

Victor BK5: Ch38

Book 5: Chapter 38: The Heart to Win

Victor smashed into the Ridonne again, and this time the concussion shook the ground, sending up a shower of torn sod, soil, and stones as somehow the golden warrior deflected the impact away from himself. Victor found himself standing, face to face with the armored figure, Lifedrinker's edge caught on the blade of that wicked, jagged scimitar. The Ridonne's wings were spread wide, and he brought them forward with a crack and thrust with his arms, pushing Victor away and himself back, smirking at the titan's ineffectual charge.

Victor didn't let him gloat, didn't let him taunt him; instead, he dove forward, and, using everything he'd learned from Polo, everything he'd learned fighting on Zaafor, he began to hack at his foe, feinting, slashing, thrusting, even using his free fist and feet to strike out, forcing openings for his axe. This Ridonne was something else, though, something far beyond the two Victor had already fought. It felt almost like he'd been toying with Victor before; for now, he parried, dodged, and blocked his attacks, even using his damnable wings to deflect and rebuff Victor's blows.

Despite his skill, the red-winged giant of a man couldn't do much to harm Victor, either. They danced, and their blows rang through the night, and though the Ridonne snuck a few slashes and thrusts past Victor's guard, his armor ate them, or they left only superficial wounds that closed almost as soon as the blade slipped away. Victor snarled, his fury rising with each moment they fought, and the Ridonne similarly grew frustrated; it was clear he didn't enjoy the delay Victor was causing him. Did he desire to slaughter weaker foes so much? The idea further infuriated Victor.

"So," the Ridonne grunted after minutes of intense battle, stepping back after a fresh parry that had left Victor overextended. "I see why my lesser kin have summoned me. You are a worthy opponent, but in the Vizashath, I've battled worse. Come, flee this world. Leave me to my slaughter. As I grow accustomed to this flesh, my power only grows."

The golden man's words echoed in Victor's head as he circled him and, as his rage ran low and he struggled to keep enough in his pathways to stoke his Berserk, part of his brain puzzled over their meaning. He was growing accustomed to his flesh? Some "lesser kin" had summoned him? The Vizashath? Was this enormous, winged Ridonne from somewhere outside of Fanwath? If not for his dwindling Energy, specifically his rage, Victor wouldn't care, wouldn't listen to the mouthy bastard's words; he'd be content to work on him for hours, days if need be—it was excellent axe practice, after all!

As they stood apart, the Ridonne still blathering about Victor leaving him so he could get on with his "bloody work," Victor continued to circle him and glanced inward at his Core. His fear Energy was brimming, his rage nearly empty, his inspiration full, blazing bright, and his glory nearly half-gone; his banner, though a great boon, had been slowly eating it away as he continued to energize it past its normal duration. He quickly returned his focus to his foe, though that sickly, dim orb of rage weighed heavily on his mind; if his Berserk faded, he'd lose more than half his strength and speed. Worse, he'd also lose his enhanced healing.

He contemplated recasting his Inevitable Huntsman spell, but he didn't think he had enough rage to fuel it—justice required equal parts rage and fear woven with inspiration. Each second he deliberated, his furious red Energy ticked away, and he could see something in the Ridonne's eyes, something like sly cleverness, as he watched Victor circle him. Could he see his Energy dwindling? Victor knew others could do so; Tes could easily see the Energy in his Core. "Enough," Victor growled, and then he poured a massive torrent of fear-attuned Energy into his Wild Totem spell, summoning a pack of huge, nightmarish coyotes.

The golden warrior's eyes widened, and he backed up another step, glancing left to right, seeing the massive, pony-sized hounds coalescing out of pools of steaming, purple-black darkness. Their eyes glowered balefully like violet wisps in the depths of shadow, and they began to yip and whine as they circled Victor's foe. "So, enough testing our metal, then?" the Ridonne quipped, flicking his sword about. "I'd hoped to keep gathering my strength, but . . ." he choked off his words as Victor charged him again, using inspiration-attuned Energy.

He flashed over the ground in a cloud of bright, white mist, and as the Ridonne flooded his body with Energy, the evil-looking hounds leaped at him. They snapped at his legs and wide-flung wrists, and one of them even jumped toward his back, wrapping its razor-filled jaws around the edge of a crimson-feathered wing. The Ridonne made no effort to dodge the totems; he didn't even flinch from Victor's charge. Just as before, he somehow deflected the Energy of Victor's spell, and this time, rather than sending it into the ground, he let it explode outward in a ball of force that rolled away, with him at the epicenter. Victor was flung back by his own power, and his shadowy, nightmarish companions were ripped to shreds, reduced to tatters of shadow that rapidly faded to nothing.

