

## Victor BK5: Ch19

Book 5: Chapter 19: Formalities

“Ancestors, Victor!” Thayla cried, leaping up from the soft, springy loam to charge at him, wrapping her luminescent arms around his waist and burying her head in his stomach. “How does a grown man keep growing?”

Victor laughed and gently stroked the back of her head, savoring the feel of her soft hair against his palm. “God, I missed you.” He felt emotion welling up, his throat growing thick, all the thoughts he’d been holding back vying to come to the forefront—Old Mother, the loss of hope about returning home, the stress of having so many people expecting so much from him. He squeezed Thayla tight and breathed deeply of the cool, fragrant air in Oynalla’s glade. “I thought I’d have to teach you how to find this place. I should have known better.”

“Aye, world-walker. It was the first place Oynalla showed me.”

“World-walker?”

“Weren’t you visiting other worlds these last months?”

“Yeah, but I don’t think that qualifies me. Let me walk on a few more before you start calling me that.”

“Fair.” Thayla pushed back from him, holding him at arm’s length and looking up, trying to see into his eyes. “Your coloring is a little different. More . . . bronze, I guess, and your eyes are lighter. They were always light brown, but now there’s yellow in there. Well, more of it.”

“You look good,” Victor said, reaching for her face, letting his thumb gently trace the line of her jaw.

“I do, hmm? Well, I have much news for you. Will you sit?” She moved back to the spot of soft grass where she’d been when he arrived and plopped down, folding her legs beneath her. Victor followed and lowered himself to the embrace of Oynalla’s glade, sighing as he leaned back and his palms sank into the rich turf.

“I have news for you, too.”

“Shall I speak first?” At his nod, she continued, “Deyni misses you a great deal, but she’s doing very well living with the clan. She’s tamed an adristii.” At Victor’s blank expression, she added, “It’s a bird of prey that hunts these plains. The clan is proud of her, and I think she’ll have a prominent place among them. She and Starlight are a common sight around the camp, racing hither and yon, Chandri often chasing after, howling about a lesson Deyni’s missing.”

She chuckled as she spoke, and Victor joined in, picturing Chandri in a teacher’s role. “So, she spends a lot of time with her? Chandri, I mean?”

“Much! I know Old Mother awaited you here to bid you goodbye, but did she tell you of my expanded role with the clan?” Thayla’s voice was a little hesitant, as though she had news and worried about how Victor would receive it.

“She hinted at it. I take it you’ve filled in for her, right? You’re the new clan, well, not Old Mother, but maybe Mother? Is that how that works?”

She smiled and reached out to grasp Victor’s hand in hers, then said, “It’s more than that, Victor. Yes, I’m the Clan’s Spirit Guide; I’m hoping to gain that Class when I next refine. It will be many, many years before I deserve that particular honorific, though. No, I’m not the Old Mother, but I’m Tellen’s wife. He and I rule the clan together now.”

Victor felt her fingers tighten on his palm, and he wondered if she thought he might pull away. Did she think he’d be jealous? Enraged that a woman he’d refused to settle down with had found love elsewhere? He smiled and gently gripped her hand between his thumb and fingers, enjoying the familiar, soft, warm feel of it. “That’s wonderful, Thayla. Really. I’m so happy for you . . . and for Tellen! That lucky bastard! So, Deyni and Chala and Chandri—they’re sisters now!”

“Yes! Oh, Victor . . . I’m so happy that you’re not upset.” She leaned toward him, relief evident in her eyes, and Victor chuckled, pulling her close so he could put an arm over her shoulders.

“I love you, Thayla. I know I told you that before, and maybe it put the wrong ideas in your mind, but the kind of love I have for you means I can’t help but feel happy when I see you’re happy. Understand?”

“I understand, big oaf,” she said, sniffing noisily as she pulled his arm tightly to herself, almost hugging it as she leaned into his side.

“Now, I want to talk to you about an opportunity for your people.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Well, you know about the campaign I’m leading for Rellia, right?”

“Oh no, Victor . . .”

