

## Victor BK5: Ch11

### Book 5: Chapter 11: A Detour

Victor stared at the ceiling of his cabin, watching the shifting light coming in through his porthole as it flickered over the wooden planks. The ship was moving quickly, and the clouds outside made the light and shadows dance in hypnotic patterns. They were more than halfway to their destination, still passing through intermittent mountain ranges but rapidly approaching the Beliss Peaks, where the ship would break free and, supposedly, fly over Lake Beliss and make a final approach to Persi Gables. Victor had seen enough of Lake Beliss to know that it wasn't something a ship, even an airship, would cross in a matter of minutes. No, if he were to guess, he'd say the lake was similar to the Great Lakes back on Earth, more an inland sea by conventional terms.

While the ship progressed through the sky, Victor was relaxing, wasting time, and waiting for dinner; the captain had invited him and Valla to his table on this, their last night aboard. Victor had gone to his cabin a little after noon with plans to cultivate Energy or study his spell patterns—he'd had the idea of trying to improve or combine some of his existing spells now that he knew a lot more about spell patterns in general, and now that he had the Elder Magic feat.

As soon as he'd entered the cabin, though, and reclined on the bed, he'd had a hard time focusing on anything productive. His mind kept wandering to Old Mother and wondering how long she'd waited for him on the spirit plane. He thought about Thayla and Deyni, sort of wishing he could drop everything and visit them, but knowing full well that he couldn't afford to disappear for a week or more, not when a legion of soldiers awaited him. Those thoughts spurred a whole rabbit hole of others—would he be taken seriously by the soldiers? Would he know what to do? How would he manage while fighting on a battlefield?

It seemed he'd made a good choice with Battlemaster as his new class; his new feat seemed tailor-made for his near future. "Maybe a lot more than near future," he amended softly, thinking about going to war with the Vesh on Zaafor. It seemed battles, wars, and armies would feature prominently in his future. Thinking of his future made him think of Tes, which made him think of Valla, and more stress began to build in his chest, banishing any hope of a productive afternoon. Growling, Victor sat up and pulled his Farscribe book from his storage ring, hoping Lam had written back to him with some news that would distract him.

He wasn't surprised to find a letter from her; she'd probably been desperate for news and had written to him immediately. Thinking that, he felt a little bad for waiting until now to check. With a scowling brow, he began reading, noting right away that the message was in Lam's flowery hand, not Edeya's neat print:

Victor,

*It's wonderful to hear from you. I'm pleased to know you've made so much progress while you were away. I never doubted that you'd return, for the record. Despite Rellia's reluctance to share her captain's missives with me, she did so, even if it took far too much prodding and poor Edeya wearing a rut between our two villas. Speaking of Edeya, she's done an excellent job clerking for me, and she's stepping into an administrative role for the legion.*

*You've heard, I'm sure, that our recruitment is progressing beyond our wildest hopes. We've gathered more than six thousand troops, many of whom are veterans and fortune-seekers, not just*

*desperate tier-ones and twos. We have plenty of those, but I'd say our average level is better than many of the Empire's armies. This brings me to your concerns.*

*You're wise to voice them to me, first of all, and I'd like to suggest you keep them between us. I'm not sure who we can trust. I want to trust Rellia, but I fear she's been playing the game for far too long. If she sees a way to make gains for herself or her family in our betrayal, I wouldn't be shocked. I'll leave it at that as far as she's concerned; I have no evidence that she's being disloyal or dishonest, but I have a general level of distrust when it comes to the nobility.*

*Secondly, I'd like you to know that we're planning an unorthodox approach to the Marches. We'll avoid significant population centers, avoid well-traveled roadways, and yes, this will slow our progress, but it will make ambushes difficult. Rellia has two airships, one she owns and the other she's hired, that will scout for us. Nearly twenty percent of the army is mounted, and we've been working on mobility drills for months now. An ambush will be difficult, but should it happen, I think anyone without up-to-the-minute intelligence on our force will be surprised by its strength.*

