

Victor BK5: Ch39

Book 5: Chapter 39: Uneasy Allies

Victor stood and looked around, fury still bleeding into his vision, tinting the night a shade of crimson. He watched his troops charging down the slope, none but Valla mounted. Where had Uvu gone during the battle? Had he been slaying Imperials on his own? Victor marveled at the outstanding training the cat must have to come to her now, allowing her to mount for the return to camp. In all the time he'd spent with her, he'd never seen Valla whistle or call the cat; how had it known? "Something to ask her later," he grunted, but then something caught his attention. The corpse at his feet was moving!

"No way . . ." he said, lifting Lifedrinker for some more bloody work, but when he looked down, he realized it wasn't moving; it was shrinking. The corpse was shriveling in on itself, generating a stinky, gray, murky steam. Victor stepped back, waving a hand before his face, not wanting to inhale those gross vapors. When they faded, a smaller figure lay before him—it was the Ridonne he'd fought with during his nightmare rampage, the tall golden one. He didn't look so good anymore. His flesh was split, thin like paper, and covered in weird tattoos; only a shadow of its former golden luster remained. The man's face was frozen in a rictus of pain, and his golden eyes were dim, fogged over in a way that reminded Victor of cataracts.

As he stared at the corpse, he saw beads of shimmering purple Energy begin to pop up all over it, and he knew the System had decided there was enough of a lull in his fighting for him to reap his rewards. He stood tall, watching the tiny beads rapidly expand to fist-sized balls. Then they floated together, shimmering, pulsating, and coalescing into a stream that began to flow around him, whooshing in a corkscrew pattern around his gigantic body until it rose to his chest, where it plunged into him, flooding his pathways with raw, potent Energy. Victor arched his back and managed a mighty yawp before the euphoria overcame him. When the moment passed, and he stood there, fully renewed, fresh, and ready for battle, he looked at the many System messages vying for his attention.

*****Congratulations! Your absorption of an Elder Wyrms heart has granted you the seed of a Breath Core.*****

*****Breath Affinity Gained: Magma.*****

*****Resistance enhanced: Fire.*****

*****Breath Core: Your Quinametzin bloodline has allowed you to claim the rare and potent power of an elder wyrm. The seed of your Breath Core will germinate, growing in potency as you consume appropriate Energy sources. The Breath Core exists within you in conjunction with your Energy Core. It grants you an affinity for the wyrm's breath (magma.) As your**

Breath Core grows, so too will your resistance to (fire) and related elements. Further boons, based on your Breath Core's affinity (magma), will be granted as it matures.***

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 52 Battlemaster, gained 10 strength, 9 vitality, 4 agility, 4 dexterity, 3 will, and 3 intelligence.*****

“What the hell?” Victor grasped at his chest where, even now, he could feel the roiling, hot potential, the power he'd wondered at earlier. Despite his situation, standing in the middle of a battlefield, his troops in need, he couldn't help looking at the first page of his status sheet:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Advanced 7

Class:

Battlemaster - Epic

Level:

52

Breath Core:

Elder Seed - Base 1

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 5

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma 9.0

Breath Core Energy:

5/100

Energy Affinity:

Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1

Energy:

12568/12568

Strength:

240

Vitality:

353 (378)

Dexterity:

108

Agility:

131

Intelligence:

98

Will:

479

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness

“Holy shit,” he whispered, “I can fucking breathe fire?” Before he could examine himself further or attempt any mad experimentation, an almost crippling pang of urgency struck him. Victor jerked his head toward the encampment. He was needed in many places, and there wasn’t a clear priority.

He started jogging toward the distant camp, explosions of far-away magic blooming in his eyes. As he ran, he summoned Guapo with a torrent of glory-attuned Energy, and as the beast sprang from a glittering, golden pool, he swung himself onto the Mustang’s back. “Let’s go!” He leaned forward, grasped Guapo’s mane, and squeezed his knees. The spirit animal knew what he wanted, and, trailing his brilliant banner, he tore over the battlefield, quickly overtaking the surviving troops of his unit.

As his banner’s light fell on them, they cheered, their urgency to fight renewed, and Valla briefly paced him with her great cat. She called out, “Is something wrong?”

