

## Victor BK5: Ch10

Book 5: Chapter 10: Aboard the Wind Dancer

Victor stood on the prow of the Wind Dancer and watched the mountain slopes drift by beneath the ship. They'd just cast off a few minutes ago, but the academy was already lost to sight, having slipped from view as the ship traversed the mountain passes. The weather was good, and according to Captain ap'Veral, it was easier to keep the vessel down among the peaks so long as they didn't need to avoid storms. Victor turned away from the railing and walked over the springy, polished decking to the hatch leading down to the crew compartments. He and Valla had each been assigned a small room.

"Where are you going?" Valla called, hurrying over. She'd been speaking with the first mate, a hairy, goat-horned Cadwalli named Grez.

"Down to my room; time to look at my upgrade options." Victor grinned at her outraged face and pressed on, "I was going to tell you before I selected something."

"Oh, I would hope so! Come, let's see what's in store for you." She ducked past him, through the narrow doorway, and down the short flight of steps to the cramped hallway below. Victor followed, very grateful for the spell Tes had taught him. If he'd had to traverse the ship's narrow, low-ceilinged passageways at his full height, he might just have found his room and stayed there for the entire voyage. Valla stopped before his door and waited for him to catch up and open it.

"Come on, then," he said, stepping into the room. It was small but very nicely appointed. A narrow bed lined one wall, a small writing desk and chair sat near the door, and built-in cabinets and shelving lined the walls. The shelves were all protected by a brass bar that could be lowered to access the contents; it was meant to keep things from falling out during rough weather. Currently, they were lined with books and curios that Victor hadn't had a chance to examine; presumably, they were there to give the space more of a lived-in look or perhaps left by a former occupant.

He stepped over to the bed, neatly made with a gray blanket and two fluffy white pillows, and sat on the edge. Valla sat in the desk chair after closing the door behind her. "I'll be patient. Take your time and read through them," she said, folding one long, uniformed leg over the other.

"All right," Victor nodded, then he went to his status menu and selected the option for Class refinement:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 1: Titanic Champion - Legendary. Pre-requisite: 1. The strong presence of a titanic bloodline originating from an Elder race. 2. A Spirit Core with affinities**

**for Glory and one or more of Inspiration, Bravery, Honor, or Loyalty. A paragon of your people, you thrive on achieving the impossible. You stand ready to take up the fight when others flee the battlefield. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will, Agility, Dexterity, Intelligence.\*\*\***

“Oh shit!” Victor said, grinning broadly at Valla after reading his first option. “I got a really cool-sounding option!”

“I’m not surprised,” Valla chuckled. “Another legendary Class?”

“Yeah. Titanic Champion, and it requires my new affinity. It doesn’t give unbound attributes, but the ones it does give are listed in a different order than my current Class. Attributes listed first are usually given more points, right?”

“That’s right,” Valla nodded.

“Right. Well, let me read the next one.” Victor moved to the next option and studied it:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 2: Quinametzin Foe Slayer - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Sufficiently advanced Quinametzin bloodline. 2. Epic-level Berserk or Berserk-like ability. 3. Epic-level strength or vitality. You have unlocked the secrets of one of your primogenitors’ Classes. Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality.\*\*\***

“Uh. Well, it’s not going to be an easy decision, I guess.” He frowned and scratched absently at the stubble on his cheek while he read through the description again.

“Well? What is it?” Valla pressed.

“I thought you were going to be patient.”

“I was, but then you told me about your first option, so now I’m too curious to relax!” She leaned forward, and Victor smiled, enjoying this bit of leverage he had over her.

“Well, it’s not that great. I don’t want to tell you something embarrassing. I mean, you didn’t talk to me when you went through your tier-five refinement . . .”

“Victor! I’ve been tier five since you met me!” She leaned forward and punched him in the knee, and her knuckles delivered a surprisingly painful crunch.

