

Victor BK5: Ch40

Book 5: Chapter 40: Ancestors or Gods

“Kethelket, this is Victor, the one who freed us from Belikot.” Vellia bowed rather than curtsey this time, sweeping one arm low, dragging it over the rough, bloody boards of the battlements, and remaining that way, nearly folded over, for several seconds until Victor figured out she was waiting for him, or maybe anyone, to speak.

“Thanks, Vellia.” He was too large to properly shake any of their hands, too large even to get close without jostling people around, so he spoke to everyone, allowing his voice to carry, not trying to be quiet, “We just fought a hell of a battle, the Ridonne who led these attackers are dead or have fled. Our soldiers are tired, and no doubt your people are too. Let’s take some time to sort things out and see to the injured, and then we can all meet and discuss what’s next. Kethelket . . . am I saying that right?” Victor paused, waiting for the tall soldier to lock his deep black eyes on his and nod, then he continued, “Do your people mind setting up camp nearby? Until we’ve all,” he gestured at the thousands of soldiers standing around the wall on both sides, “had a chance to get comfortable with each other?”

He could see Rellia wanted to speak, that Borrius was chomping at the bit, his bruised, sweaty face giving away his every emotion, but Kethelket spoke before they did. He had a deep, smooth voice, and his words rolled off his tongue with something almost like a lilt. “Thank you, Victor. Thank you for the service you did for the world when you crushed that vile man, Belikot. I know seeing my kind is a shock for all the people here. I know the world has grown to revile us, that the history books have not been kind to us. I’m here to assure you; we seek to change our destiny, we seek redemption, and it was to that end that we joined your battle.” As his words wound down, he flicked his two long, slender swords, twirling them with a flourish and driving them home into scabbards, one over his shoulder and one at his hip.

“We will set up camp within sight of your walls,” Vellia said, stepping forward next to Kethelket. “We’re eager to meet with you and the leaders of this great army.”

Victor nodded, and then, almost silently, the Naghelli lifted into the air on their gossamer wings, the ones on the battlement and the others down below. Victor tried to count them, but it was hard as they all kept crossing in front of each other as they flew. He thought it had to be more than a hundred, though, perhaps hundreds. Hadn’t Vellia told him she and the thirty or so in Belikot’s weird dungeon were the last of their kind? The ochre and crimson glow of the Naghelli’s wings drifted through the night to the north, and then, maybe a mile from the camp, they settled to the ground.

As their flight came to an end, it was like a spell had been broken, and Uvu pierced the silence with a grumbling yawn. Without thinking, Victor reached over his titan-sized hand and rubbed the great

cat's head. He arched his neck and pressed his head into his palm, and Victor smiled, scratching the surprisingly soft fur.

"I think you have much to explain, Legate." Rellia didn't speak loudly, clearly not wanting to display any conflict in leadership in front of the troops. Victor was about to reply, but suddenly the night began to lighten, and he frowned. Had dawn come so soon? His answer came to him with the cheers of his soldiers. When he looked out over the battlefield, he saw millions of tiny golden motes drifting up from the bodies of the slain Imperials. All around the encampment, the motes gathered, casting an eerie golden glow on the walls that steadily brightened as more and more appeared.

In a matter of minutes, the motes began to flow together, pooling into bigger and bigger clumps, and then, as the soldiers cheered, yammered, and celebrated their continued existence, the motes burst into movement, drifting and flowing toward the soldiers. A sizeable portion plunged into Victor, but it was nothing compared to the influx he'd received after his battle with the Ridonne. He didn't level again, but he saw that many soldiers gathered near the broken wall, including Edeya, Rellia, and even Borrius, received substantial Energy torrents. They whooped with excitement, shouting about levels gained and skills improved.

The System's disbursement of post-battle Energy put an end to any chance for calm, quiet talks atop the wall; the soldiers went mad with celebration, healed, recharged, buoyed by victory; their cheers couldn't be contained. "Do we let them just party, or what?" Victor asked, leaning close to Rellia and Borrius.

"No. For a while, maybe half an hour, but discipline is paramount after a battle. We don't know what other threats lurk out there," Borrius replied.

"Exactly. You killed the Ridonne, Victor?" Rellia stepped closer so she could be heard over the din.

"I killed one. He was possessed by something that made him stronger than usual. Much, much stronger. I didn't see the other one. Either he ran away, or something else happened to him." Victor shrugged, and then he let his Iron Berserk and his banner fall away, resuming his usual half-titan size. "Are you guys all okay?"

"We are. Thanks to your dangerous friends. We really need to talk about them . . ." Rellia started to say, but Borrius cut her off.