*As to your request for a sparring partner, I have good news: Polo Vosh is already with the army. He and many of my old friends are taking on leadership positions with the force. He's eager to see what you've learned and to spar with you, by the way—I shared your request, and he was enthusiastic.*

*Please keep correspondence between us in this Farscribe book and keep others from viewing it; never leave it lying around. I feel foolish and a bit embarrassed to write such obvious words of advice, but I fear it's my nature; I cannot abide an unchecked box. Stay well, travel safely, and keep your guard up; there are, as you have guessed, many snakes in this Empire, and few of them wish for our endeavor to be successful.*

*In great anticipation,*

*Captain Lam*

Victor smiled, imagining Polo Vosh shouting orders to some undisciplined recruits. He was glad that Lam's thinking regarding risks from the Empire or other nobility matched up with his own. He still had hopes of meeting with Olivia Bennet while in Persi Gables, but, as far as he was concerned, the sooner the army got moving, the better. He wanted to get on with this chapter in his life, fulfill his obligations to Rellia and the others, and be done with it. There was a big universe to explore, and he wouldn't make the gains he needed here, not on Fanwath.

He thought about that, about the "gains" he needed, and he chuckled. His mind kept going back to Tes, but he knew that would probably fade. Could he really keep a crush alive for ten, fifty, or a hundred years? "Well, what if I meet her again before then? Maybe she'll want to check in on me." Victor sighed again and frowned. He knew it wasn't healthy, especially when it made him push away perfectly wonderful people like Valla. "I haven't really pushed her away, though, have I?" Once again, his mind descended into turmoil—guilt mixing with desire, mixing with doubt.

After he'd chased his thoughts about relationships out of his mind, a more pertinent thought occurred to him, and he pulled a pen from his ring and began to write in the book:

*Lam,*

*Message received. Don't worry, I only trust one person within a hundred miles of me, and that's Valla. I know, I know, she's loyal to Rellia, but we've been through a lot. Trust me, she's good. That's not what I'm writing about, though; I need you to find someone for me. It turns out other humans are on Fanwath, and one of them might be related to me, might have something to do with my summoning. I'd like to speak to her, and I believe she's in Persi Gables. She left Fainhallow by airship about a month ago and, according to the school's administrators, is still in the city. Would you locate her, please? I'd like to get the army moving ASAP, but I'd like to speak to her first. Her name is Olivia Bennet.*

*Thanks,*

*Victor*

Victor slapped the book closed, put it away, and surged to his feet, suddenly feeling stifled, irritated, and too cooped up. He grabbed Lifedrinker and exited his room, moving to Valla's door. He knocked on it and called, "You in there?"

"Mmhhh," Valla's voice replied. A few seconds later, he heard the door's lock click, and then she pulled it open. He stared at her—sleepy eyes, unkempt, glossy pale-green hair, white shirt hugging her slender form, tucked into her usual sleek uniform pants. She looked into his eyes, blinking and stifling a yawn, and said, "Something wrong?"

"What?" Victor realized he was holding Lifedrinker, unharnessed, and chuckled, "Nah. I just want to get my mind off a lot of . . . things. How'd you like to spar a bit up on deck?"

"Now?"

"Did I interrupt something important?" Victor grinned crookedly.

"I was napping! This ship lulls me so nicely, and the little bed is so cozy. What time is it?"

"I don't know. A few hours past noon. We've got time before dinner if that's what you're wondering about."

Valla stopped trying to fight it and yawned hugely, covering her mouth with one hand and squinting at him the whole while. When she was done, she nodded and said, "Fine. I'll meet you on deck." Then she closed the door.

Victor turned, walked to the end of the hallway, and bounded up the steps to the hatchway. Once outside, he found his guess was probably about right; the sun was moving toward the western horizon, but the shadows among the mountains were long and deep, and it felt later than it was. He looked about the deck, found it too crowded with sailors, ropes, and gear, and moved toward the aft section, up a few steps to the deck there. Plenty of open space greeted him, and Victor smiled, proceeding to stretch and limber up.

