

Victor BK3: Ch22

Book 3: Chapter 22: Night Conversations

“Your cat isn’t going to try to eat my vidanii, is he?” Victor asked Captain Valla when they stopped for their first camp. She’d surprised him the day before, suggesting they keep riding for a day, insisting she needed little rest, and neither did Uvu, her mount. Thistle had seemed fine, so Victor had shrugged and agreed, and though they stopped several times to feed and water the animals, this was the first time they’d stopped to sleep. Thistle was huffing and more tired than Victor had ever seen him, but he seemed good—like you might imagine a horse would be after a hard day of travel.

“Uvu knows better,” Valla said, producing a large haunch of raw meat and tossing it off into the grass for the big cat. It was the fourth time she’d fed him that day.

“He eats a lot of meat,” Victor observed.

“Yes,” Valla said, not one to elaborate or drive a conversation. She began pulling out parts to a large canvas tent, and Victor contemplated asking her if she needed a hand, but a streak of stubbornness in him wanted her to ask him for help or at least communicate what she was doing. He sighed and began walking in a spiral pattern out from their campsite, looking for stones to use for the fire pit.

After he’d gathered ten good-sized rocks, he walked back to the camp and set them up in a ring and saw that Valla had already erected a tall, rectangular tent with the flaps pinned open and a rather luxurious interior exposed—rich carpeting, a polished wooden table with two ornate, cushioned wooden chairs, and a spacious, fluffy bed complete with insect netting. “God damn—makes me miss my wagon,” Victor said as he set up the fire, producing logs from his storage ring.

He did miss his wagon and, not for the first time, cursed his guilty conscience and his impulsive decision to leave it with Thayla and Deyni. He’d felt like he had to make the gesture for Deyni’s sake—he’d had no idea how much her not wanting him to leave would affect him. If he were being honest, saying goodbye to the little girl had been harder than leaving Thayla or Chandri. “Shit, it was harder than both combined,” he said, finishing his thoughts aloud.

“Are you addressing me?” Valla asked, sitting in one of her cushioned chairs, legs crossed, sipping something from a silver cup.

“Uh, nah, just muttering to myself. Don’t sweat it.”

“Will you want to spar before supper?” The question caught Victor off guard, and he glanced at Valla in surprise.

“Spar?”

“Lady Rellia suggested I could learn a thing or two from you and that I might be a suitable partner for you to hone your skills against.”

“Oh, well, yeah. I can always use the practice. Sorry, I didn’t think of you as a fighter. I guess I should have, considering you’re a captain.”

“Yes.” Valla stood, tossed the remainder of her drink into the grass, then produced a surprisingly heavy-looking, deep blue, almost black broadsword. The sword was about as long as her legs, and she rested the point in the grass so the pommel jutted up past her waist. She leaned against it and stared at Victor, clearly waiting for him to finish fiddling with the fire.

“Quite a sword,” he said, straightening up. “You sure you want to spar with sharp weapons? I have some weighted wooden weapons I bought back in Gelica.”

“I’ll be fine. Will you?” she asked, her face betraying no judgment, no amusement.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. Mind if I ask what tier you’re in?”

“I’m newly fifth tier.”

“Ah. No shit?”

“I speak truly.”

“No wonder Rellia had you hanging around. So, um, you know Captain Lam?”

“Yes, we served together for a time.” Again, she didn’t elaborate, and Victor was tired of fishing for details from the obstinate woman. He lifted Lifedrinker from his belt and started walking out into the plains, on the opposite side of the camp from their mounts. He cast Globe of Inspiration, not because it was too dark to see, but because if he was going to practice, he wanted to maximize his benefit.

“Effective,” Valla said, following behind him, basking in the white-gold glow of the orb.

“Yeah, I’ll keep it going while we practice—should be helpful.” After he spoke, Victor cast Inspiring Presence, knowing full well the spell wouldn’t affect Valla if he faced off with her. “Too bad. I can’t share all my benefits, can I?”

“I don’t have any spells that will be beneficial for you; I’m sorry,” Valla said, perhaps misinterpreting Victor’s constant chatter with himself.

“You’re good,” he said, using Sovereign Will to boost his agility, then he squared off with Valla, raised his axe, and nodded. She lifted her big, dark sword and, holding it sideways, so the blade rested on the palm of her left hand, performed a low bow at the waist.