Victor had seen the effects of his Energy charge on his foes, seen how it could ruin a lesser opponent like Chokodo-dak, and seen how it would send even an enemy like this Ridonne flying. For the first time, Victor felt it turned on him, and he didn't enjoy the experience. The concussion wracked his body, ruptured his ears, and burst the tiny vessels in his eyes and nose. As he staggered back, stunned and concussed by the force of his own power, the Ridonne gathered another great burst of his potent red-orange Energy and, from the palm of his outstretched left hand, fired a beam of it directly into Victor's chest.

Victor's Dragonsteel belt was spent, unable to absorb any more for the day, but his wyrm-scale armor, lovingly crafted by a true dragon, took the beam of Energy and mightily reduced it. Still, the lance of Energy bore down, pushing the stunned titan backward, slowly eating through the wyrm scales. As the Energy began to bleed through his armor, the agony of it rending his flesh and bone was like a smelling salt to Victor's concussed mind. He thrashed, trying to roll away from the beam, but the Ridonne tracked him with it, scoring it over his body, looking for a lethal spot to focus it upon.

Screaming with agony every time it bit through his armor or found a gap, digging furrows in his flesh, Victor rolled and dove, trying to somersault away, only to find unarmored parts of himself exposed to the beam. His arms, his legs, and even his neck felt that biting ray as he struggled to get out of it. Finally, in desperation, he bunched his legs and used Titanic Leap to escape the horrible, lancing Energy. He crashed to the earth a hundred yards distant from the devilish Ridonne, rolling

and crashing through empty tents, his body smoking, his armor steaming and ticking with the potent Energy it had absorbed.

Victor heard the Ridonne chuckling, and his lack of fury made him aware that his Berserk had faded as he fell. He was his natural size, his natural strength, and he was severely hurt. As he struggled to gather his jumbled thoughts, furiously contemplating the contents of his storage devices, trying to decide on a healing potion to consume, his mind's eye settled on something he'd set aside, something he'd been meaning to use next time he had a moment's break to concentrate on himself for a while.

Images ran through his mind, memories of racing through a vast wasteland, chasing after Tes, never quite catching her. He remembered how his rage would run low, and he'd start to lose his Berserk, and she'd say, "Aren't you hungry, titan-blood?" Victor summoned the wyrm heart from his storage ring, and, lying there, wrapped in the smoldering remnants of enemy tents, he contemplated eating it. It was enormous, even in his half-titan hands. "This will take too long," he grunted, agony surging with the effort; the beam had carved a black welt over his throat and lower jaw.

The pain served to focus his mind, and Victor cast Titanic Aspect, using his most plentiful Energy source, fear. It didn't seem to matter; the Energy didn't affect the spell. He simply surged in size, ripping the fabric of the tents shrouding his body, and making the heart look more like a snack than an impossible meal. "Witness my glory, Ancestors," he grunted, and then he took a massive bite of the heart. He crushed it between his teeth, savoring the hot, coppery juices as they exploded into his mouth. He swallowed great hunks of it, gulping them down, then bit another third of the morsel away and did the same.

Already he felt the effects—heat was exploding in his gut, coursing through him. Energy poured into his pathways like floodwaters down culverts, draining into his Core, pushing his different attunements to the edges of their ability to contain it. As his Core expanded, the Energy rolled out again, exploding through his pathways and then out of his body, great waves of it. As he choked down the last bite of the wyrm's heart, anyone looking at him would have thought he'd exploded. The fiery, powerful Energy of the heart had fully engulfed him, wrapped around him like a cocoon of smoldering magma.

From the outside, the Ridonne saw a great ball of fiery Energy roiling where Victor had fallen, roiling and pulsing, sending waves of that hot Energy outward, scorching the tents, grass, and the ground beneath, leaving a barren, dead, black circle nearly a hundred yards in diameter. The Ridonne had been stalking toward the downed titan, ready to finish his work with that blood-red scimitar, but when the first pulse of that volcanic Energy washed over him, he clapped his wings and, screaming with fury and pain, flew free of the area of destruction.

