

Victor BK3: Ch3

Book 3: Chapter 3: A Plate Full of Problems

“Rellia, this is a lot,” Victor said, his mind trying to take in everything he and Rellia had spoken about—her family, her motives, the Empire, the map, the Marches, and the Writ of Conquest. He felt like every time he started to wrap his head around things, she would add another piece to the puzzle. Now she was talking about war with the Empire? Or was it just war in the Empire, and she wanted to be out of it?

“I know,” she said, still leaning on the map table, still looking at him with eager, bright eyes.

“Look, just an hour ago, I was wondering if you would try to kill me. I was wondering if I should want to kill you! I’m still raw about everything, and you’re still involved in some things that I think are plain evil. Now you want me to go to war with you? To travel into some unknown wilderness and ‘conquer’ it? It’s just too damn much.”

“Victor, I,” she paused and gathered herself, standing up straighter and breathing deeply through her nose, the smile fading from her face. “I understand you. I understand your reservations. I’m trying to plan for an eventuality that most of my family thinks will never come. When I’ve spoken to the ones I trust, the few, about what I think we should do, they put me off. They treat me like I’m paranoid. They point to the age of the Empire. They mention the Old Powers and how they don’t seem concerned.”

“Those are the more benign reactions. Others in my family think war in the Empire would benefit us. They see it as a chance to grab power, snuff out other families and take what was theirs. Mind you, these are just the opinions of the very few whom I trust enough to share my doubts, to whom I dare mention the corruption in Tharcray. When I’ve tried to propose a plan, creating a haven for our family, using our Writ of Conquest, I’ve never had support. Only because of you and the schemes of my uncle and his supporters have a few of the Old Powers given me their blessing.”

“Yeah? How does that change any of my concerns?”

“Victor, I don’t think the Old Powers would interfere, would even consider the expense I’m anticipating if they disagreed with me. They’re in Tharcray—they know things that none of my peers in the family do. Something is happening in the Empire, and I think the time to prepare is slipping away.”

“Right, Rellia, I get how this is important to you. I don’t get how it’s important to me. Sure, I can gain some lands and whatever that entails, but do I even want

that? I'm young, and I've hardly had a chance to live in this world. I have plans of my own—things I want to do and accomplish. I mean, I was going to go spend the winter with some hunters out on the plains, learning more about my Core."

"We wouldn't launch a campaign like this in the winter, anyway, Victor. Won't you please tell me you'll at least consider my offer? I can't make it happen without you. My excuse for using the Writ is that I'm repaying our clan's honor by sharing it with you. You'd need to be seen as the one driving the expedition." Her face had fallen, and her earlier excitement was replaced by a more sober, almost pleading tone. Victor had to admire that she was being so honest with him about how she was, basically, using him. It didn't mean he had to like it, though.

"Do you love anyone in your family?" he asked, the thought coming to him rather suddenly.

"What?" For once, he'd caught her off guard.

"The way you talk about them makes me wonder why you're making these efforts. Are they redeemable? Think about the evil your clan has committed to remain in power."

"Victor, I do love people in my family! There are hundreds of children completely removed from our family's business. They're truly innocent. There are hundreds of people in my family involved in very benign industries. Only a few dozen are like me, with hands sullied by things like indentured contracts, industrial sabotage, and, oh, Ancestors! Am I confessing all my sins today?"

"If you expect me to go into this venture with you, I want to know what's going on in here," Victor reached out and poked Rellia in the chest, trying to indicate her heart, and he felt like she got the message. She didn't pull away, and she nodded.

"I want to change. I want to change how things at this level in my clan operate. I don't like the corruption and dishonesty. I don't like the guilt. I don't think about the people whose contracts we buy because I'd never sleep if I did. I push them all into a corner of my mind and label them 'criminals paying their dues.' Victor, if you help me, I'll start divesting our family of those sorts of businesses. I'll say I'm raising funds for the campaign. I have the influence right now, and once I start us down that road, it would be impossible for my detractors to derail us, not until we fail, which is what they'll be counting on." She had tears in her eyes again, and Victor could feel the emotion in her voice.