“Oh, am I supposed to bow? You’re only my second sparring partner outside the pits, and Polo Vosh didn’t do any bowing.”

“It’s customary from the school I attended. Not necessary.” She paused for a moment as though struggling with a decision, and finally, she said, “Are you ready?”

“Yeah,” Victor said, and there began a truly humiliating ass-kicking. Valla was fast—not as fast as Rellia when she used her shadow magic, but faster than Victor. More than that, she was good with her sword, like Polo Vosh levels of good. Victor had learned a lot when he gained the advanced rank with his axe, but Valla seemed to have a maneuver and a reaction for every one of his attacks. Worse, she repeatedly slipped her long, wickedly heavy blade past his guard attempts.

Sometimes she’d stab her sword forward in a thrust, faster than he could swing his axe to parry it, and sometimes she’d cleave it with such weight and force that Victor found himself knocked out of his stance, open for her quick remise—a term meaning follow-up attack that she taught him after she’d struck him with it several times.

Perhaps compounding his humiliation, she pulled every hit she scored, tapping his armor or shallowly nicking his legs. Twice she deftly rang the flat of her blade on his heavy helm. Victor, for his part, threw everything he had at her, and as he felt his anger building, he pushed it down—he knew he’d learn more if he didn’t go berserk and overpower her with brute force.

Accepting that he couldn’t beat her without his rage, Victor contemplated using his fear affinity or projecting twisted inspiration at her. He held back, though, wanting to learn as much true fighting skill as possible.

After a long while, when he was drenched in sweat and she was starting to breathe heavily, Victor noted the look of consternation on her face, and finally, she backed off, stabbed her sword into the grass, and stared at him, “Why do you toy with me? Why let me think I can beat you?” Her usually cool, calm voice was angry, and the emotion in it caught Victor by surprise.

“What?”

“I missed your match with Rellia, but I heard tales of your fury, of your insane strength. Why do you hold it all back?”

“I mean, I’m trying to learn to fight better. I don’t want to Berserk and whip your ass. I don’t like thinking I have to unleash my rage or . . . darker abilities to win a fight. I want . . . I should be able to win based on skill.”

She frowned, narrowed her eyes, and nodded. “I, too, haven’t used all of my abilities. I suppose this is more fruitful for now. Even against your lackluster martial skills, I feel my forms improving. Perhaps it is your orb.”

“Can I ask? What’s your sword skill up to?”

“Epic, but Blue Razor pushes me closer to legendary when I have it in hand.”

“Blue Razor? Your sword? Is it awake, er conscious?”

“No, but it’s a masterwork artifact, enchanted beyond what the smiths in Tharcray can ken.” It seemed Victor had found the key to getting the woman to talk—ask her about fighting or her sword.

“Where’d you get it?”

“A dungeon near the World Spine. I was with Rellia and two of her friends.”

“Oh, so you don’t just work for her?”

“No, I’ve known Rellia for twenty-two years.”

Victor couldn’t stop his mouth from dropping open. When he’d first seen Captain Valla, she’d looked like a teenager to him. “Fuck man, I’ll never get used to this world. I didn’t realize you . . . oh, never mind. I’m going to end up eating my boot at this rate.”

To his surprise, she smirked and nodded. “Good. Shall we continue?”

Victor motioned with his hand as if to say, “After you,” lifting his axe, and this time, when he nodded his head, he bent at the waist—not comfortable with a full bow, but willing to try a bit to show he respected Valla. Her smirk turned into a half-smile, and she bowed. Then they were at it again, and Victor learned many lessons over the next two hours.

They traveled that way for the next ten days, riding for a full day and night, then camping the following evening until dawn. Uvu was fast and sturdy, but Victor knew Thistle could outpace him, which made him feel a little better when he considered the giant cat was also a formidable fighter. Each evening that they made camp, and also at noon on the days when they were riding through, he and Valla would spar, and he’d use his inspiration Energy to try to speed up what they learned from each other.

By the evening of the tenth night, Victor was getting a lot better at predicting Valla’s movements and countering her. He’d taken what the System gave him with regard to forms and styles, attacks and counters, and he’d begun to make them his own, adding his own flair and combining them into maneuvers that not every System-taught fighter would be able to predict or deal with.

That night, while they sat near the fire, Victor on a blanket in front of his low, one-man tent, and Valla sitting in one of her comfortable chairs, she surprised him by saying, “You improve quickly. I think you’ll move through the advanced ranking much faster than I did.”