“Yeah! I think we’re losing the siege!” he shouted over his shoulder, and then Guapo really turned it on, and he streaked away from her. He’d cleared half the distance back to camp in something less than a minute, and he could see that the walls facing him weren’t exactly overwhelmed. In fact, the enemy troops were all but nonexistent, just a few scattered units here and there, but all of them seemed to be trying to work their way around the walls to the far side of the encampment.

Victor let his gaze lift and instantly saw where he was needed; the far side of the camp was swarming with activity. He couldn’t see exactly what was happening, thanks to all the magical attacks exploding in the night. Wild lightning strikes, bursts of flame, explosions of Energy in almost every imaginable color, and, most obscuring of all, clouds, geysers, and sheeting rains of

Energy-based liquids all combined to make an obfuscating haze. He contemplated riding around the perimeter to smash into the enemies on the far side but decided to charge straight for the wall; he could leap over it.

As he rode, the pangs in his head, urging him onward, came more and more frequently, and he began to wonder if he was too late. If he arrived to wade into the enemy troops, broke their spirit, and drove them out of the camp, what good would it do if half his army was dead? What if Rellia and Borrius were already gone? Had he taken too long with the Ridonne? How long had he lain in the cocoon of fire? Had it been very long? His unit had fought the Imperials left behind to a standstill while he'd absorbed the wyrm's heart—that couldn't have happened quickly . . . Victor shook his head, banishing the fruitless speculation, and leaned forward, urging Guapo to give it his all.

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The tower shook, rocking wildly, and Edeya cried out, dropping her spear and sliding to the railing, grasping the sturdy planks with both arms. Rellia danced nimbly over the boards, displaying her grace and unnatural agility as she grabbed Borrius's wrist in fingers like steel bands. "I've got you," she said, halting his tumble—he'd nearly gone over the top of the railing.

"Are they bringing it down?" he grunted, steadying himself on the wooden rail the same way as the lieutenant.

"I don't know. They've stopped—perhaps it was a warning."

"Perhaps," Borrius sighed. The three of them had killed dozens of Imperials trying to mount the tower. Many had come up the ladder, but quite a few had scaled the exterior. A few Ghelli had even flown up. Rellia was a match for them, though; her speed and deadly accuracy with her rapier made defending such a small space child's play, especially when it became clear the Imperials were, in fact, trying to take them alive. "Perhaps it's time to hand ourselves over . . ."

"I thought we were fighting to the death," Edeya gasped, wincing in pain as she knelt to recover her spear. At some point, she'd taken an arrow to her hip, the broken shaft still jutted forth, blood drizzling along it like a leaky keg tap.

"What's the point?" Borrius gasped, leaning forward to breathe better. Pinprick stars filled his vision, and he felt woozy. He gestured to the north, where the flickering lights had grown steadily closer over the last fifteen minutes of desperate fighting. "Perhaps we can stop them unleashing whatever that is on the troops. Perhaps we can prevent the slaughter of our entire army."

Rellia had been pacing around the still-shaking tower's perimeter, looking for the next assault, but when Borrius mentioned the lights in the sky, she stopped and stared. He watched her lean forward, watched her mouth fall agape, and then listened as she hissed, "Those are wings!"

“Your eyes are better than mine, but those don’t look like Ghelli.” He squinted, wishing, not for the first time, that he’d squandered some of his savings on racial advancements instead of buying favor in Tharcray. He supposed there was nothing to be done now, but if he could go back in time, he would certainly do things differently. What had his many years serving the Empire gotten him? It was a cold, hard truth that he hadn’t gained any consideration from the troops breaking down this tower.

“No,” Edeya said, also squinting into the night. “We’d see the motes falling down; such flight would require very advanced wings.”

Her words rang true. Even Lam couldn’t fly that far, and her wings gave off sparkling motes that showered the air around her. If she could soar like those supposed flyers to the north, Borrius could only imagine the light show.

A rough voice shouted up from beneath the ladder hole, interrupting their speculation, “Will you come alive? Our leaders wish to question you. Order your troops to surrender, and many may yet live!”

Rellia was still staring into the black night to the north, but Edeya ran her eyes around the camp, perhaps hoping for desperate salvation. Borrius stood up straight and cleared his throat, ready to talk to the man below, if for no other reason than to stall him. A gasp from Rellia halted the half-formed words in his throat, though, and she hoarsely whispered, “Ancestors . . . are we so cursed?”

“What?” Borrius lifted his shield, his arm numb from the exertion, and stared at the ladder hole, wondering what the Imperials had planned if he didn’t respond.