“Hear me out! We’ve raised a bigger army than we could have hoped for—a full legion. We’ll win, Thayla; you have to know that, right? If I have anything to say about things, we’re going to claim a lot of land outside the Empire. Wouldn’t you like to be a part of that? Aren’t you tired of looking over your shoulder? Wouldn’t some real freedom mean a lot to the clan? I got to thinking about all the people Rellia and Lam are bringing along with the campaign, lots and lots of really powerful, rich people, not just peasants looking to get lucky. I thought about how so many of them are eager because they know something better is coming to them if we’re successful. Well, I want people I care about to get a piece of that, too.”

“Freedom always sounds nice, but you can’t tell me there aren’t risks.”

“Sure, there are risks. If the clan followed the legion, though, I’d be sure you were out of the worst of the fighting. Mainly we’d use you for scouting, just the hunters. The kids and non-combat folks can stay with the legion’s supply train, well-guarded.”

“And you get to spend some time with Deyni and Chandri.”

“And you!” Victor squeezed her again.

“It’s a huge decision, Victor.” Her voice was soft, and Victor recognized the tone—she was trying to spare his feelings and let him down easy.

“I know it is. I know you can’t say ‘yes’ right now. You’ll need to speak with Tellen and the other clan elders. You’ll need to weigh the risks and possible benefits. The good news is that the army is marching east for a long while. We’re going to skirt the Blue Deep, which means we’ll pass by your spring camp. If you decide to join us, you can do so, and if not, I’ll at least get to see everyone again.”

“That is good news!” She looked up at him and said, “Why so far south? There are roads leading east that go around the Starfall Mountains . . .”

“We don’t want our route to be easily predicted. I can explain more when we meet.” While he spoke, Victor was watching Thayla’s face, looking into her luminescent magenta eyes. Her eyes always told the story of her feelings, and he could see them narrow, and he knew she was connecting some dots.

“You fear trouble before you even get to the Marches?”

“I don’t fear trouble, but I won’t lie and say we don’t expect any.”

Thayla nodded, and as he looked up from her eyes, he saw that her flesh seemed less corporeal, more translucent. “I’m running out of Energy, Victor. I can’t stay here as long as you and Old Mother.”

“Well, think about what I said; promise me you will!”

“I will! How long until your army draws near?”

“Two weeks or so, I’d guess. No, maybe closer to three; it took Valla and me about twelve days riding hard.”

“Aye. Okay. I’m so glad to see you well.”

“Me too, Thayla!” Victor hugged her close, but she felt far less substantial than when he’d first done so. She was fading quickly. “I love you!”

“And I, you, oaf!” She tittered, and then she was gone. The only evidence she’d ever been there were wisps of rapidly fading Energy that drifted up into the starlit canopy of Old Mother’s glade. Victor sighed and fell back into the soft grass,

letting it cradle his weary spirit. He hoped Thayla would truly consider his offer. He hoped she'd try to convince Tellen to join the conquest. He had his doubts, however. She'd seemed quite reserved about the whole thing.

"Maybe she just needs to sleep on it. Let the idea fester in the back of her mind. I wish Deyni had come tonight; I know she'd help me convince her." He sighed and cut the connection to his Spirit Walk spell, and then he found himself sitting on his bed, his five proud, golden, glory-attuned coyotes sitting around it, their eyes glittering and gleaming with the nature of their spirits. "Hey, amigos."

They whined and yipped softly, pacing around his bed, and Victor figured he should send them home; people were probably trying to sleep nearby. "See you soon," he said, and then, as the spell ended, they shimmered and disappeared, leaving pools of glittering golden Energy on the rough floorboards. "That's new," he said, watching the puddles gradually shrink to nothing. "Something to do with the Energy type, maybe?"

Seeing his companions reminded him of what he'd said to Valla; he wanted to try to improve that spell with a twist of elder magic, but his mind was dull, tired, and foggy. He'd only had one good night's sleep in the last several, and he had a busy day ahead. That said, he undressed, leaned Lifedrinker against the wall near his bed, pulled his thin, plain gray blanket up, and went to sleep.