“Really?”

“I can tell,” she nodded, sipping wine from her silver cup, and continued, “You’re a born fighter. It’s no shame that Rellia lost to you.”

“Well, thanks for working with me. I know I’m learning a lot more than you are.”

“I’m glad to do it.” She stopped, and Victor thought she was returning to her old reticent self, but then she said, “I was only seven when Rellia took me in.”

“Oh?” Victor drank from his mug of honeyed mead to mask his surprise. This was the first time Valla had ever volunteered any personal information.

“Yes. She’s more a mother than a friend, sister, or, well, an employer. At least to me. I think she sees me differently, but I owe her, quite literally, everything.” She took another long drink from her cup, and Victor tried to think of something to say—Valla had caught him completely by surprise.

“Uh, well, I’m sorry if I’ve said some unflattering shit about her. I mean, we did have a rocky start to our relationship . . .”

“I’m not trying to sell you on Rellia. I don’t know why I said all that.” She blushed furiously, the pale blue of her cheeks darkening toward purple, and she turned to the side, downing the rest of her wine in a huge gulp.

“Chill, Valla. It’s because we’ve spent more than a week traveling together and it’s nice to chat by the fire. Nothing weird about it. Didn’t you bullshit with other soldiers while you were in the legion?”

“No.” She shook her head and clamped her mouth shut, pressing her lips into a tight line, and, just as Victor was about to try to coax her to say more, she added, “I was promoted young. The other officers resented me, even though I bested most of them on the practice field, even though I never lost an engagement with my troops. No, I didn’t ‘bullshit’ with others.” She sighed heavily, looked at the inky black sky and the sea of glittering stars, and said, “What will you do in Persi Gables? We’re only a few days away.”

“I’m going to figure out who the fuck summoned me and give them a piece of my mind,” Victor said without thinking, allowing his mouth to give voice to his impulse.

“You’ll want the details and map to the location that Rellia’s investigator found, then.” She turned away from the stars and stared at Victor, meeting his eyes over the fire. “I’ll come with you. I’d like to help, and Rellia will be angry if I lose you somehow.”

“Yeah, that’s cool. It’s likely to get ugly. You sure you’re up for that?”

“You’re speaking to a captain of the Imperial Legion. Do you think I’ve not seen ‘ugly?’”

“Nah. You’re right. Well, thanks; I won’t turn down the company. Speaking of the legion, you said Lam served with you for a while? You weren’t friends, I take it? What was she like?”

“Captain Lam is the opposite of me. Gregarious, clever, plotting, successful. She never caused me trouble, but we didn’t share more than a few sentences with each other in the seven years I served.” Valla sighed again, then produced a dark blue wine bottle and refilled her cup.

“Yeah, Lam’s an alpha,” Victor said, laughing and shaking his head. “I think she’d come out on top of pretty much any situation.” As he rubbed his eyes, still shaking his head ruefully, he saw the moons near the middle of the sky, and he said, “Hey, do you mind watching me while I do a Spirit Walk? I want to try to talk to Thayla or Oynalla.”

“Spirit Walk?” Valla leaned forward with interest.

“Oh, yeah. I have a spirit Core—you know that, right?” She nodded, and he continued. “Well, a spell I know lets me walk around on the Spirit Plane. I can meet with other Spirit Casters that way.”

“But you want me to watch you?” She looked puzzled.

“My body. My spirit will be free, but my body is going to sit here like a lump. I’m trusting you to keep me from getting eaten by a monster. Well, and to not kill me and take my stuff. That okay?”

Valla stood swiftly, and suddenly her huge, dark broadsword was in her hands, glimmering strangely in the starlight. She whipped it through the air, turning it, so the point was down, then knelt before it, facing Victor, “I swear! No harm will come to you while I watch over your person.”

“Oh,” Victor said, halfway to his feet already, alarmed by Valla’s sudden, armed movements. He finished standing and nodded to her, keeping his expression solemn. “Thank you, Valla. I accept your oath.”

His words must have been near enough to what she’d wanted to hear because she stood up and lifted Blue Razor up to her shoulder, and began walking around the camp’s perimeter. She whistled a complicated series of notes, and Victor heard Uvu grumble and yawn in the darkness. Then the huge cat’s padding steps faded into the distance.

“Uvu will watch as well,” she said.

“Badass. Pretty damn cool mount,” Victor said.