“Easy!” he said, laughing. “All right, all right. It’s a Quinametzin Foe Slayer. I guess it’s based on my bloodline; the System message seems to indicate that it figured out the Class based on my progress with unlocking my, uh, inner Quinametzin. It only grants strength and vitality on level-ups, so you can kinda guess what sort of Class it is.”

“I could guess that from the name—Foe Slayer. The description doesn’t contain warnings like that Rager class you were offered last time?”

“Nope.”

“I suppose it would be nice to learn more of your Quinametzin ancestry, to gain some of their abilities beyond what you know, but the champion Class sounds better to me.” Valla shrugged and held her palms up on her knees as though showing she had nothing more to offer.

“Well, yeah. Let me see what else there is.” Victor advanced the System screen and read the following page:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 3: Quinametzin Spirit Channeler - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Sufficiently advanced Quinametzin bloodline. 2. Sufficiently advanced Spirit Core. 3. Epic-level will. You have unlocked the secrets of one of your primogenitors’ Classes. Accepting this new Class will grant you abilities based upon those buried deep in the history of your blood. Class attributes: Will, Intelligence.**

Victor described the third Class and asked, “Do you think I’m getting these Quinametzin options because I took the Titanic Herald class last time?”

“It would make sense. Didn’t the description of that one say something about bringing your ancient bloodline to light or some such?”

“Yeah. Again, not an easy decision, but based on the Class attributes, I think it would be a pretty big change from what I’ve been doing. I wish the System would tell me more about the damn Classes rather than that vague, ‘You have unlocked the secrets, blah blah.’ Like, what secrets? You know?”

“Yes, it’s frustrating . . .” Valla’s eyes opened wide, and she twisted a little ring on her pinky. “Wait! Tes gave me books from Coloss about Class advancements! Let me see if I can find anything.”

“I doubt there’ll be anything about Quinametzin,” Victor said, frowning, but Valla was already flipping through a thick book, so he just looked at his next option:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 4: Battlemaster - Epic. Prerequisites: 1. Sufficiently advanced bloodline. 2. Sufficiently advanced weapon skills. 3. Sufficiently advanced attributes. 4. A Core with appropriate affinities. 5. A history with and love for combat. In your life, you’ve known strife well. Not only have you survived the many conflicts in your path, but you’ve thrived on them. A Battlemaster seeks to become a paragon of conflict, an aficionado of destruction and survival. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Agility, Dexterity, Will, Intelligence.\*\*\***

“What the hell?” Victor frowned, rereading the option. Valla looked up from the book and raised an eyebrow, so he continued, “My fourth option was only epic. It sounds really plain, but it has a lot of prerequisites—Battlemaster.”

“So, you were offered three legendary Classes and then an epic one?” Valla drummed her nails on the book, then said, “That is very unusual. I’ve only ever heard of options increasing in rarity on the System’s menu.”

“So, maybe it’s more rare,” Victor frowned and shook his head. “No, it can’t be. I’m the only Quinametzin alive, right? Maybe it’s more exclusive? Has harder to meet prerequisites? I don’t know.”

“Maybe. Let me see here. That might be easier to find.” Valla reopened the book, and Victor checked to see if there were any other class options:

**\*\*\*Class refinement option 5: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.\*\*\***

“That was the last one.”

“Mmhmm. Just a minute. Oh, Victor! Battlemaster is in this book!” Valla grew quiet, and her eyes rapidly tracked the text she was reading, so Victor tried to be patient. He leaned back on the bed and stared at the ceiling, thinking about his options. If he had to choose at that moment, he felt he’d lean toward the first one, the Titanic Champion Class. “Victor, the Battlemaster Class is almost never offered and highly sought after. It seems the Vesh often strived to get that offering. The hardest part is the final prerequisite; the System isn’t fair or methodical about whom it awards the ‘history with and love for combat’ prerequisite to.”

“Huh?”