He tried to keep focused on all the suffering that he and others had been through as a result of this woman's actions, but even then, Victor couldn't help believing she was sincere and knew he had to get out of there before agreeing to something he might regret. "Listen, I think I believe you, Rellia,

and part of me wants to help you. Part of me wants to agree right now, but another part of me, the part that's been screwed over and nearly killed a dozen times, is telling me to get out of here." He took a step away from the table, nodding as if to confirm his conviction to himself.

"Wait, Victor," she said, using the table to hop around to a bureau of drawers against a nearby wall. "That's fair. I want you to be sure, and I hope you'll go and talk to the people you trust. Tell them what we spoke about, but please leave my comments on the Empire and Tharcray out. I want to send something with you, though. I want to give you something solid that illustrates my conviction, my intentions." She opened one of the drawers and pulled out a polished silver scroll case, densely packed with golden filigrees and purple ribbons hanging from each end.

"This is my family's Writ of Conquest. I want you to hold it. Take it with you, and think about what I've proposed. I'll return to Persi Gables at the end of the month—I always winter there. I'm going to start laying the groundwork for this venture. I'll take this time to prove to you that I am sincere.

If you come to me in two months, you'll find I've sold off our stake in the Greatbone Mine and cleared all our balance sheets of indentures. I'll be surrounded by furious family members, but, as I said, they won't move against me unless our venture fails. They'll kill me if it does. My life is, once again, in your hands, Victor." She held the scroll case out to him, and Victor grimaced.

"Goddamn! You'll lay that shit on me? If I decide I don't want to do this, you're gonna die? Why not try to conquer some of the Marches without me?"

"My approval from the Old Powers is dependent upon your participation. Victor, you asked me to change how my family does business. I will do as you asked, but there will be a price. We can pay the cost with a successful conquest or with my head. I'm willing to risk everything to do what you asked." She saw the storm clouds building in Victor's eyes and added, "I know it's the right thing to do, Victor. You aren't responsible."

"Put a madre!" Victor swore, taking the scroll case, "Fucking hell! You really tied me up here, Rellia!"

"I'm on borrowed time, Victor. If you never show up—if this plan of mine blows up in my face, I'll consider this winter a bonus. I should have died in that pit when we fought, and you know it." She held out a hand like she wanted a handshake, and Victor looked at it, then stared hard at her, looking into her eyes. He wished he had some sort of superpower that let him read people's minds, but he didn't, and he couldn't see any deception there.

"All right, then. I won't leave you hanging—I'll let you know one way or another. Let me talk to my friends and spend some time figuring shit out, and then I'll get

word to you.” He took her hand, and she wrapped her surprisingly long fingers around his palm, squeezing firmly. He found himself reluctant to let go, but he did, and then he pulled her chair closer to where she’d hopped. “You good? I can find the way out.”

“I’m fine, Victor. Thank you for hearing me out and for accepting my trust. I hope I hear from you soon.”

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“And you took it?” Thayla asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, I mean, what else could I do? She was laying everything on the line.” He glanced from Thayla’s outraged face to Lam’s gleeful one to Edeya, standing by the door, doing her best to remain impassive. They were in Lam’s front parlor, going over the news, Victor sitting in a chair facing Thayla and Lam as they lounged on a couch.

“This is a wonderful opportunity!” Lam said. “Victor, you have to let me help with the venture! I can raise several companies! Get me into a meeting with Rellia, and I’ll negotiate for a portion of her piece, not yours. I’m sure I can get that out of her!”

“Oh, Ancestors!” Thayla huffed. “Lam, aren’t you going to try to talk any sense into him? Rellia ap’Yensha? Turning a new leaf? Do you really believe this nonsense?”

“I know I’m not explaining things perfectly, but Thayla, you had to be there. She’s either the world’s greatest saleswoman and liar, or she truly wants to make some changes. It should be pretty easy to see if she’s sincere, right, Lam? We’ll be able to check if she really sells out of the mine and gets out of the indentured servant business, won’t we?”

“Of course! It will be trivial to find out if she follows through. Even if she doesn’t, though, this is a fantastic opportunity, Thayla.”

“Of course, you would say that, Captain!” Thayla said, scowling from Lam to Victor. She kicked a foot against the coffee table, pushed herself further back on the couch, and crossed her arms in front of her chest.

“Why? Because I know a good opportunity when I see one? Because I know that these Writs of Conquest are worth a fortune? Even though none of the families have taken advantage of them, at least publicly, I know that deals are brokered for them at the top levels of society all the time. Some families have collected ten or more of these Writs, trying to squash future competition. Something tells me the Marches won’t remain vacant forever, and Rellia knows it.”

