

## Victor BK5: Ch22

Book 5: Chapter 22: A Carriage Ride

“Woah!” Victor said, holding up his hands to the stomping Mustang. It snorted and bucked, and then, perhaps weary of their heroic efforts, the floorboards gave way, and Victor, his bed, his newly summoned mount, and several hundred pounds of lumber fell through to the bottom level of the command fort. Victor managed a hastily shouted, “Shit!” Then he was too busy rolling free of the shattered flooring and the thrashing horse.

Too late, it occurred to him that he could cancel the spell, sending the horse back to the spirit plane like he often did with his other totems. Too late because the damage was done, and several alarmed junior officers were gathering, gawking at the spectacle. Victor canceled the spell, and covered with dust, disheveled and embarrassed, he stood up and looked around. “Well, who let that animal in here?” he yelled, feigning outrage.

“Legate, sir, I don’t know how that happened! Where did it go? Was it a monster?” The speaker was Rellia’s aide, Darro, and Victor instantly felt sorry for his joke.

“No, no, Darro. I’m kidding. That was my fault. I summoned that animal, but, well, I didn’t think it through entirely. Shit.” Victor looked at the other gawkers standing around—he’d managed to fall right into the central hall, just a bit past the entrance to the fort where the second-floor stairway sat. “Unless you can help fix this mess, you can move on. Nothing more to see.”

“Shall I fetch the engineers?” Darro asked helpfully.

“Yes! Yes, let’s get this fixed, I guess. Unless it’s too big a hassle; I don’t really need a room much longer. We’re breaking camp soon.”

“I’ll find out, sir!” Darro snapped a salute, then, like the other onlookers, carefully moved around the wreckage and out of the hall. Victor brushed himself off, then began kicking through the mess, trying to find his notes and the books he’d borrowed from Valla. He wanted to get out of there, embarrassed as he was, but he couldn’t leave those behind. He slapped a hand over his shoulder, feeling the empty axe harness, and cursed, scanning for Lifedrinker.

It took him several minutes to find his axe and all the books, by which time Darro had returned with two men wearing legion uniforms. The men were visibly drunk, apparently having started celebrating the oath-swearing ceremony. One of them was an Ardeni with bright green eyes, and he looked at the mess, then at Victor, and paled. He began to stammer, and when Victor frowned at him, he finally managed to choke out some words, “Lord, I swear, we thought this structure perfectly capable of supporting your . . . girth.”

“You . . .” Victor tried to see the scene from the other man’s perspective, and he couldn’t help the laugh that rolled out of him. He slapped a big, heavy hand on

the man's shoulder and said, "Listen, my good man, when you're building a structure meant to accommodate me, you need to double your estimates on the required durability." He glanced at the other man, a Cadwalli with one horn that pointed sideways out over his ear, and added, "Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" they both said, and they tried to snap salutes, but they were rather sloppy in their inebriated state.

"Can you fix it?"

"Aye, sir!" the first engineer said, emphatically nodding.

"Right. Well, go ahead and enjoy the night. Fix it first thing in the morning."

"Truly?" the Cadwalli asked.

"Yeah. Don't worry." Victor turned, a stupid grin on his face, and walked toward the front of the building. He'd just stepped through a doorway into the entrance hall when Valla came charging up the front steps. He saw the panicked, crazed concern on her face and once again felt guilty. He held up his hands and said, "Relax. Everything's fine."

"I thought we agreed!" she said, standing in the doorway, regaining her composure.

"Agreed?"

"That you wouldn't blow the place up!"

Victor laughed and shook his head ruefully. "I didn't mean to, Valla. It's just my room that's wrecked, in any case. Well, I guess there's a big mess downstairs in the main hall. Anyway, my spell worked! I have some very interesting shit to share with you."

"Interesting shit?" Valla frowned.

"Yes! About spells, the System, oh, and some very creepy, scary people who found me on the spirit plane."

"Oh, Ancestors, Victor! Polo tried to find you earlier. He said you wouldn't answer your door and asked me if we should break it, you know, out of concern. I foolishly told him no, and said you were probably concentrating on something. We should have interrupted you, shouldn't we have?" She stared thunderclouds at him, and Victor wondered how much of her outrage was real and how much was manufactured for effect. He decided to err on the side of it being authentic.