At least, his intention was to go to sleep, but his mind was busy. He still had the ancient wyrm heart to eat, he had to think about what he'd say in the command council the next day, and he had a nagging worry about his new-found cousin; was she biting off more than she could chew? As he pushed those thoughts into a corner, he began to wonder about Vellia and her people. Would the Naghelli answer his call? How would he sell their presence to the army? Weren't they pretty much universally hated? He tried to remember their history and thought it had something to do with when the System had formed Fanwath; did they help the Yovashi or something? "Ugh, goddammit!"

Victor thumped his fist into his forehead, tossing left to right, twisting himself in his blankets, and trying to think of anything other than his dozens of problems. He let his mind drift to Tes, picturing her eyes, her smile, the way she laughed when he did something clever. Before he knew it, he was floating through clouds, following her as she taunted him, jumping from mountaintop to mountaintop. He always almost caught but never quite reached her. He could hear her giggle, see how her skirts and ribbons trailed behind her, and then the dream shifted, and he was lost to deep slumber.

When Victor woke, it was to an incessant tapping at his door. He was flat on his back, his blanket and pillows nowhere to be found. As the tapping continued, he stared at the roughly-fit planks of the ceiling, listening to the sounds of distant shouts and trying to gather his thoughts. Finally, the tapping registered, and he remembered where he was and grunted, "Just a minute."

"Victor?" Valla's voice said, speaking softly. Was she trying to keep people from gossiping about how he'd overslept? Victor leaped out of bed, flipped up the crude lock, and, as Valla quietly came into the room, he pulled some clean

clothes out of his storage ring—easy to do since pretty much all his clothes were enchanted to clean themselves.

“Sorry, Valla.”

“It’s all right. I just wanted to make sure you didn’t have anything you wanted to discuss before the ceremony.”

“How much time do we have?” he asked, pulling a plain, dark-blue shirt over his head.

“Twenty minutes. Are you going to wear a uniform?”

“Should I?” Victor frowned, “I was going to wear my armor again.” He blinked his eyes several times, then took a good look at Valla. She’d opted to wear the new uniform—slim black pants, red shirt, black and gold brocade coat. He saw she’d transferred all of her medals and ribbons from her old Legion uniform.

“For this ceremony, I suggest you wear the uniform. People are going to be swearing fealty to you and the campaign.”

“Damn it.” Victor started pulling off his shirt, glad he was, at least, wearing some underwear that decently covered him—some silky shorts he’d picked up in Coloss. Valla had seen him like this before, so he didn’t feel like he was doing anything wrong, but when he looked up, she was sitting by the window, pointedly looking outside. As he summoned the uniform he’d been given from his storage ring, he said, “I’m going to be the only officer in there without a chest full of ribbons and shit.”

“Your coat will be the only one to bear the rank of Legate Primus.” She turned toward him, saw he’d already pulled on his uniform pants, and said, “You could commission some medals for yourself. Ribbons to commemorate your achievements. A wyrm-scale ribbon, a token of Coloss ribbon, a Greatbone Mine ribbon, etcetera.”

“That wouldn’t help me today, and it would look dumb if I suddenly showed up at some point with a bunch of medals and ribbons no one recognized.”

“That’s partially true, but there are many medals on my chest that require an explanation to most people.” She fingered a silvery bar with a blue tassel and said, “Few would know this is meant to recognize that I finished my sword qualifier in under five strokes.”

“Sword qualifier?”

“Yes, the Imperial Legion doesn’t let anyone use just any weapon; you have to qualify for the weapon you carry.”

“Right,” Victor said, only half hearing her as he worked to tuck his crimson shirt in without wrinkling the front of it.

“No,” Valla said, walking over to him. “You have these pockets up here,” she said, demonstrating by pulling one open. They were placed differently than those on other pants he’d owned, up high near the waistline. “Put your fingers in there, and you’ll find a hole where you can pull your shirttail back, removing the extra fabric near your beltline.”

“Speaking of belts—I need to wear the black one, I’m guessing, and the shiny boots they gave me?”

“Yes. You’ll look odd in uniform with random accessories.”

“What about Lifedrinker?”

“You didn’t look at the dress sling Rellia had made? Take it out.”