“Let me guess,” Thayla said, “You’ve been trying to buy one?”

“Of course! They’re impossible to get ahold of for an upstart like me, though, despite my wealth.”

“Well, I don’t know what to do about any of this,” Victor said, rubbing his hands through his hair, scrubbing at his scalp like he was trying to stimulate his brain.

“What do you want to do?” Lam asked, and Thayla grew quiet, staring at Victor to hear his answer.

“I don’t know. I kind of want to just fucking disappear. You know, go with Deyni and Thayla, find Tellen’s camp, and spend some time with them. I’d like to learn a thing or two from Oynalla. I’d like to do some real adventuring and exploring,” he took a deep breath, exhaling through his nose, then he continued,

“I think of those things, and then I remember I’ve got all kinds of shit I’m responsible for, still. I have to do something about Belikot—something I was going to talk to you about, Captain. I need to visit the Wagon Wheel in Persi Gables and put Yund out of business,” he paused to glare around, waiting for someone to tell him not to worry about that. He hadn’t voiced that desire aloud, at least not so clearly before.

“And there’s a certain minor noble, at least I think he’s minor, living near there that I need to deal with. He’s the asshole that tried to wreck my Core and sent some hunters after us here.” He paused, then added, “I mean, let’s not forget about Lifedrinker. If I’m being honest, that’s what I want to do more than anything right now—help her recover from the sacrifice she made for me.”

Lam started to say something, opening her mouth but then closing it and shaking her head. Victor stared at her a few seconds, then turned to Thayla, saw how she’d started to frown, perhaps sympathetically matching his own expression, and said, “Am I missing anything?”

“Probably, but that’s enough to stress about right now,” Thayla said, reaching out to pat his knee, her earlier scowl softening.

“I can’t think of a better place to adventure and explore than the Marches,” Lam said, giving him a sly smile.

“God, you’re not going to let me get out of this, are you?” Victor sighed, trying to resist Lam’s smile but finding his lips creeping up at the corners in response.

“I’ll be with you every step of the way, Victor. Now, tell me about this Belikot situation. If we’re going to go along with Rellia’s campaign, I think we should get your plate of problems cleared off a bit.” She sat back, folding her hands with a smug smile, and once again, Victor found himself wanting to trust her. Hadn’t

she tried to help him at every turn? She'd given him Liferdrinker, bought out their contracts, sheltered them, and spoken on their behalf to the Magistrate. She'd fought with them, too, in the depths.

Victor thought about when he'd seen Lam soaring out of the high tunnel to smash amongst the swarm of beetle riders. She'd saved them that day. Though, now that he thought about it, they'd been in that battle because of her. She was the one who brought them down there. She was the one who'd told them to guard that spot while she hunted treasures. Suddenly Victor realized what had been bothering him, a thought that had been scratching at his subconscious mind since he'd come back to Lam's estate. He looked at Lam and said, "How many indentured workers do you own the contracts of?"

"What? How's that important right now, Victor?" Lam didn't frown, she didn't scowl, she maintained an impassive expression, but Victor could see his question had bothered her. He stared at her green eyes, beautiful as they were, and frowned.

"Come on, Lam. Answer the question. If Rellia's willing to stop doing business that way, shouldn't everyone involved in the campaign at least be honest about it?" He leaned forward, resting an elbow on his knee as he kept eye contact with the captain. He couldn't tell what Thayla was thinking, but she shifted uncomfortably in his peripheral vision.

"Are you really that ungrateful?" Lam asked, allowing some of her anger to show. "Everything I've done for you, and you bring this up? I own some contracts, but I'm good to my people, Victor, even the indentured ones. You know I didn't own any contracts among the delvers, right? I'm done with the mine—sure, I made some profits there, but I won't do business with them anymore. Is that what you want to hear?"

"It's a start, but I'd like you to stop buying indentured contracts, too. Just fucking hire people to work for you, Lam. Is it that hard? If we're going to be working to make a new start, to build something new, let's fucking do it right. Can you get on board with that? If you can't get Rellia to share some of her split, I'll share some of mine. It's worth it to me if you'll agree to do things without slavery. That's what those contracts amount to most of the time; you realize that, right?"