"Hey, it's okay, Valla. Everything worked out. Yeah, I met some scary folks, but they seem like they won't mess with me for a very long time. Well, I hope." He

shook his head and moved closer to Valla, reaching toward her as though he'd put a hand on her shoulder, but she stepped back.

"I should have stayed closer."

"Dammit, I'm not a kid. I don't need you to babysit me. Yeah, things got a little crazy, but I accomplished something fucking cool. Will you let me tell you about it?"

"Why not tell us both about it?" Rellia said from behind him, and Victor almost jumped out of his skin.

"Goddammit, Rellia!" He whirled on her and said, "Stop sneaking up on me!"

She frowned at him, her perfect lips turning downward and her brow drawing together, and said, "I understand you're agitated, but I'm not one to sneak about." Her evident irritation was enough to douse the fire in Victor's belly, and he sighed heavily, looking from Valla to Rellia, then shrugged.

"I guess we might as well have that dinner. I don't think Polo and I are going to spar tonight. Sorry, I snapped at you both."

"Understandable." Rellia nodded. "I hear you just fell through the ceiling in the main hall." Before Victor could bluster a response, she added, "Let's take my coach into the city. Lam and Borrius are coming along. I hope that's all right."

"We're not dining here?" Valla asked.

"Heaven's no. Our last dinner before we march? Come, you know me better than that. We'll dine at my estate in town." Rellia started down the steps, lithely passing between Victor and Valla. "Darro, let Lam and Borrius know we're leaving." Victor turned just in time to see the aide hurrying up the stairs behind him.

"Well, if we're all riding in your coach, I'm going to reduce my size." Victor followed Rellia, Valla behind him, and began forming the pattern for his Alter Self spell.

"Are you still working on the spells Khul Bach and Tes told you to practice?" Valla asked. He wondered at the sudden change of topic, but he figured it made sense; she was irritated with him and wanted to keep the spotlight focused.

"Yeah, of course. I mean, yes and no. I'm always using Sovereign Will, but I've let up on my Berserk training. I'll get back to it when we're on the march."

"Even though you had that epic breakthrough?"

"Yeah, Tes and Khul Bach think it's worth trying to get it up to legendary. I feel like it'll be years down the road."

“Most likely,” Rellia said over her shoulder. “I don’t have a single legendary skill or spell, and I’ve been at this much longer than you.”

“Victor’s not normal,” Valla said, and Victor wasn’t sure if he should take it as a compliment or an insult. He shrugged and finished his spell, and both Valla and Rellia stumbled as he channeled torrents of Energy into changing his form. His aura slipped its leash momentarily, and then he snatched it up, smiling around from his new perspective, once again only a very large man, no longer a half-titan.

“Ancestors! I’d almost forgotten that feeling.” Rellia paused as though to steady herself, shaking her head gently. She gathered herself quickly, though, and kept walking. A few seconds later, they stood outside the palisade, waiting for Rellia’s coach to approach. It was slowly driving down the main boulevard between the army’s tents and had nearly reached the gate when Lam, Edeya, Darro, and Borrius arrived.

“Apologies,” Lam said, hastily straightening her uniform jacket. “I thought we had a couple of hours yet before leaving.”

“My fault,” Victor said. “My evening plans got canceled.”

“Nobody’s at fault. Nobody has suffered. Here we all are, ready to go.” Rellia, like the others, still wore her dress uniform and looked very comfortable in the form-fitting blazer and slimming pants. She smiled agreeably at everyone and gestured to her coach. “A pleasant little ride together and then a very nice meal awaits. Let’s begin this great endeavor by being positive, shall we? Daughter,” she gestured again to the coach, “after you.”

“I think not,” Valla said, striding to the coach, opening the door to the flustered protests of the driver, and then reaching in to lower the little hinged step. “After you, dear Mother.”

“Oh, Valla.” Rellia tsked and then climbed into the coach. Lam and Borrius didn’t quibble about propriety and hurried after her. Victor motioned for Edeya and Darro to precede him, then stepped up to the door.

“You all right?” he asked, looking past Valla toward the darkening horizon. The sun was nearly gone, but the moons looked to be bright that night.