A few minutes later, Valla joined him, still dressed the same but walking, nimble and graceful as ever, with Midnight's naked blade resting on her shoulder. "So, some physical exertion is needed, hmm?" She glanced around the aft deck, watching an Ardeni sailor carrying a coiled rope down midship.

"Yeah. My mind was driving me crazy. I can't stop thinking about things."

"Nervous about the army? Or Rellia?" Valla gave him a sly smile as though she'd uncovered some sort of secret.

"Rellia? Nah. I'll let you handle her."

"Handle?" She frowned, then sighed, "Not exactly what I meant."

"Well, I am nervous about the army." Victor leaned forward on Lifedrinker's haft, her shiny metallic head resting on the wooden deck. "I love to fight. I'm good at it, too, but I have no idea what to do when it comes to leading soldiers."

"You'll catch on. Listen to Lam, listen to me, and we'll help you sound like you know what you're doing."

"Right. Sorry, sometimes I forget your title isn't just, you know, a title."

"That I actually earned it?" She winked at him, and Victor was trying to think of something clever to say, but then he saw her eyes tracking something behind him.

"What?" he asked, turning to look into the darkening blue sky. He saw a few distant dots hugging the eastern mountain slopes, flying in a sort of V pattern. "Birds?"

"Maybe, but don't they seem too large?"

Just then, a sailor's voice cried out from the watch castle on the foredeck, "Wings! Wings to stern, Captain!" His voice was strained with something like panic, which prompted Victor to stare harder at the flying dots, trying to see what the worry was.

"I wish I had some binoculars or something," he muttered, but then he saw Valla out of the corner of his eye, holding a brass tube to her eye. "Shit, you have a telescope?"

"Sure. It's not as powerful as some, but I can see . . ." she trailed off as she seemed to have zeroed in on the object of everyone's interest. "Strigaii with riders!"

"Strigaii?"

"Here," Valla said, handing him her scope.

Victor held the narrow end to his eye and felt a tickle of Energy in the device as it expanded his vision, zooming in on the five dots. He had to steady the brass tube, carefully moving it back toward the dots as it magnified his view. When it steadied, he saw what Valla had been talking about. Apparently, strigaii were giant lizards with wings and beaks and resembled nothing more than scaled chickens with enormous black wings.

Only one of them was in his view, but he saw a rider on its back, a man wearing glittering, pale-blue scaled armor. Atop his red-fleshed head, two enormous black horns rose from his forehead and curved backward, tapering to fine points. His face was set in a grimace of determination, and Victor could see his eyes glowing with sparkling, golden Energy. “Who’s that asshole?”

“Good question. Tamed strigaii aren’t cheap. I’ve only ever seen one before, and it was when I was in the Legion. One of the Emperor’s Princeps flew one over our formation, performing an inspection.”

“So, five? Chasing our ship? Can’t be good, can it?”

“I wouldn’t think so, but perhaps it’s a coincidence. Perhaps they’re merely traveling toward Persi Gables as well . . .”

As she spoke, amid the clamor of shouts and activity behind them, the watchman in the miniature wooden tower at the front of the ship cried out, his voice cutting through the rest of the noise, “Fire incoming!”

Victor pulled the tube from his eye, and, in his much broader view, he saw a dot of bright white-yellow light hanging in the sky behind them. “What the fuck?” Valla offered no explanation, and he continued to watch as the dot of bright light grew slowly larger. Suddenly the airship banked, and Victor stumbled into Valla, the two of them slamming against the waist-high wooden railing. Victor looked over his shoulder, heard shouts from the captain and crew, and realized they were trying to dodge the slowly approaching ball of fire.

“That’s not going to work,” Valla grunted, straightening and moving out from between Victor and the railing. “It’s tracking us.”