"We do, but now's not the time. Let us convene a command council in an hour. Victor's home?"

"Very well." Rellia sighed and stretched, and for the first time, Victor saw just how ragged she looked. Despite the Energy she'd just received, she was covered in scabbed-over cuts and blood splatters. Her clothes were torn, and

her hair was disheveled. He wondered how long she'd had to fight to keep the Imperials from taking her and Borrius.

Valla slid down from Uvu's back and slapped his rump. "Go hunt!" The cat chuffed and pushed his big head into her, almost knocking her over, but then he turned and bounded down the ramp, disappearing into the night. "I'll follow you to your home, Victor."

"We'll join you soon." Borrius looked around, and when his eyes fell on Edeya, he said, "Lieutenant, you come with me. We'll get some messages out to the captains, establish some duty rotations and, hopefully, get a count on our casualties." The young Ghelli immediately straightened; she'd been fidgeting with a tear in her pants, rubbing at a wound that had mostly healed. She rushed to his side as the old commander began making his way around rubble, bodies, and broken, discarded weapons toward the nearest working stairway.

Rellia started following the old commander. "I'll go with him. You know, you can come with us, Victor, but I think it's going to be . . ."

"No, he and I have things we must discuss. Thank you, Legate." Valla pointedly used her mother's title.

"Very well. Until the command council, then."

Victor looked down at Valla. "Something up?"

"Many somethings. Can we please get out of this noise?" It was true; the troops were still being raucous, so Victor nodded and motioned for her to precede him. To his surprise, she turned, walked to the edge of the battlement, and dropped off, landing lightly on her feet, some twenty feet below on a mound of soil that had spilled through a breach in the wall. Victor followed her, amused at himself; the drop for him was nothing, and why should it be much for her? She probably had higher agility than he did and wasn't anywhere close to a base-level Ardeni.

They walked together toward the section of the camp where the command tents and travel homes were arranged. He might have dropped his banner and his titanic size, but he was still a striking, recognizable figure, so it wasn't a surprise that troops and support personnel called out to him all along the way. He had to pause many times to shake hands, clap shoulders, and commiserate with soldiers mourning a fallen comrade. Valla spoke comforting and encouraging words along with him. As they finally neared his travel home, a familiar voice called, "Victor, hold up!"

He turned to see Chandri running toward him and Valla. "Hey." He raised his hand, offering a wave and warm smile. She slid to a halt before him, and her face was a mosaic of emotions. He couldn't read it but thought he saw some relief, some anger, and something else . . .

"Hey?" She scowled as she repeated the word back to him. "That's what you have to say after that nightmare? We thought the night was lost! Our kin fell back from your wall when the Imperials broke through. We set up a perimeter

around the wagons, ready to fight to our last breath! Victor, we thought it was the end!”

“Shit.” Victor sighed, and while Valla watched with arched eyebrows, he tried to pull her into a hug. She resisted, of course, and as she pulled back, he said, “Listen, Chandri, I’m sorry. My fight with the Ridonne took longer than I’d hoped, and I guess the Imperials did better against our walls than Borrius expected. I should have come to you right away. I should meet with Tellen and Thayla . . .”

“They’re busy dealing with the clan. We lost forty-three hunters and have twice as many wounded.”

“Oh, man.” Victor felt the pit of his stomach drop out, imagining the loss the Shadeni had suffered. He lowered himself to a knee, still nearly able to look Chandri in the eye. He asked, “Are the army’s medics helping?”

“Yes. Of course.” She seemed less angry suddenly, and he wondered if it was the thought of all those dead clan folk.

“What about Deyni and Chala?”

“They’re fine. We kept them in the wagon with the youngest children throughout the battle. You can’t really hear the outside very well from in there.” She sniffed, her brow furrowed, and asked, “You killed the Imperial bastard who led the army?”

“One of them. I don’t know what happened to the other—probably crawling back to Tharcray with his tail between his legs.” Victor squeezed Chandri’s arms, wishing she’d let him pull her close.

“That’s good, then. Let the Empire fear us. Still, I wish you wouldn’t let him get away. What about those flying folk? Is it true they’re Naghelli? Are they your friends?”

“They’re . . . allies, at least. Yeah, they’re Naghelli. I think they’re the last of their kind. They’re going to join us in the conquest of the Marches, and with them along, I don’t think any other armies will be able to sneak up on us. Can you pass that along to Tellen and Thayla? Please tell them I want to see them as soon as they can break away.”