“Fine,” Valla shrugged, still holding the door, gesturing for him to get in.

“You’re a complicated woman, Valla.” Victor tried to smile reassuringly at her but felt it was awkward on his face, so he shrugged and climbed inside. He found that the others had left the central cushion on the far bench open for him, so he

crouched low and sort of pivoted, allowing himself to fall into it as Valla climbed in and shut the door behind her. The coach, like most magical conveyances on Fanwath, was enchanted to be larger inside than out, but it was still quite full with the seven of them. Victor scooted toward Rellia on his right, trying to make a bit of room for Valla, and she nodded, seeing it. She'd barely sat down when the coach began to roll.

Victor watched the central fort and then the tents of the encampment fall away and said, "Well, this is nice. Maybe I should have ridden my new mount, though."

"A new mount?" Lam asked, taking the bait.

"Yeah! I was trying to tell Valla about this back at the fort. I managed to alter a couple of my spells, combining them with some . . ." Victor paused. He'd almost mentioned the elder magic, but he worried about opening that can of worms. He'd promised Tes to keep her magic to himself, so how would he explain where he'd learned it? "With some things I learned in Coloss." He looked around the coach and added, "That's the city where Valla and I were the last couple of months."

"Oh, right, right." Lam nodded. Borrius frowned, deepening his already prodigious wrinkles, but he looked intrigued, ready to listen. Victor glanced at Rellia and Valla, saw they were waiting for him to continue, and grinned, enjoying having everyone's attention.

"Well, when I did it, the System gave me a bunch of warnings, said I was creating a non-System spell and I'd lose my originals, blah-blah, then asked me if I wanted to continue or not."

"How much are you glossing over with that 'blah-blah?'" Valla interjected.

"Not hardly at all; I just don't remember the System's exact words. Anyway, when I hesitated and started to get a little mouthy, I think the System yelled at me. Have you guys ever seen a System message with red text?"

"Mine are always green on a translucent, silvery page . . ." Edeya said, then clamped her mouth shut, her cheeks blooming with red roses.

"Mine are always black," Borrius shrugged. "Most everyone sees them differently."

"Well, anyway, I usually see white text, and this time the System sent me a red message, and I felt a terrible pain in my head."

"That's not good!" Valla cried.

"How disturbing," Rellia muttered.

“Are you still in pain?” Lam asked.

Before more of them could speak or throw more questions at him, Victor held up a hand and continued, “Hold on. That’s not even the important part. So, anyway, the spell worked, and the System seemed to calm down. My headache didn’t last, and I didn’t get any more scary messages. At least not right away.” He paused, once again enjoying the rapt attention they were all giving him.

“So? What happened?” Lam pressed.

“Right, so the spell I cast was supposed to take me on a Spirit Walk, and it did. I arrived with a literal bang, huge waves of Energy pouring out of me—I didn’t put any limits on my new spell, you see, and I didn’t hold back the torrent as it came out of my Core. That’ll be important in a minute.” Victor continued to relate his brief adventure finding the Mustangs and with the strange, frightening duo, Fox and Three.

“These beings were that strong? They just took your blood and left before you could even react?” Darro asked, the horror of the idea widening his eyes.

“Yeah, I think so. I’m hoping that threat is so long-term that they’ll forget about me, or, hopefully, I’ll figure out a way to dissuade or beat them by then.”

“Another enemy to add to your list,” Valla sighed. “Perhaps Tes will have some advice for you.” She looked down as she said that, and Victor couldn’t quite read her expression. Was she still annoyed with him?

“Well, anyway,” he said, turning back to the group, “the spell worked, and I learned a lot. All in all, I’d say it was a good experience.”

“That’s good, but the System . . .” Rellia shifted, glancing in irritation toward the front of the coach as it bounced over something in the trail. “What is that driver doing?” She shook her head and then refocused on Victor. “Now we know why your room collapsed—a pity I didn’t know it earlier when I gave those engineers a tongue-lashing.”

“You didn’t!” Valla leaned forward to glare at her mother. “Victor already spoke to them!”

“But I didn’t know that! Don’t worry; I’ll. . .” the coach lurched again, and she and several others were almost thrown out of their seats. “What’s happening out there? Kel!” she yelled, reaching to pull angrily on a red, tasseled cord that hung from the ceiling. A bell sounded, but the coach didn’t slow, still bouncing roughly.