Victor wasn't aware of the Ridonne or his movements. Though draconic fire boiled in his pathways, flooded his body, and churned around him, he didn't burn. Nothing but pure, unadulterated pleasure coursed through him as his cells absorbed the Energy, his pathways simmered with it, and his mind drifted on currents of flame. He saw gigantic halls beneath the planetary surface, so deep down that only a great creature such as a wyrm or dragon could hope to visit them.

Pillars of basalt a mile high supported arched caverns through which mighty magma flows ran like rivers, and fungi forests stretched further than the eye could see. Wyrms coiled and writhed together in mating nests, screeching and roaring their enthusiasm. Some of the greater ones, the ancient elders of the hive, coiled around hoards of Energy-rich stones and metals high on the walls, their

private nests of tunnels guarded by their very bulk. Here were the greatest of their kind, the most potent wyrms of Zaafor, and no scaleless soft-skin had ever or could ever set foot in these storied halls.

Victor's mind's eye soared through one great cavern after another, where he saw countless wyrms of every age and type. He saw every kind of wyrm Zaafor had to offer in those depths, from mighty rock wyrms to potent magma wyrms. He saw hordes of wealth that would buy a nation on most worlds, wealth buried beneath mountains and mountains of rock, magma, and soil. These places weren't meant for his eyes, but he saw them, and he felt awe; why would any wyrm venture forth from their deep kingdom? The answer came to him as he watched a clutch of eggs hatching, watched the young wyrms fight for space and food, and saw them driven forth by the older wyrms, pushed out to make their future where they might.

As the vision began to fade and Victor came back to himself, he felt invigorated and powerful. He knew something was different about him, something new. He felt more vibrant than ever before; a power deep in his chest roiled and surged. Before he could take the time to investigate himself, though, he remembered the Ridonne and his frustrating battle with the red-winged bastard. Deep in his Core, his rage began to boil, trickling forth into his pathways.

Victor leaped to his feet, his experience with the wyrm heart forgotten; something nagged at the corner of his vision—System messages. He didn't have time to look just then; a pang in his head, a warning from his Battlefield Awareness, told him his troops were in jeopardy in more than one place. He scanned the area for the Ridonne, only to see a great blackened circle of which he was the center.

As the pang wracked his mind again, he turned toward the source, and his eyes lit up with a bright red bloom of foreign Energy. The Ridonne had left him; it had descended on his troops, the brave men and women who'd come to fight beside him to keep the Imperials at bay! Rage exploded from his Core, and Victor cast Iron Berserk. In the span of two heartbeats, he was engorged with power, and his vision dimmed to crimson as he used Titanic Leap to close the distance between himself and his embattled soldiers and friends.

As he soared through the air, he resummoned his Banner of the Champion, and bright, golden light lit up the night, throwing back the shadows and revealing the carnage of the battle that had been waging the entire time he'd been busy with the Ridonne and then with his strange vision of the depths of Zaafor. Bodies were strewn in the mud churned up by the five-hundred charging cavalry that had accompanied Victor. Bodies of Imperials were everywhere, dead roladii were scattered throughout, and his troops were in the center of a long, thin ring of Imperial soldiers, pressed into a tight square where they fought, shoulder to shoulder, against their foes.

Victor believed they could win; the Imperials, though encircling them, were fewer in number. How devastating his troops' charges must have been! He wanted to scream with pride and praise, but the Ridonne had come upon the scene, and his influence had turned the tide. As he descended toward the conflict, Victor saw dozens of his soldiers' bodies around the enormous golden figure. In a near panic, Victor scanned for Valla, for Lam, and he saw them. They stood with Polo before the Ridonne, backs pressed to their troops, ready to try to fight him off.

Victor squeezed Lifedrinker in his fist, and as he landed on the field twenty yards behind the Ridonne, his banner bathing everyone around in its influential light, he roared. His voice rumbled over the battlefield like never before. It was a palpable thing, that roar; it took hold of the air and shook it, vibrating the hearts and minds of those nearby. It drove courage into his troops and fear into the Imperials. The golden warrior spun, eyes wide with surprise. As Victor stalked toward him, he growled, "Chica, it's time for you to drink this pendejo."