“They aren’t Ghelli. They’re Naghelli.” Rellia’s voice was hushed, full of dread, disbelief, and defeat.

“Impossible!” Borrius couldn’t help his scoffing tone. “They’re all dead—generations ago.”

“I’ve seen paintings. I’ve heard stories. I know what I’m seeing. Let me paint you a picture: ochre and red wings, lanky bodies, pale flesh, glittering dark mail. It’s like they’re flying out of the painting my grandfather had hanging in his reception hall. You know the one, Borrius!”

Scorn and disbelief began to war with dread at Rellia’s further description. “What dark deal have the Ridonne wrought? How could the Naghelli be here now? They’ll kill us all!” Borrius felt his heart hammering in his chest, nightmare stories running through his mind.

“I said, are you ready to talk? You don’t all need to die tonight!” the rough voice called again from the ladder.

“What have you fools done?” Borrius wailed, his mind going from defeat to utter despair. “The Naghelli? Where were you bastards hiding them all these years?”

“Wait,” Rellia said. “Wait, Borrius.” Her voice carried a note of something different, and she whirled on Edeya. “Did Victor not have an encounter with Naghelli on his way from the mines?”

“Aye, Lady. In a pocket realm—a dungeon. Only a handful, though, perhaps two score. They were in league with the Death Caster, Belikot.”

“That’s more than two score!” Borrius cried as the glowing ochre-stained wings loomed larger, and even he began to see the dark figures suspended between them.

“What if . . .” Rellia started to say, and then the winged figures began to burst into weird blurs, their wings leaving streaks in the air as they fell upon the Imperial army where they were pouring through the breached wall into the encampment. Wails of alarm and surprise warred with death screams from the mass of soldiers below. Borrius watched Rellia’s face, saw the shock there as she heard those cries—perhaps the Imperials, too, had assumed their Ridonne masters had sent the flyers to aid them. It seemed everyone had been wrong.

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When Victor leaped upon the southern wall of the encampment, the soldiers still there, stoically holding their positions, cheered for him, the light of hope igniting in their blood and soot-stained faces. Bodies were strewn everywhere, far more wearing the Imperial uniform than not. “What’s the story?” Victor boomed, towering over the soldiers, his banner blazing with light, bathing the wall and the ground around it in its brilliant glow. His Battlefield Awareness, and his gut, told him he needed to get to the far side of the camp where the light show signaled the wild combat still underway.

“They broke through at the northwest corner! Legate ap’Yensha called almost all the troops to defend there. Sir, flyers arrived a while ago, and everything went mad. Should we go? Should we hold the wall?” A lanky woman with bright yellow eyes staring out of her helmet’s visor shouted in a husky voice.

“Flyers?” Victor frowned and bent his legs, readying another leap. “Hold the wall,” he grunted, and then he was gone, exploding into the air, lifting Lifedrinker, fully healed, heavier, and with a haft better suited in size for his enormous hand. She vibrated with eagerness, ready for battle, and like a distant echo on the wind, she filled the air with a soprano warcry, her spirit hungry for conquest. Victor landed near the center of the encampment, and then he sprinted toward the battle, his banner throwing crazy shadows on the ground as he tore through the camp, passing tents, wagons, huddled non-combat personnel, animals, and wounded soldiers who’d fought their way free of the furious melee.

When he came upon the chaos of battle, he saw men and women fighting desperately and saw the tower where he knew his commanders were supposed to be standing. Then he saw them, the Naghelli, weaving among the Imperial forces like winds of death, cutting them apart with that

deadly, unnatural speed of theirs. When the light of his banner fell upon the chaos, ragged cheers rose from the throats of his troops. The Imperials surging through the breach in the wall, already faltering from the onslaught of the Naghelli, broke. They turned and, pursued by soldiers with hearts engorged by glory, fled the way they'd come.

Victor screamed his encouragement and bounded through the fighting, smashing Lifedrinker into Imperials as he passed them, ending death struggles and eliciting more hoarse cheers from blood-streaked faces. Victor took two bounding steps and then leaped past the tower toward the crumbled fortification, and when he came down, he stood among the fleeing Imperials. He roared, hacking Lifedrinker left and right, spraying hot red mist as she ripped through the enemy soldiers, and then, as if his banner, his presence, and his killing weren't enough, he conjured forth a rage-fueled bear totem, letting it lose a hundred paces down the earthen ramp the Imperials must have constructed.