“He’s much more than a mount,” Valla said, and Victor could only grunt in agreement.

“Well, here goes. I don’t think I’ll be gone long.” Victor sat down again, and feeling very secure knowing Valla was keeping watch, he closed his eyes and cast Spirit Walk.

He stood up and looked around the vast, open grassland—no fire, no tents, no Valla. Rather than the dead of night, lit only by the stars and moons, he stood in the perpetual twilight of the Spirit Plane.

Smiling, he concentrated on Thayla and Oynalla, and, Lifedrinker warm in his hands, he began walking.

He strode confidently, his feelings and connection to the two other Spirit Casters strong in his mind, and he wasn't surprised when, in just a few minutes, he found himself striding down a lightly treed, grassy slope. He heard the babble of a brook in the distance, and he picked up his pace, jogging toward the sound. He burst out of the tree line into the little clearing that Oynalla had shown him in the past—the place where her mother had taught her about the Spirit Plane.

Thayla and Oynalla sat together in the clearing, and the young-seeming Old Mother looked up at Victor and smiled as he approached, "Here's our visitor, daughter."

Thayla stood and rushed over to him, hugging him tight, and Victor was exceedingly pleased to feel her warmth—he'd feared that their connection in the Spirit Plane wouldn't be as solid or visceral as in the physical world. "Why'd you wait so long to visit?" she asked, pulling back and looking into his eyes.

"Well, to be honest, that captain, Valla? She's been wearing me out every damn day, and we've been riding for two days at a time between camps."

"What?" Thayla's mouth fell open. "What do you mean she's been wearing you out?"

"She's a fucking good fighter! We've been sparring every day, and I'm tired as hell most of the time." Victor saw Thayla's face relax, and it only then clicked that she'd been thinking something very different. "Oh, come on," he laughed.

"And what of my work, warrior. Have you been studying your pattern?"

"Well, yeah, but I haven't built it yet. I've got it mostly memorized, though. I draw it a couple of times each night." Victor knew she wasn't going to be happy with that and looked away, unwilling to meet her eyes.

"Oh? What do you think, daughter? Has he been diligent enough with my instruction? Does his Core feel stronger to you?"

"Well, Old Mother," Thayla said, reaching out to rest her faintly glimmering fingers on Victor's shoulder. "It's only been a bit more than a week. I don't feel much difference, though . . ." she trailed off, smirking sideways at Victor.

"Oh, God, really? If you guys are going to bully me like this, I won't make these visits very often!"

"Now he threatens us with his absence? What love is this? Are we not family, warrior?"

"Yeah. Yes! All right, I admit, I could be working harder on my Core and the pattern." Victor sighed and stepped past Thayla to sit by Oynalla. Thayla, still holding his shoulder, followed and sat down next to him.

“This is a good time to show me what you know of the pattern, don’t you think?” Oynalla asked, her youthful face breaking into a beaming smile and a trilling little laugh escaping her lips.

“Well . . .” Victor tried to think of a way out of this but shrugged and said, “Okay.” He closed his eyes, and reaching into his Core, he teased a thread of fear-attuned Energy into his pathway. Then, with a slight strain of will, he pulled out a thread of rage-attuned Energy. He manipulated the two threads, twisting, folding, and bending them into the pattern that Oynalla had given him. He truly had been practicing with it, and he’d drawn it from memory several times.

While he was weaving the Energies, he briefly contemplated why he hadn’t tried to build the pattern in his pathway yet. He almost lost his concentration when a subconscious needle of doubt entered his mind—was he afraid of this new pattern? Maybe he didn’t want to see what kind of new terrible Energy he was going to make. He ground his teeth and kept working, forcing his mind to focus on the task. He’d gotten to the last few twists in the pattern when Oynalla suddenly stood and took his face in her hands.

“Stop, warrior! Stop!” She shrieked, and Victor lost his concentration, letting go of the threads. He looked at her in confusion. “Oh, good, good. That was a mistake! Your amulet and I were foolish, indeed! I thought we were leading you to a weave of justice, but you nearly created shame. You don’t need more dark Energies in your heart, Victor.”

Thayla reached out a hand to take one of his, and he saw the concern in her eyes, and then he said, “Well, shit. I mean, yeah, I’m not super excited about casting spells with shame-attuned Energy.”