Lam sat back and licked her lips, looking into the space over Victor's head, clearly thinking things through. Just as the silence was starting to feel awkward, and Victor was trying to think of something more to say, she looked at him, brushed some of her silvery, blonde hair behind one of her ears, and said, "It'll cost me, but not terribly. I appreciate your convictions, Victor, and I know you have good reason to feel the way you do. If I can manage a twenty percent stake in this venture, I'll sell off all my indentures immediately. If you or Rellia don't want to give me that much, I'll stop buying indentures and work to clear my books more naturally as the contracts expire. Deal?"

Victor smiled and held out a hand. Lam took it and squeezed, her fingers like iron bands around his much larger palm. Victor grinned and squeezed back, almost laughing as her eyes bulged a little. He let go and said, “Thanks, Lam. I know you’re not one of the bad guys, but that’s been bugging me in the back of my mind for a long time.”

“Now that you two worked that out, can we tell her about Belikot, Victor? You’re stressing out about him because you promised me you’d deal with him. Maybe that’s not really necessary anymore?”

“I think I’ll feel better having his situation resolved,” Victor said, turning to Thayla and offering a slight shrug. “He might leave us alone, leave you alone, but we don’t know for sure, right?”

“Who the rotten roots is Belikot?” Lam asked with a growl.

“Alright, let me explain,” Victor said, and that’s what he did. He told Lam about Thayla finding the skull in the dungeon and about how it tricked her. He told her about how he’d won the phylactery from the dungeon boss and how he’d noticed its tether to Belikot in Thayla’s body. Lam asked questions throughout, and Victor had to explain Gorz to her, and then they had to have a whole side conversation about how Victor had lied to her when he’d told her about the map he’d seen, showing the route to the dungeon.

“So anyway,” he continued after apologizing for not trusting her completely when he and Thayla had first gone to her for help. “Gorz helped me follow the tether, and I ambushed Belikot, forcing him back into his skull and helping Thayla to get back into her body. That’s when we met Oynalla—she’s the Spirit Caster for Tellen’s clan. She kinda guided me with the process of getting Belikot out of Thayla.”

“So, what’s the problem?” Lam asked. Victor noticed that Edeya had come closer, enjoying the story. He didn’t look at her, though, because he didn’t want Lam to yell at her for moving away from her post.

“The Belikot that tricked me was just a small fragment of the real Belikot. We found out he lives in a dungeon in a ruined town called Gel Harra. Lam, there are Naghelli in there—real ones.” Thayla answered, perhaps afraid Victor would be too long-winded with his explanation.

“Naghelli? I think you must be mistaken. They were probably dungeon constructs.” Lam sat back with a snort.

“Nah, they were real, Lam,” Victor said. “I killed one, and his wife came to thank me for giving him an honorable death in combat. They spoke about leaving the dungeon soon and continuing Belikot’s ‘great work.’” Victor shrugged as if to say, “None of it makes sense to me either.”

“They stole the phylactery from Victor while he protected me. I’m not a match for them, Lam.” Thayla shook her head, eyes distant, clearly remembering the battle.

“You’re tier-two, Thayla?” Lam asked. She knew the answer but seemed to want to confirm something.

“Yes, I think the Naghelli were tier-four. Victor was still tier-two at the time, but, well, he’s Victor.”

“Yeah, so I told Thayla I’d go back and sort things out with Belikot. You know, after she and her daughter were safe. I figured maybe I could get some help here in Gelica cause, well, who wants a crazy necromancer to come out of a dungeon with a bunch of Naghelli and start up some kind of evil plan?”

“You’re sure it’s evil?” Edeya asked, lifting a hand to her mouth like she hadn’t meant to speak. Lam looked at her, raised an eyebrow, and snorted.

“Well, come and sit down, then, Edeya. I think the guards outside the door are enough,” Lam said, surprising Victor.

“We don’t know their plan, but the Naghelli spoke about some kind of new empire, and they said that since we brought them the phylactery, they’d make us some of their top servants or some bullshit.” Victor grinned at his summary, then sat back, rubbing at the stubble on his chin. He didn’t grow enough facial hair to manage a beard, but he did get some thin, wiry stubble around his chin. He figured he was due for a shave.

