

Victor BK5: Ch9

Book 5: Chapter 9: Departure

“What was the point of that display?” ap’Gravin muttered, perhaps trying to cling to some semblance of his earlier bluster.

Victor grinned, shifting to a more comfortable sitting position, pushing Lifedrinker’s handle back and to the side; she’d been pressing into the stone floor now that Victor wasn’t titan-sized. “Oh, I just wanted to give you a taste of what you’re facing here. I wanted you to understand that I’m not leaving you alone until I get what I want from you, and if the other professors here don’t want me to harm you on their property, I’ll take you away, and nothing in this world will stop me.”

Ap’Gravin stared at him, his eyes hollow, his blue flesh wan. He looked over to Oylla, who still lingered by the door to his cell, and asked, “You’ll stand by and let this animal threaten me?”

“There’s no love lost between you and me.” Her voice was flinty, not an ounce of sympathy in it, and she shrugged then added, “If this man takes you too quickly for me to follow or too forcefully for me to stop, I won’t lose sleep. I’ll make my report and be done with it.”

“I might be down, woman, but I’m not out. I will come back from this, and you know with my father’s resources, I’ll make you pay for that insolence.”

Victor leaned forward and rested one of his large, strong hands on ap’Gravin’s shoulder. “I don’t think making threats is going to serve you well. You should hunt for a new tone to use.”

Ap’Gravin shook his head slowly in defeat and said, “Oylla. Remove the spell script from the back of my neck. A bit of fire is all it will take. Not enough to injure me!”

“Oh? What is it, a Mind Trap? Have you locked away the memories Victor wants you to share?”

“That’s right, wench,” he growled, leaning forward as Oylla brushed aside his hair, revealing the flesh of his neck. Victor couldn’t see what she was doing from his position, but a moment later, a wisp of pink smoke drifted into the air, and ap’Gravin cursed—a word the System didn’t translate—and glared at her. “You did that on purpose.”

“Did I?” She smiled and leaned a shoulder against the wall, looking at something behind Victor and smiling. Victor followed her gaze and saw Valla standing there with her arms folded, a rather wicked grin of her own revealing sharp teeth.

“Well?” he asked, turning back to the still-cowering, haunted-looking man.

“Bah! It’s nothing—a trifling transgression. To be honest, I’m not sure why I locked this memory away. I took a bit of blood from the infirmary; a sample the nurse kept after that upstart was cracked in the head by a stone. I gathered many such from many promising students. My father was doing research into

bloodlines with the help of some off-world mage. A complete waste of time, if I recall correctly; he abandoned the project and cut ties with the charlatan.”

“Nurse Tyliste helped you?”

“What? No. She was unaware. What does it matter? This is nothing! Why, it’s practically my right as a senior professor!”

“I don’t think so,” Victor growled.

“You’d be correct, Victor.” Oylla moved away from the wall and produced, seemingly out of thin air, a pen and a length of parchment. She held them out to the bedraggled ap’Gravin and said, “Professor, I think I’ll need you to write a statement and list the names of every student whose privacy and security you violated.”

“I think not!” He pointedly looked away from the proffered writing utensils and focused his eyes somewhere near the base of the stairs to Victor’s right.

“So, what sort of summoning spell was your father doing with Boaegh? So far, you’ve told me very little I hadn’t figured out for myself.”

“Exactly as I said! Summoning relations of gifted students. I don’t know the details of the summoning rituals; I was never a part of them. I handed my father the samples on visits home, and that was that.”

“That was that?” Victor pressed. “A senior

professor at an esteemed magical school finds out his father is doing a ritual to summon people from around the universe to ‘research bloodlines’ and doesn’t get at all curious?” Victor held up his fingers in quotation marks as he spoke, though it seemed the gesture only served to confuse the professor. The sarcastic tone wasn’t lost on the man, though; he shifted uncomfortably.

“Fine, if you must know, the charlatan insisted he knew a way to steal bloodlines and, failing that, to siphon potency from powerful Energy users. It was laughable, though, those few he attempted to summon from this world resisted his efforts, and most of those summoned from off-world were so pitiful in their development that they were utterly useless. My father sent the slithering fool packing after a few months.” Ap’Gravin’s voice cracked, and he licked his lips, clearly suffering from a dry mouth. He’d recovered a bit from the ordeal Victor had put him through, but he was obviously still shaken.

“The spell, though, tell me about it. Could it have pulled the victims from the past?” He leaned closer but eased his attempts to intimidate; it seemed ap’Gravin was ready to talk.