“Shit,” Victor breathed, watching as, sure enough, the—much larger—ball of bright, roiling Energy shifted in the air and continued to pursue the ship. “It’s going to hit us,” he growled, reaching into his Core and severing the bindings on his form. Valla gasped in surprise as he suddenly increased in size, and the planks beneath his feet groaned and creaked as his mass suddenly intensified. “Stay by me,” he said, moving between Valla and the incoming fireball.

“We should get below . . .”

“And be trapped? As this ship crashes? Look!” Victor pointed behind them, and Valla followed his gaze.

“More . . .” she breathed, noticing what Victor had seen as his titanic bloodline was unleashed and his vision improved; three more balls of fire were surging through the air toward the ship, tracking it.

“I’m guessing this little transport ship isn’t designed to withstand attacks like that.” He looked back at the scurrying crew and listened to the panicked, rapid orders of the first mate and captain. He turned back to the incoming fireball and guessed they had about twenty seconds before impact.

“Likely not,” Valla said, shifting so that Victor was between her and the incoming projectile. Victor nodded, then began to step backward, one hand holding Lifedrinker, the other reaching back and holding onto Valla’s shoulder, ensuring she walked with him. They’d just descended the aft deck’s stairs and lost visual of the rapidly expanding ball of fire when the ship shuddered and surged. The helmsman was trying a last-minute dodge, driving the vessel straight upward. Victor squatted, his axe-wielding hand going to the steps to steady himself, and he felt Valla grab onto his belt.

The maneuver was for naught; with a deafening roar and concussion that flung the ship upward further, the fireball impacted the keel and sent splinters, embers, and smoking, smoldering projectiles through the air, darkening the skies on both sides of the ship. Crew members screamed and ran about, some were flung overside, and the captain bellowed and roared commands that were ignored—the airship was going down, and more missiles were incoming.

Victor had seen enough. He stood up, cast Iron Berserk, and, as his size doubled and furious power filled his pathways, he grabbed Valla up, hugging her to his chest as he did back in Coloss when they fled the warlord. In two strides, he moved to the starboard side of the ship and scanned the mountainside below, growing closer as the vessel lost altitude. Victor watched the slopes and turned to look over his shoulder, trying to time the next fireball impact.

“Victor, what are you doing?” Valla asked, but she didn’t struggle in his grasp.

“We can’t stay here,” he grunted. When he thought he couldn’t wait anymore, he bunched his legs and leaped toward a stand of tall, greenish-blue trees below. Laterally, he only had to move fifty yards or so, so he didn’t jump as hard as he could. Still, the decking cracked and exploded as he hurled himself over the railing, soaring through the air, trying to aim between two massive trees. With his Titanic Leap ability, he wasn’t worried about harming himself as he landed, but he worried about Valla. He tucked her close, wrapping both arms around her, Lifedrinker still gripped tightly in his fist.

To her credit, Valla didn’t scream, but he felt her press her face into his chest, and he didn’t blame her—they were probably dropping five hundred yards toward the tree-covered slope, and it would have been terrifying if he weren’t the size of a Quinametzin and filled with furious rage-attuned Energy. When he landed, the ground shuddered, nearby trees shook, dropping ten thousand blue-green needles to the ground, and Valla would have been yanked from his arms by the momentum if his arms weren’t like enormous steel cables, holding her tight to his chest.

Still, Valla groaned and cried out, and he knew the impact hadn’t been easy on her. Gently, Victor set her down, and she wobbled then fell to her butt on the loamy mountain slope, shaking her head dazedly. “Ancestors,” she groaned. Victor didn’t speak, but he turned and scanned the sky, waiting

to see if any of their pursuers followed them. He was thinking about climbing a tree when Valla said, "Victor, put on your armor." He turned to see her doing just that, and he nodded.

"Good idea," he grunted, then he produced his wyrm-scale vest and shrugged into it, chuckling as it grew to accommodate him; he'd last worn it as a much smaller man. Once he'd sealed up the front of the vest, he pulled out his Kethian Juggernaut helm and put it onto his head. Thus girded for war, he hefted Lifedrinker and growled, "Come on, you fuckers. Come and look for me."