“There are countless anecdotes about warriors, gladiators, and duelists trying to gain this Class. Very few see it offered early on—before tier ten—and usually, by the time they do see it, they’ve started down a road they don’t want to change. One man, a great arena champion named Lobsos, claimed to have a record of more than ten thousand personal combats on his way to tier ten but never was offered the Battlemaster Class.”

“So, what’s so great about it?”

“Two reasons. Apparently, people with the Battlemaster Class are often awarded skills and abilities that outperform those of other epic-level classes. More, though, it’s a prerequisite for some legendary Classes that are highly coveted on Zaafor. Let’s see. Huh,” she frowned, “you’d think those skills and abilities would be listed, but it starts to get vague again. Here’s an anecdote about a Battlemaster who could ‘project his blade, sweeping the battlefield of chaff,’ whatever that means. Another anecdote of a Battlemaster who was nearly impossible to harm. He left Zaafor in search of greater challenges.”

“Okay, does it list what the Classes it opens up are?”

“They’re only hinted at. It seems the Battlemasters who advanced were a bit tight-lipped. Victor! The warlord was a Battlemaster!”

“Seriously?”

“Yes! At tier-seven. He never told anyone what Class refinements he took after that.”

“Huh,” Victor frowned and groaned. He still lay on his back, his legs hanging off the bed. He rubbed his eyes with the backs of his hands and sighed, “Why isn’t any decision ever easy? When I read my first option, I was like, this is it! Now I have no idea what to do. Do you think it would be wise to step down from a legendary Class to take an epic Class in the hopes of some hinted-at, super rare refinements?”

“I don’t know. What about your mentor?” Valla gestured toward the bracer on Victor’s wrist.

“Yeah. I was going to ask him, but I kind of wanted a better idea of what I was going to do first. Khul Bach is a little . . . judgmental.” He chuckled and shook his head ruefully. He reached for the pink gem on his bracer and said, “I’ll be right back. I’m not sure you’ll even notice I’m gone.” Before Valla could reply, he channeled Energy into the gem, and the world around him changed.

The color bled from everything, and then the walls, furnishings, and even Valla faded to nothing. In that weird plane of white and gray light and strange, sharp angles and reflections, he saw Khul Bach seated before him, as always, his eyes open and expectant. “You come to me much improved, young Titan! You’ve grown in power. I sense a new complexity in the Energy you sent into the crystal. A new affinity?”

“That’s right,” Victor said. “I uncovered an affinity for glory. Are you familiar with it? I haven’t done any experimenting yet.”

“Glory! Cousin to pride and the light side of shadowy lust. It’s a good affinity, especially for one set on fighting his way to greatness. Congratulations, Victor.”

“Thank you. I also reached level fifty and have a difficult decision to make.”

“Ah! Tell me, then, lad. What are your options?”

Victor pulled up his Class refinement menu again and read through the various options. Khul Bach nodded along, making little sounds of interest and even a few exclamations like, “Oh!” a few times. Still, it wasn’t until Victor read his final option that Khul Bach began to get agitated, clearly eager to say something. When Victor finished reading it, he nodded and said, “That’s the one.”

“But it’s only epic.” Victor’s lips quirked into a small smile at his words—imagine saying ‘only’ epic!

“Yes, but it leads to one of the best legendary Classes known to my people.”

“Do you know what it is? ‘Cause the book Valla got in Coloss only hints about it.”

“Of course I do. The leader of the Degh during my youth, Brodarak, was a Battlemaster. He joined the Ancestor Stone shortly after I did, and I learned of his refinement. What’s more, you met one who was a Battlemaster, did you not? The upstart mutant, the king of the Vesh, Warlord Thoargh.”

“Yeah. Valla said the book listed him as one of the few who’d gotten the Battlemaster Class. He never told anyone what his refinement was, though.”

“Hah! Yes, he did! Why, I called him by his refinement just seconds ago.”