The Ridonne bloomed with crimson Energy. He channeled it up into his outstretched hand and pointed it at Victor again. Victor changed his sovereign will boost from strength to agility, leaving the bonus on his vitality alone. Then, as he charged at the Ridonne, moving like an enraged grizzly, closing the distance in seconds, he cast Project Spirit and bathed the golden-clad warrior in a blanket of pure, potent fear. The Ridonne balked, his beam of red, terrible Energy sputtering as soon as it started, and then Victor was on him, Lifedrinker weaving a web of smoldering destruction.

As his troops backed away, some of them impacted by his brief burst of fear-attuned Energy, they watched the battle with wide eyes. Those on the edges of their formation stood their ground, watching the Imperials, but it was clear their will was broken; most of them were fleeing the conflict and had been ever since Victor had roared his challenge and dropped into the corpse-strewn field with his blazing banner. Those who stayed couldn't move; they were transfixed by fear and stunned by the battle between the two giant men.

Victor fought differently than before. His boost to agility was just what he needed, and more, the Ridonne looked taxed; whatever limit he suffered from, be it Energy or simply time, he was starting to feel it, and Victor was slipping Lifedrinker past his guard again and again. His first truly damaging blow caught the Ridonne's left wing as the warrior tried to bring it around to knock Victor off guard. Victor was just a touch too fast, though, and he brought Lifedrinker's smoldering edge down on the edge of that great appendage and cut it in half.

"Whoreson!" the golden man screamed, and then he went into a frenzy of hacks, charging his arm and sword with that vile red Energy. However, Victor wasn't one to be battered away with a furious outburst. He ducked his chin and waded into those sword strokes, and as the blade clanged against his helm, he hacked Lifedrinker again and again, into the winged warrior's side, from his shoulder to his ribs to his hip to his knee. At the end of the furious exchange of blows, Victor had a few rapidly healing gashes, but the Ridonne lay in the bloody mud, writhing. Victor had nearly severed one of his arms, smashed his armored plate into a concave shape, shattered his ribs, and cut his leg off at the knee.

The Ridonne lifted his scimitar in his one good hand and held it in front of his face as though to shield himself from a deathblow, and he gasped, "You've made an enemy here, fool, one who will haunt you through the worlds."

"I'm not scared of ghosts," Victor growled, and then, with all his might, he hacked Lifedrinker into the sword, and she drove that crimson blade down until it hit the Ridonne's chest, and she bit clean through it and the gold-plated armor,

and buried herself deep in the golden man's sternum. As the crimson scimitar fell away in two pieces, Lifedrinker bucked and pulsed, pulling herself deeper as thick rivulets of potent red Energy surged into her. The char fell away from her haft, and she seemed to expand, her axe head growing in mass. "That's it, chica; get a good drink." Victor's chest heaved as he gulped in deep breaths.

The Ridonne struggled for a while, blood spraying from his gasping, breathless mouth. He thrashed side to side, clawing at Lifedrinker with his one working arm, but as she drank his Energy and the crimson light faded from his eyes, the once-great winged warrior's thrashing grew listless, and he fell still. Suddenly the battlefield erupted with cheers and bright lights as his surviving soldiers witnessed his victory.

Victor was deaf to it all; the only voice he could hear was Valla's as she ran up to him, drenched in blood. Midnight clutched before her, dripping with gore, she shouted, "When he came, when he fell upon us, we thought you were dead!"

"Not a chance, beautiful, not a chance," Victor grinned, and if he wasn't fifteen feet tall, he might have tried to kiss her. "Take them." Victor gestured to the cheering troops. "They need us at the encampment." Having resolved this danger to his soldiers, Victor was very aware of another pang, another urge to go and help his embattled army.

"Are the Ridonne gone?" Valla asked as Lam and Polo started shouting orders.

"I think so. I think they brought this pendejo here somehow. I'll look for them afterward. Go! I'll catch up, but first, I want to cut something out of this asshole. As Lifedrinker finished her feast, Victor smashed his fist through the hole she'd made and began grasping through the hot insides of the Ridonne's chest, feeling for the warm, stiff organ that was his prize. He grinned, huge, bloody, and red-eyed, at Valla, and she nodded, then, stumbling in her haste, she joined her voice to those of Lam and Polo, exhorting their troops to action.

Victor wrapped his fingers around the muscular heart of the Ridonne, and, with squelching pops, he yanked it free, steaming into the night air. Saliva flooded his mouth, but Victor knew better than to try to savor his prize at that moment. He tucked it away into his storage ring and then turned to the north, where his army's encampment blazed with a thousand magical lights—they needed his help.