“The fragment of Belikot we met was duplicitous and cruel, and the way he treated me when he stole my body tells me that anything he’s planning will not be good for people who aren’t among his followers,” Thayla said, glaring at Victor.

“What?” he asked.

“Well, you either say too much or too little! Don’t you think mentioning what Belikot is like was a good idea?”

“Damn, Thayla! I figured we were both here, and we could both explain shit.”

“All right, all right. Here’s what we’ll do; I’ll come with you to the dungeon, Victor, and I’ll bring a few old friends, like Polo Vosh. We’ll deal with this Belikot fellow. Meanwhile, Edeya and some of my troops can escort Thayla to your friend Tellen’s camp. After we deal with Belikot, you can go visit. Near the end of winter, we’ll make our way, you, me, and the troops I’ve raised, to Persi Gables, and before we join up with Rellia, you can sort out your problems around that

city. I'll help if you need it." Lam sat back with a satisfied grin, and Victor and Thayla stared at her with open mouths.

Victor closed his mouth and started to speak, "I, well, shit, Lam! You make it all sound easy!"

"I've always been good at organizing. Edeya, fetch my lap desk; I want to write a message to Rellia."

"What are you going to say?" Victor asked.

"I'm going to tell her that we'll be working together, that you'll be unavailable for a few months, but that you'll see her in Persi Gables come springtime. I'll also let her know that we'll need to borrow a tier-four or five from her personal guard for a short mission—something important to keep her in your good graces." Lam smiled at him smugly.

"You think we'll be able to handle it? Belikot seemed very powerful—the Naghelli were afraid of him," Victor asked, frowning at the memory.

"If you could hold off a pack of Naghelli, even though they were higher rank than you, then a group of us should be able to settle things well enough."

"You know how strong Lam is, Victor. Polo Vosh and a few others will make you a force to be reckoned with. I think you can do it," Thayla added.

"All right. Shit, Lam, I feel a lot better having sorted out my problems and having a plan to go after them all."

"Victor, it's a fundamental skill that officers in the Imperial Legion are drilled with: list out problems and prioritize based on severity, distance, and urgency. Stick with me, berserker, and you'll learn a thing or two." She favored him with a brilliant smile, and Victor remembered his old crush on her. He wanted to go back in time and slap his old self upside the head.

Lam was so much more than beautiful. She was strong, intelligent, an incredible leader, and a savvy politician. She was ambitious and experienced, and the thought of trying to pursue her romantically made Victor want to run and hide. He'd rather face down a thousand giant river rats than try even to hold Lam's hand.

"Thanks, Captain Lam," he said, leaning forward earnestly. "Thanks for everything, especially respecting my feelings about indentured servants."

"If Rellia ap'Yensha can do it, so can I," Lam scoffed. "Edeya! Hurry! Get my desk while I still have a few amusing quips at the tip of my tongue!"

"Yes, Captain," Edeya said and hurried out of the parlor, barking at the guards outside the door to get out of her way.

“Come on, Victor. I think this would be a good time for me to take you to meet the Artificer that Deyni and I visited. He has some ideas for your axe.” Thayla stood and motioned toward the door.

“Really? Right on! Thanks, Thayla! All right, Captain, let me know when you have a plan. I mean, like when we’re leaving and who will be coming.” Victor stood and began to follow Thayla.

“I will, Victor. You’ll have a plan of action to read through before breakfast tomorrow.” Lam said distractedly. She’d produced a quill and some paper and was already writing down some notes. “I have some clever remarks for Rellia, and I want to write them out before I forget them.”

Victor shook his head with a grin on his face and followed Thayla to the main foyer. He felt immensely better now that he’d shared all of his problems with someone other than just Thayla. It was like the more people who knew about them, the lighter they felt. On top of that, it felt good to know there was a plan of action and not just an amorphous cloud of concerns circling around the back of his mind.

“You seem happy,” Thayla said.

“Well, shit, that went well, don’t you think?” Victor asked, joining her by the doors.

“Yes. Lam’s a captain, and she knows how to make things happen. She earned that rank, you know—people outside the Legion don’t get to call themselves military ranks without having served. At least not in the Empire. Now, let’s take advantage of this calm before the storm she’s about to stir up. Ready to see if we can help Lifedrinker?”

“Hell, yes!” Victor put his arm around Thayla’s shoulders, and the two of them strode out of Lam’s estate.