Victor looked at Khul Bach blankly for a moment, but he wasn’t stupid; he connected the dots and said softly, “Warlord? That was his Class refinement?”

“Yes. He may well have ensured that he was the only one after he broke the Degh.”

“Is it that good? You really think I should take this Battlemaster Class?”

“Indeed. I believe it will make your conquest of Zaafor that much easier.”

“Do you think the, uh, warlord, kept that refinement, or do you think he changed it after ten levels and just made people keep calling him that?”

“I have no idea about the answer to that one. It may be that the Class is so good that it’s worth keeping over other options, or it may be that it led him to better and better refinements. Regardless, your choice is clear. Follow an assured path to greatness, or gamble with one of your other offerings. You’re young and still relatively low-tier, though. If you take Battlemaster now, you will have further chances to refine it into something else. Perhaps Warlord, perhaps something better. You know what I recommend.” Khul Bach folded his arms and settled back, his shoulders slumping slightly to indicate that he was done with the matter.

“All right. Thanks, coach. I’ll speak with you again soon.”

“Coach, hmm? Let’s not get too flippant, young Titan. Very well. Continue your good work.”

Victor smiled, pleased at the praise, and then he severed the connection of his Energy to the crystal, and the world snapped back into being, replacing the white, angular expanse of Khul Bach’s crystal plane. As he refocused on his room in the airship, he heard the tail-end of Valla’s words, “. . . just wait for you here.”

“I’m back!” He laughed, sitting up on the side of the bed again.

“So fast? Wasn't he available?”

“He was! We spoke for several minutes. Time in the crystal is weird. Anyway, he gave me some advice. It was kinda weird, to be honest. Last time he made me listen to all his reasoning, then he led me to the decision I wanted to make. This time he basically just told me what to do.”

“Which was?”

“He thinks I should take the Battlemaster refinement. He said his old leader or ruler, or whatever, had that Class. He also told me what the warlord's refinement was.” Victor grinned, wondering how best to tease Valla about what he'd learned.

“Truly? He knew the warlord?”

“He knew of him. Still, you're going to feel silly when you learn what the refinement is . . .”

“Warlord!” Valla clapped her hands together as she connected Victor's ham-handed clues.

“Really? You got it that easily? I just had to say you'd feel silly?”

“It was obvious after that.” Valla nodded. “Well? What will you do?”

“Honestly? I want to resist all the advice. I want to make my own choice and go with one of the Quinametzin Classes or the first one, the Titanic Champion. I mean, they all sound better than Battlemaster to me, and I hate being told what to do.” Valla nodded, but her eyes narrowed, and Victor could tell she was about to give him some advice, so he beat her to it. “Look, I said I want to do that. I didn't say I was going to. That book says the Battlemaster Class is rare and coveted, Khul Bach told me to take it, and that might be enough, but really the thing that clinches it for me is that the System presented it last, even though it's an epic option and my others were all legendary.”

“I couldn't have said it better.” Valla nodded. “It might feel like a step back, going from a legendary Class to an epic one, but I think it will pay off. I think you're making a wise decision. A mature one.”

“Oh, brother,” Victor chuckled. “You trying to get me to change my mind?” Valla's eyes widened, and he laughed. “Just kidding. Well? Should I do it now?”

“Yes, unless you want to ask the sailors for advice.”

“Tempting, but nah.” Victor opened his menu again and scrolled through the options until he saw Battlemaster and selected it.

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have refined your class: Battlemaster.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Energy Charge - Basic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Energy Charge - Basic: Use the Energy in your Core to shield and propel you in a straight line at terrific speed for a short distance. Those in your path will be knocked aside and suffer damage. Energy Cost: 1000. Cooldown: Short.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a Class feat: Battlefield Awareness.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Battlefield Awareness: You have an uncanny knack for knowing where you are needed on the battlefield. You can sense when a line is about to break or where people suffer the most. More, you can gauge, at a glance, the relative strength of one group of soldiers versus another.\*\*\***