“I see the mistake we made, though, Victor. Rage and fear—two dark, powerful affinities—we should have thought more broadly and remembered your prodigious will. After watching how quickly you built that weave, I think you can make one from three Energies. Give me a day or two to work with the pattern; I’ll add in a third twist of inspiration.” Oynalla reached out a slender hand to join Thayla’s gripping his hand, grabbing onto a couple of his fingers.

“Okay,” he said, and when he saw the concern still lingering in their eyes, he added, “Guys, relax! I’m not going to go out and try to finish the weave. I’m already stressed about the fear affinity.”

“Good,” Oynalla nodded and squinted as though she were trying to see into his mind, but she squeezed his fingers again and then sat back. “Daughter, your aura fades. This has been a long Spirit Walk for you.”

“Yes, but I’m so glad I got to see you, Victor! Come to us more often, okay?”

“I’ll try, but we’re getting close to Persi Gables, and I don’t know what kind of shit’s about to go down. Don’t get mad at me if I’m not here for a few days.”

“No, come tomorrow, warrior. After that, you can take your time, but I want to get the new pattern into your hands,” Oynalla said with finality.

“Oh, all right, Young Mother,” Victor laughed.

“See how he grows so full of himself?” Oynalla asked Thayla, shaking her head in dismay.

“He’s always been full of himself, Old Mother,” she replied, reaching out to flick Victor’s ear.

“All right, all right,” Victor laughed, standing up. “I’ll see you ladies tomorrow. I need to get back before some giant cat eats me or something.” He waved, but before he could end his spell, Thayla jumped up and squeezed him again, and that reminded him to think of more people than himself. “Hey,” he said into the top of her head, wishing he could smell her physical hair instead of the clean, neutral scent of the Spirit Plane, “hug Deyni for me and tell Chandri and everyone I said hello, okay?”

“I will,” Thayla said, squeezing him once more. Then Victor ended his spell and opened his eyes. He almost fell backward when he saw Valla squatting in front of him, peering with narrowed eyes at his face.

“You’re back?” she asked.

“Yeah. Everything all right?” He looked around, wondering why she’d been peering into his face like that, but he didn’t see anything alarming.

“Everything is fine. I felt you building up Energy,” she said as if that explained everything.

“Oh, right. Well, all’s good.”

“You contacted them? Your hunter friends?” Valla moved back to her chair and sat down, crossing her legs and regarding him, almost like a queen staring down at a kneeling subject. Now that he’d learned a bit about her past, Victor didn’t think that haughty expression was intentional—she was socially awkward.

“Yeah, I did.” He scooted back toward his tent and looked at the moons; they hadn’t moved much while he was gone. “Your cat good to keep watch?” Victor knew the answer—Uvu had allowed them to sleep soundly at each of their camps so far, but he figured he shouldn’t take it for granted.

“Yes, he’s very alert. More than either of us could be. Were your friends doing well, Victor?” Valla asked, and he saw that she was pouring herself another cup of wine. It appeared she wasn’t ready to call it a night.

Victor shrugged and dug another honey mead out of his ring. He'd found that, of all the strange alcohols he'd sampled on Fanwath, he enjoyed it the most. "My friends are doing well; thanks for asking, Valla. How's Rellia? You've been sending her messages in the book, right?"

"Rellia is doing well, though she fears the schemes of her family on a constant basis. I wish she hadn't sent me away, but I knew I was driving her mad with my vigilance. She's surrounded by those loyal to me and her, though, so I'm not very worried. I wish I could walk to her the way you just did."

"Do you mind me asking what your affinity is?"

"I have two, three if you count pure Energy: air and iron."

"Iron? I've heard of air affinities but not iron." Victor took a swig of his ale.

"It's a more focused form of an earth affinity. I don't think it's very common, but it's nothing too unusual."

"So it's, technically, an elemental affinity?"

"Correct."

"That's pretty cool. Can you weave the two of them for additional effects?"

"Yes, in theory, I could weave a meta-element from them, but my will, well, I've not been able to do it yet. I'm working on it, though."

"I can tell you focused a lot of your attribute points on agility, huh?"

"Yes, I was raised to perform well in combat," she smirked. She looked like she had more to say but shook her head slightly and took another sip of wine. Victor decided not to push it and sat back, leaning on his elbows and studying the stars while he swirled the thick, spiced mead around in his cup.

"It's a nice night," he said, "a good night to talk with friends." He looked at Captain Valla, and she met his gaze, and though it was awkward, and she quickly turned away, she smiled and nodded.