“An intriguing question.” Ap’Gravin sighed and sat up a bit straighter, leaning back into the stone wall. He glanced at Oylla, at the parchment in her hand that she’d let fall to her thigh, and sighed again, more dramatically. “Oh, old lady’s bones! I’ll tell you what I know, but it isn’t much. My father hired a dozen Energy users to work with that snake. The only prerequisites to their hiring were a strong will, a large Energy pool, and a willingness to sign a binding contract, one that wouldn’t allow them to speak about his work. I only know that much because my father bragged to me about how easy it was to bend people to his bidding with a bit of treasure.”

“Go on.” Victor’s voice was calm, but his steady gaze and stony countenance made him appear implacable.

“So, he had more than two dozen of these pocket casters, essentially living Energy stones. Boaegh’s summon spell could have been potent, indeed, given the right ritual space, which, for the record, I never saw. Still, my father did talk about it; he’d spent a fortune on rare materials, one of which was a primal fire conduit. So, to answer your question, I’d say with that sort of ritualized effort involved, breaching time as well as space would have been possible.”

“Is that true, Oylla?” Valla asked from behind Victor.

“I’m not an expert on summoning rituals, but it sounds plausible. I don’t understand how summoning through time would work, however. What’s to stop me from summoning an earlier version of myself, thereby making it impossible for her to experience my life and, in the end, summon herself? Isn’t that a paradox?” Oylla lifted one hand to tap the pen against her chin, her eyes staring distantly into space.

“You are ignorant,” ap’Gravin snorted.

“Go on,” Victor growled, some of his earlier irritation entering his voice.

“When you alter a timeline in such a way, it creates another. In this timeline, Oylla, you weren’t summoned. In your hypothetical example, the earlier Oylla would cease to exist in her timeline, removed as though mysteriously murdered or lost. Life would go on without her, just as it would if you died now—in a matter of a few weeks, the school would hire a new professor, and all of your simpering, fawning students would forget you as they went on with their lives.”

“Lovely as always, Professor.” Oylla frowned, shook her head, and added, “Still, he is more expert in these matters than I. I suppose it makes sense with what I know of multiple universes. I do recall reading about timelines and their many branches in one obscure text or another.”

Victor stood up, shaking his head. He didn't feel like he'd gained much at all from ap'Gravin. A bunch of maybes and possibilities. He looked at the still-covering man and said, "Well, it looks like I'll never know exactly what happened unless maybe this guy's father was present for the summoning. Maybe he has the details of the spell, or he knows the names of some of the pendejos that helped Boaegh." He turned to Valla and added, "Unless we killed them all when we dealt with ap'Horrin. Anyway, the father's easy enough to find, huh? Pretty famous noble around Persi Gables?"

"My father? He owns much of that city and Gelica. Approach him at your peril." Ap'Gravin managed to sound proud, disgraced though he was.

"You can put him back in his cell. You want me to?" Victor leaned forward as if to grab the professor by the robes, but the man squirmed to the side and, on his hands and knees, scurried into his cell. Oylla smirked and closed the door behind him.

"I'm sorry you went to all that trouble," she gestured at the pool of drying blood near Victor's feet and the room in general as if to indicate the shadows that had once filled it, "for very little gain. At least I heard his confession about stealing students' blood; he'll be disgraced, and many powerful families will demand justice. Endangering students in such a way will be a black mark on his family's name for decades."

"Oh, I didn't gain much from him, but I gained plenty from my . . . theatrics. It's hard to explain, so I won't. Let's just say I'm sorry you had to see that; I know it was disgusting." Victor pulled a towel from one of his storage rings and worked on scrubbing his chin; he could feel the drying blood beginning to itch uncomfortably.

"I've seen worse. Tell me, Victor, how do you manipulate your size the way you do? Weren't you my height when you first came to my office?"

"He was," Valla said, stepping closer. "It's an uncanny ability of his, though, not one that can be taught. Sorry, Oylla."

Victor offered Valla a quick smile; he wasn't sure why she felt the need to speak for him—he knew better than to share Tes's magic—but he didn't mind. He concentrated for a moment, then cast the spell in question, feeding it the same amount of Energy as he had back in the inn. A moment later, he was no longer looking down at the professor but stood eye-to-eye with her. "That should keep me from banging my head on the lintels, eh?"

"If only, just," Oylla chuckled.

"Listen," Victor said, "I appreciate you standing by and helping me to bluff that guy when I threatened to take him out of here."

“He’s always been a bit of a thorn in my side. I was happy to play along. I’m glad to hear it was just a bluff, by the way.”