“Uh,” Victor dug around in his ring and pulled out the boots, belt, and a thick, black leather and red silk sash. At least, he’d thought it was a sash, but now he saw that part was stitched with tooled leather and big golden rings.

“This,” Valla said. “You wear it crossways over one shoulder, and Lifedrinker will hang on your back. It won’t be easy to put her back in there if you have to pull her out, but that’ll be the least of your problems. I can help you, or an aide like Edeya can.”

“And if I want to sit down?”

“Right, if that comes up, just allow me, or, as I said, Edeya, to help you. This is a formal uniform; you’re not meant to fight in it.”

Victor shrugged into the black dress jacket, annoyed by the extra level of golden brocade on his compared to Valla’s. He’d already tried on the uniform once, bonding with it so it fit perfectly, and Valla had assured him that if he had to expand his size, it would hold up all right. Once he had the coat on, he shrugged into the harness for Lifedrinker, noting that it added quite a bit of flashiness to the front of his uniform, what with its shiny leather, red silk lining, and golden buckles.

“Here,” Valla said, picking up Lifedrinker. “Oh! She’s heavy!” she grunted. “Does she always vibrate like this?”

“Well,” Victor said, watching Valla struggle with the axe, “She’s not used to anyone else touching her. It’s okay, Reina; she’s just going to help me put you on my back.”

“Wow,” Valla said, lifting Lifedrinker and slipping her through the golden hoops near the top of Victor’s left shoulder, “she calmed right down when you spoke.”

“Don’t take it personally. At least she didn’t melt your hands off.” Victor reached up to ensure he could grab the top of the axe, and when his fingers touched her, he felt a surge of amused pleasure. “She liked that one,” he chuckled.

“Midnight still hasn’t spoken to me.”

“Well, keep talking to her. Keep using her. She’ll grow.” Victor nodded confidently as he spoke, even though his experience with conscious weapons extended precisely as far as what he knew about Lifedrinker. Still, Valla seemed to appreciate it, and she smiled and reached her hand to her sword’s pommel.

“You’re a sweet, beautiful girl, aren’t you, Midnight?”

“Uh, is that what I sound like?” Victor raised an eyebrow speculatively.

“Because, if that’s how I sound, maybe I should . . . Ow!” he cried as Valla viciously punched him in the chest. “Careful, you’re going to mess up my uniform.”

“If you’re done mocking me, we should probably get going.”

“I’m done for now.” He hurriedly stepped toward the door, flinching away from her as though he expected another blow, but Valla just smiled and followed.

“Can I keep my small size on?”

“It’s up to you. All the officers will be there; they might feel better swearing fealty if they can feel your full aura.”

“How many altogether?” Victor pulled the door open and, as he stepped through, cut the Energy keeping his Shape Self spell going. The floorboards creaked and groaned as his mass instantly increased.

“Rellia, Borrius, Lam, me, ten captains, and sixty lieutenants. The captains will take oaths from the sergeants in a later ceremony, and, still later, the lieutenants will take oaths from their troops.”

“And the words? Rellia didn’t have any issue with the final oath?”

“None. At least none she felt she needed to vent to me.”

“All right, Primus. Let’s get this over with. Time to listen to a bunch of people swear they won’t betray me.”

“As you say, Legate,” Valla winked at him, and they began to march down the steps, her a bit behind him the entire way. Victor’s mind wandered while they walked, wondering if he’d ever seen Valla wink before. He might have been concerned about his appearance or forced himself to stand up straight back in his old life, but it wasn’t an issue these days. He’d put his body through enough,

improved it enough, that his core muscles were probably beyond any Olympian's in history—his back was straight as a board.

He did, self-consciously, run a hand through his hair, making sure it was still short enough that his lack of a shower or comb hadn't let any strands fall out of place. The bristly feeling against his palm reassured him, and he smiled, dropping his arm as he stepped outside the command fort into the courtyard. He was a little surprised to see the assembled officers standing at attention on the loose, sandy cobbles. Rellia, Borrius, and Lam were arrayed in front, eyes trained on him from the second he stepped through the door. "I thought we were still a little early," he muttered.