans to make things up to you. Will you hear me out?”

She pulled away to look at his face, her eyes red and filled with tears, and nodded. Victor said, “I plan to move quickly, and I think I’m just going to take Thistle. Will you adopt Starlight from me? She needs a good home—someone who will take care of her and brush her, and . . .”

“Yes!” Deyni cried before he could say more.

“I know I promised to teach you to ride, but you know who taught me, right?”

“Chandri!”

“Would it be okay if she taught you?”

“Victor, you don’t have to . . .” Thayla started, but he held up a hand.

“I’m not going to want to pull a wagon everywhere I’m going, Thayla. I only need Thistle. Will you guys take it for me? I might come back for it someday . . .”

“Yes. Of course, we will,” Thayla said, her eyes starting to tear up.

“Oh jeez, you two! I can’t spend the whole day crying. Let’s cheer up, okay? I’m not leaving forever. Even Oynalla will agree with that, right, Old Mother?”

“I can’t see that far ahead, warrior,” she replied with a cackle.

“See? She can’t deny it!” Victor laughed, and then Tellen came into the room, followed by Chandri and Chala, and Victor held Deyni close while he told everyone about his plans to leave. They took it with more stoic reactions than Deyni’s, but he saw the troubled look in Chandri’s eyes, and he knew he’d need to speak to her again before he left. Tellen tried to talk him into a feast before he left, but he knew that it would only prolong the painful goodbyes and insisted that he wanted to get on the road as soon as possible.

“Will you sell Thayla some roladii to pull that wagon when you guys head to your summer camp?”

“She won’t need to buy them . . .”

“I have plenty of funds, Tellen,” Thayla said, reaching out to rest a hand on his shoulder. He opened his mouth to argue but changed his mind when he looked at Thayla’s face. He shrugged and nodded. Victor hadn’t seen that familiarity between them before, and he suddenly wondered at all he’d missed while busy with his quests and spending time with Chandri. Thinking of Chandri, he looked

at her face, saw the lack of any sort of smile or amusement, and reached out for her hand.

“Chandri, will you come with Deyni and me to see Starlight? I think we should talk about what it means to be a good mother to a vidanii.” He winked at her, and she forced a smile, taking his hand.

“Yes,” Oynalla said, “Go do that. The rest of us will follow soon—I can tell this warrior doesn’t want to linger around, feeling sorrow at long goodbyes. Chala, run; tell the clan mothers to gather their families outside to shout their goodbyes.”

“I will,” Chala said, but then she charged forward and grabbed Victor in a hug. “I’ll miss you too, Victor,” she said as he squeezed her back, one arm still holding Deyni.

“Thanks for everything, Chala. You’re going to be a fierce warrior one day. The clan’s lucky to have you.” When she pulled away, Victor had a white and black smear of face paint on his armor, and she laughed, rubbing at it with her palm. Then she turned and hurried out of the room, the beads rattling in her wake. Victor reached down, took Chandri’s hand again, and walked outside. When they got to Victor’s wagon, where the two vidanii were staked, still grazing happily, Victor set Deyni down.

“Hey, can you go over to Starlight and give her a brushing? I want Chandri to see that you know how to do it perfectly.”

“I will,” Deyni said, eyes wide and serious, and Victor handed her the brush.

“Good huntress,” Chandri called after her as she hurried over to the huge animal. “She can’t even reach its back. I hope you didn’t create trouble giving such an animal to a child . . .”

“She’ll be fine. I know you’ll teach her well. Just don’t let her go out alone until she’s bigger, all right?”

“So now I’m in charge of this beast and the girl? You’re certainly leaving with a lot of demands.” She scowled at him, but he knew she wasn’t serious. Victor reached down to take her hands and looked into her big magenta eyes.

“It’s better like this, don’t you think?”

“What?”

“Me leaving kind of suddenly. I mean, who wants to have a long slow buildup to a goodbye? This way, we can rip the bandage off. Er, is that a thing in this world? The phrase I mean? ‘Rip the bandage off?’”

“Yes. I know what you mean, and no, I don’t think it’s better. Oh, Ancestors! I thought this would be easier after how we left things last night, but I’m sorry to see you go, Victor. I hope it’s not forever.” She squeezed his hands, looked up at his face, and added, “Kiss me, then. At least one more time. Friends can kiss, can’t they?”

“Certain kinds of friends, sure,” Victor said, leaning down and gently pressing his lips to hers. As the heat grew between them, and his heart started to beat faster, they kissed hungrily for several seconds, and then Victor grew aware of people approaching, and he pulled away, embarrassed but grinning. “You’re the best kisser I’ve ever known,” he said. “Too bad you’re just my friend.”

“Well, who knows. Look me up in fifty or a hundred years,” she said, throwing his words from the previous night back at him. Then she squeezed his hand one more time and walked away toward the group of people gathering, including Tellen and Thayla. Victor smiled and nodded at them, then walked over to Deyni.

“Hey, huntress. How’s she doing?”

“She’s good, Victor. She asked me to ride her soon,” Deyni said, still diligently brushing the parts of the vidanii she could reach. Victor lifted the little girl up so she could brush Starlight’s back and shoulders and said, “Thistle’s favorite spot is around his ears and horns. Does Starlight like that?”

“She does! She loves it!”

“Oh good! Listen, Deyni; this is your vidanii now. You have to be responsible about feeding her and caring for her, and when Chandri says you’re ready, you can learn to ride her. Don’t try to rush things, though. Let Chandri help you, and remember that it’s her decision when you get to ride alone, okay? Do you promise?”

“I promise, Victor,” Deyni said, and her voice was solemn. Victor smiled and put her down.

“Come over to Thistle now, and watch me get him saddled up.” With that, Victor began his preparations to leave. Many clan members came over, clapped him on the back, or shook his hand, giving him their well-wishes, and it took him several times longer than usual to get Thistle’s tack on, but he enjoyed it. It was good to know so many people cared about him and would miss him.

Realizing how much he’d miss the clan, not just his close friends, Victor’s heart began to grow heavy, and he almost talked himself into putting off his departure, but then he saw a shape lope around the longhouse out into the grass, pacing back and forth. He waved to Valla and knew it was best that he get going. He walked over to Tellen and shook his hand. He hugged Oynalla, Thayla, Chandri, and Deyni one more time. Then, he pulled himself into Thistle’s saddle, waved to the

assembled crowd, and thundered away, racing past Valla, wondering if her cat was as fast as his mighty vidanii.