“Yeah, of course.” Victor shrugged and reached an arm around Valla’s shoulders. “I wouldn’t want to cause that kind of trouble for Valla and her family.”

“That’s good to hear . . .” Valla patted his wrist and smiled up at him.

“Things worked out well enough,” Oylla said, speaking almost simultaneously with Valla. She lowered her volume and trailed off a bit when she realized she was interrupting. Valla just shrugged and nodded to her, then the professor added, “Will there be anything else? I’m sure Jaxin-dak will send a report to the ap’Yensha household along with all the other alumni with news of ap’Gravin’s confession and subsequent punishment once the board metes it out.”

“What if he locks his memories away again and denies everything you say?” Victor asked.

“Little chance of that with the collar he’s wearing. He’d struggle to create a light, let alone practice advanced mind magic.”

“All right, then. Let’s go, Valla. I don’t know if I’ll ever learn more about how I was summoned, but I suppose we can ask the professor’s father if we ever find the time. Right now, we have an army we’re supposed to meet.”

“An army?” Oylla looked intrigued.

“Victor’s leading a conquest of the Untamed Marches with my household.”

“Truly? That’ll be the first expansion attempt in a very long time. More than my lifetime, for certain.” She turned back to Victor, her eyes narrowing with renewed interest. “Do you have a large force?”

“Well, Lady Rellia and Captain Lam have been gathering troops for months now. I think they were hoping to gather some two thousand, but I don’t have the latest numbers.” Victor looked down at Valla, wondering if she’d provide more details.

“Oh! Wait a moment,” Oylla said before Valla could chime in, “Rellia ap’Yensha, Perci Gables . . . now it’s falling into place!” She tapped her temple, “There’s been an army growing there all spring! Some of the students were talking about it when they came for the new term, thousands of tents out in the grasslands beyond the city’s walls.”

“That’s right. Victor’s being modest, as well.” Valla shifted out from under his arm and gave his shoulder a friendly slap. “Rellia has raised nearly a full legion—six thousand men and women ready to push into the Marches for glory.”

“Glory,” Victor said, smiling at the coincidence of her phrasing.

“Something funny?” Valla raised an eyebrow, taking another step back.

“I’ll tell you later. Anyway,” Victor turned to the tall, sparkling-eyed Shadeni and held out a hand, “thanks, Oylla-dak. I appreciate your patience with me.”

“I won’t say I wasn’t worried, on the verge of acting, honestly, when you filled the room with those cloying black shadows, but still,” she reached forward to grasp his hand, her grip surprisingly strong, “it was nice to meet you. Good luck with your conquest; I’m sure we’ll be hearing more about you and your escapades.”

Victor nodded, smiling, more relaxed than he thought he should be. He hadn’t really learned much from the disgraced professor, but he felt more at ease, more accomplished. As he turned to the stairs, gesturing for Valla to precede him, he wondered if his good mood had more to do with what he’d accomplished with his Core than anything involving ap’Gravin. As he followed Valla up, he turned his vision inward, admiring the four pulsing, throbbing spheres of his attunements—smoldering crimson rage, gleaming white-gold inspiration, glowering purple-black fear, and glittering golden glory. Victor was pleased with what he saw.

Valla quickly guided them to the main central hallway of the academy, and Victor moved to walk beside her as they turned toward the bright, sunlit exit. “I leveled when I ate that heart. I also gained three ranks in my Core and unlocked a new affinity.” He laughed when Valla rewarded him with the expected outrage.

“Seriously?” she cried, her voice rising with disbelief. “How does someone so reckless always come out on top?”

“In my defense, it was a close thing—that heart wanted to boost my fear affinity way past my others. I almost lost myself to it, but then I had the idea to use the extra Energy to create a fourth affinity.”

“How is that in your defense?”

“Well, I mean, it wasn’t just luck; I had to scramble to avoid some pretty hefty consequences for my reckless behavior. You see?”

“I see. So. You’re level fifty. Before you tell me about that, tell me about your new affinity.” Valla quickened her steps, moving around some slow, gossiping students, their ribboned, curly-haired heads pressed together as they whispered.

“Well,” Victor replied, hurrying after her, “that’s what I was grinning about back there. It’s glory. My new affinity is glory.”

“Glory? That’s an affinity?” Valla frowned but nodded as she thought it over. “I suppose it’s not much stranger than inspiration. In stories, Spirit Casters always have affinities like hate, fear, and love. One story I remember had a king of the

Urghat whose affinity was greed, and he drove his people to wild, terrible acts of war in pursuit of riches.”