The bear came into existence roaring and swinging, and the poor Imperials could do nothing but try to speed their already desperate flight. Victor's army, like him, was eager for the glory of combat and saw the fleeing enemies as nothing but encouragement. They charged after them, threw spells, and flung weapons, hacking them down as they ran. Victor's mind was filled with mad battle lust, driven so by rage, glory, and the idea that his army had almost been overwhelmed. He was still cognizant, however, still able to observe his surroundings, and he noted that the Naghelli didn't join him or his troops in the pursuit of the fleeing Imperials.

After a time, the slaughter ceased to feed his lust for glory, and Victor slowed. His gigantic figure and blazing standard were a beacon to his troops, and when they saw him give up the pursuit, saw him lower his smoldering axe and watch the scattered, overwhelmed Imperial remnants dashing into the darkness of the grasslands, utterly defeated, they gathered around him. They lifted their weapons and cheered, savoring the glory of victory. Victor spun to look back at the camp, saw his bear pacing around the base of the earthen ramp, saw more friendly troops and Naghelli atop the wall, and he lifted his axe and roared. The bear stood up on its hind legs and roared almost simultaneously, and the troops joined in, waving their weapons and screaming their lust for life and their pride in triumph.

At some point, while he'd been pursuing the fleeing Imperials, Valla, Lam, and Polo had arrived with their troops, and Victor could see Valla up there, at the top of the earthen ramp, sitting atop Uvu's back, facing a group of Naghelli. He figured it would probably be wise to join her and make sure he introduced Vellia to the commanders. "Oh, brother," he sighed, turning and stomping back toward the wall, gesturing for the soldiers to follow him. "Just what I needed, Vellia, Rellia, and Valla in the same room." Shaking his head, he decided he'd better enunciate his v's and r's very clearly.

He walked quickly, being fifteen feet tall, and soon he'd outpaced his soldiers, though they jogged to keep up as best they could. He strode up the earthen ramp, and as he came up to the level of the battered parapet, he saw that Valla, Rellia, and Borrius were standing across from a dozen Naghelli. He thought he saw Vellia near the center, but most of the attention was on the tall, lanky man at the center. He wore glittering black chainmail, an ornate platinum crown atop his white hair, and wielded two slender longswords, their blades dancing with silver-blue Energy.

The swordsman had a presence that drew Victor's eye, eclipsing the other Naghelli nearby, and he instantly knew who he was. He couldn't think of his name, but he remembered Vellia saying that her "faction" of the Naghelli had someone on their side, a man who was, according to her, the

greatest swordsman in the world. No one was speaking at the moment he walked up, but everyone looked tense. Whatever words he'd missed must not have been overly friendly.

Heads turned, and eyes focused on him, and he spotted Vellia standing to the swordsman's left, just a bit behind. She sketched an elegant curtsy when his eyes fell on her, and Victor couldn't help a grin spreading his lips.

"You know these Naghelli, Victor?" Rellia asked, breaking the silence.

"Well . . ." He paused and looked over the Naghelli on the wall, then further into the encampment where a great crowd of the winged cousins of the Ghelli clustered together. They held naked weapons and looked at the soldiers surrounding them with hostility in their dark, depthless black eyes. He knew they probably hadn't been close to anyone other than themselves in a very long time, and he hoped his army could keep their cool. "I know Vellia." He nodded to the beautiful woman with her black gossamer wings patterned with glowing orange Energy. "I probably fought a few of the others around here, but we should be good now. Thanks for helping with the Imperials."

"May I introduce our leader?" Vellia asked, stepping forward.

"Please," Victor said, and he'd cooled down sufficiently to be well aware of the frowns and scowls on the faces of the commanders and troops standing nearby. Inwardly he railed at himself for not taking the time to brief Rellia and the others on the possibility that the Naghelli might try to join them. Why had he not asked about them? Why hadn't he sought answers to his own questions about why they were so hated? He knew the answer was simple if not satisfying; he'd been busy with a lot of shit since the Ridonne showed up back near Persi Gables and hadn't thought about it.

"This is Kethelket," Vellia said, gesturing to the tall swordsman, "Prince of Zerevia, the greatest swordsman in this world and the elected leader of us," she gestured at the group of Naghelli standing on the wall, "the last of the Naghelli."