“Something’s wrong!” Lam cried, reaching for the door, flipping the catch, and kicking it open. Victor caught a glimpse of tall grass rushing by, and then Lam launched herself out, flying into the air. Valla reached for her sword and leaned toward the door, looking out. Victor wanted to shove her aside and leap out of the coach, imagining all sorts of terrible scenarios, but he held himself still, trying

to remain calm. To that end, he cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, feeling rather self-satisfied as he saw the panic wash out of Darro and Edeya.

Suddenly the coach lurched and began to slow, and Victor heard Lam call out, "The driver is dead!" Those words were all Valla needed; she leaped out of the coach, and Victor was hot on her heels, Lifedrinker clutched in his hands. He'd barely cleared the threshold when he snipped the lines of Energy constraining his form, and when he tumbled into the thick grass of the plains, the ground shook with his impact. He rolled to his feet, scanning the area, wondering who could have killed the driver without alerting anyone in the coach. He was currently boosting his agility and vitality and decided that was best, nimbly leaping to the top of the now-motionless coach.

Lam stood on the driver's bench, the reins in her hands, the headless body of the driver slumped by her feet. Valla was stalking around the coach, her sword dark and glittering in the bright moonlight. Beneath him, Victor could hear Rellia and the others getting out of the coach while he looked around, trying to see what had attacked them.

"What's happened?" Borrius asked, his voice more indignant than worried.

"I don't know, sir," Darro replied, and his voice quaked with nerves.

"Darro, Edeya, you are charged with protecting Borrius," Rellia said, whipping her wicked rapier through the air, slashing some grass out of her way as she moved toward the front of the coach. She looked up at Lam and Victor and said, "Anything?"

"Nothing . . ." Lam replied, but Victor held up a hand, interrupting her. He'd seen something. Out in the grass, more than a mile away, something was moving toward them. If the grasslands were instead an ocean, he'd call it a wave. It surged through the grass, causing it to bend forward and snap back, but it was subtle at that distance in the dark. Someone might mistake it for the wind, even. But Victor had a feeling in his gut that told him something was coming, either something massive or many, many smaller things.

He pointed and said, "There." He didn't wait for the others to register what he'd seen, didn't wait for whatever it was to get closer. He jumped off the carriage, and before his feet hit the grass-covered turf, he cast Iron Berserk; this time, the ground really shook. He heard Lam launch herself into the sky behind him, but he didn't look. He had one idea in mind, and that was to engage whatever enemy had attacked them before it closed on the others, before the lower-tiered Edeya, Darro, and, apparently, Borrius were caught up in the battle.

He used his Titanic Leap ability and distanced himself from them, launching himself headlong into the oncoming enemy or enemies. As he charged, Victor cut the thread to his inspiration spell; he wanted to use that Energy for something else. He gathered up a vast torrent of it, pulling that white-gold Energy out of his Core, and then he cast Globe of Insight, forming a basketball-sized, blazing orb that followed him through the tall grass, laying waste to the shadows, brightly illuminating the plains for a hundred paces on either side of him.

That done, Victor leaped into the air again, and, this time, as he soared, the wind whistling over his ears, he cast Banner of the Champion. More glorious light erupted behind him as the banner of his primogenitors took shape, hanging in the air above his head. The bloody sun depicted in the ethereal coat of arms blazed with glittering golden light, and it, combined with the Globe of Insight, lit up the night like a fireworks show as Victor hurtled toward the ground.

He saw his foes, then, not clearly, but enough to get an idea that they weren't one gigantic monster but rather a host of shadowy, black-clad individuals racing toward him and the others in a tight V-shaped formation. At the point of that charging host, something reflected back the light of Victor's blazing spells. A man, enormous in stature, clad in glittering gold from his feet to the horned helmet atop his head, charged with madness in his eyes. Somehow he locked those wild, insane eyes with Victor's despite the distance between them, and then he screamed—a terrible sound that echoed over the grassy plains, ripping the night like a psychopath's mad howling.

For the first time, Victor became aware that Lam had flown with him out into the plains as she said, with dread in her voice, "Ridonne."