“Glad I didn’t find an affinity like that . . .” Victor narrowed his eyes, remembering his hurried thoughts as he’d struggled to find his new affinity. He’d followed his emotions and hadn’t really had a say in the matter when the gray, unattuned orb began to fill with glory. What would he have done if it had started to fill with something like hate or greed?

Valla interrupted his dreary what-ifs, asking, “Well? What about your level? Fifty is quite a milestone!”

“I haven’t looked yet! Been busy talking to you, that creepy professor, and that not-so-creepy Oylla-dak.”

“She was something else, wasn’t she? I’ve never seen a Shadeni with eyes like that. Is it a bloodline, do you think?”

“Maybe,” Victor shrugged.

“Okay, so . . .” Valla almost stepped on a little girl rolling a bright red wooden ball over the cobbles. “Oh, dear!” She scooped the little Ghelli up and carried her to the sidewalk with her ball. “I almost stepped on you, sweetie. Be careful! What if I had been a roladii?”

“You don’t look like a roladii,” the girl replied sweetly, brushing a wave of curly hair out of her eyes to inspect Valla more carefully.

“Cheeky,” Valla laughed, holding out her ball. “Take this and be more careful!”

Victor watched the interaction with a stupid grin, happy to see something so innocent play out. “Better than talking about war, I guess. Shit,” he said as they started walking again, “that reminds me! Rellia really raised that many troops?”

“She and Lam. People are hungry for adventure and conquest. The Empire has stagnated for too long, the power locked up by too few. If we don’t go soon, Rellia fears our little army will be the seed of a true insurrection.”

“You called it a ‘legion.’ Is that a technical term? I mean, ‘cause you call the Empire’s army ‘the legion’ too.”

“The Ridonne Empire keeps a standing army of six thousand troops at the capital. That’s the main Legion, with a capital L. Of course, there are six other equally sized forces loyal to the Empire stationed in strategic locations. When people say ‘Legion,’ they’re talking about any of those armies.”

“So, a legion is six thousand soldiers?”

“That’s right. Each legion has ten cohorts led by a captain, and each cohort has six divisions led by lieutenants. Smaller units within each division are called

squads, and those are headed by sergeants. I'm sure Rellia and Lam have been busy trying to organize the troops in such a fashion."

"That's so weird." Victor scratched his head. "The System is translating some of those military offices and terms in a confusing manner to me; some of the words, like captain, sound like modern terms, I mean from my world, and then others, like legion and cohort, are straight out of ancient history."

"Yes," Valla nodded, guiding him past the busy square and toward the gatehouse where the main road intersected the wall. "That's how it works. The System is trying to best fit the meaning of the word I'm using with the word in your vocabulary. I'm not surprised they don't match your world's military terms; I mean all together."

He heard her words, but a new sight grabbed his attention as they rounded the corner. "Ah! So that's the airship!" Victor shaded his eyes and looked over a rooftop. He could just see the corner of the wall surrounding the academy grounds and a ship hanging in the air tethered by a series of long, thick cables to the crenelated tower. It looked pretty large, but the perspective of looking up from some distance away made it hard to judge. Still, he thought he saw figures moving on the deck, which gave the impression of a vessel similar in size to pirate ships he'd seen in movies and games.

It was shaped like a wooden galley, with high fore and aft decks and portholes along the sides, but the resemblance ended there. The sails were more like wings—huge silvery spans held taut by wooden beams jutting out from either side of the hull. Big circular, metallic rings lined the keel and emitted yellow, pulsing light. Were those what kept the craft aloft?

"Yes! There it is," Valla replied, "the Wind Dancer. Are you sure you want to get going right away? Shouldn't you explore your options for refining your Class?"

"I'll do it on the ship. How long will it take to get to Persi Gables?"

"Only two days on the airship, assuming nothing goes wrong." Valla pointed to a stone stairway leading up to the top of the wall next to the gate. "We can get up to the rampart there."

"Right. Let's get aboard, and then I'll check out my refinement options. You aren't interested in that, right? I'll just lock myself in my cabin and . . ." Valla turned and punched him hard in the shoulder, and Victor laughed, "Hey!"

"You better tell me about your refinements!"

"I was joking! Sheesh!" He winced, hamming it up, rubbing his shoulder as though she'd hurt him, and Valla chuckled, shaking her head. Together they mounted the steps and made their way over the ramparts toward the ship, and Victor was glad to be moving to the next phase of his adventure; he'd had enough of Fainhallow.