“I will, Victor.” Chandri pulled back, glanced at Valla, who’d been standing nearby quite patiently, and then turned back to Victor and grinned. “I shot many, many arrows into those Imperials! I gained a level!”

“Oh, shit! That’s what I like to hear, Chandri!” Her fierce grin was a welcome expression on her soot-stained face, and Victor smiled back as she began to jog toward the wagon enclosure.

Before she was gone from sight, she turned. “Speak to you soon, Ridonne Slayer!” Her teeth flashed as she called out the words, then she was gone, ducking between two tents.

“Your legend grows.” Valla smirked and turned back toward his jade travel home, and Victor followed, a look of consternation plain on his face. When he stepped into the foyer, she asked, “The library?”

“Uh, sure. What’s up?” He was growing increasingly leery about this conversation she wanted to have. Her mood was always difficult for him to read, but she was being even more curt or mysterious—he didn’t know how to phrase it—than usual. She didn’t reply until they were inside the library, and then she turned to him, leaning against the big map table.

“Tell me what happened to you when you fought the Ridonne. Why did he leave you to come and attack our unit?”

“Oh, is that all? He was a tough bastard.” Victor shrugged. “He had me down for a minute, there, so I ate my wyrm heart.”

“You were ‘down’ for a minute?” Her eyes opened in alarm. “Yet when you arrived, leaping into battle, you seemed to thrash him rather easily!”

“Well, I was fully recharged, and I think that dude was losing power the longer he stayed here, inside the Ridonne’s body. Like, I think it was a different . . . person in there. He kind of threatened me, said I’d made a powerful enemy or some bullshit. He said it while dying, so maybe take it with a grain of salt.” Victor shrugged again, trying to lift the mood with a sheepish smile.

Valla didn’t bite, though. She narrowed her eyes further. “What did the wyrm heart do to you?”

“Is something different about me?” Victor’s impulse was to turn around in a circle like he wanted her to see every angle, but he held still, just a half smile quirking up a corner of his mouth.

“Let me see.” Valla surprised him by stepping forward and taking one of his big hands in both of hers. Her fingers felt cool, and she squeezed his palm, massaging the meat of it between her fingers. “You’re hot, not just warm, despite the chill. It feels like I’m holding a cup of tea.”

“Well, ahem.” Victor cleared his throat and looked up at the ceiling for a minute, trying to choose his words. “When I ate the wyrm’s heart, I gained something from it. I have a Breath Core now, and it came with a new affinity.” He shrugged,

looking into Valla's wide eyes. "It's magma. I guess that wyrm we killed could breathe magma, but Lifedrinker never gave it a chance."

"You have a . . . Breath Core? I've never even heard of such a thing. You can . . . breathe magma?" She sounded incredulous, stunned, even, and she stopped squeezing his hand with her fingers, but she didn't let go.

"I don't know how it works. Also, it's just a 'seed,' whatever that means. The System said something about consuming the appropriate types of Energy to try to grow it."

"You're very surprising, Victor. I have to tell you something, and I want you to know it's not easy for me to say things like this. You remember what I said when we spoke about Tes? I still feel that way, but . . ." She broke off and looked down, almost pulling her hands away, but Victor closed his fist, trapping her fingers within.

"But?" he prompted, voice gentle, coaxing.

"But when the Ridonne arrived to attack our troops, I feared you'd lost. I feared you'd died, and my heart nearly burst with grief. I can't stand the idea of losing you. I was moments from throwing myself at him, from doing everything I could to kill him or die trying. I was intent on following you into the spirit realm!" Her words came out as almost a sob, and Victor's teasing smile fell off his face as he pulled her close, their wyrm-scale armors clicking and sliding against each other.

"Shit, Valla! I'm sorry! You know, I was pretty panic-stricken when I saw that asshole's magic going off near you guys. I never meant to let him get that close to you. Damn, though, I don't want you thinking like that." He lifted her chin so her big teal eyes looked into his and continued softly, "Hey, I'm serious. You know I'm going to risk my life over and over again. It's my nature. You know that by now, right? You have to wrap your head around the idea that I might lose someday. That doesn't mean your life's over!"

"I know," she sighed, leaning into him. "Ancestors, you're warm."

"Do you hate it?"

"No! It feels nice." She wormed her hand in between them and brushed it down the front of her armor, opening the scale hauberk so just her soft shirt pressed against him. "Open your armor."

Victor could only comply, and when he'd opened his vest, Valla pushed her arms inside the seam, spreading the sides apart and working her slender, muscular arms around his ribs. She buried her face in his chest and sighed heavily. "God, that feels good. Did I say that right? I hear you saying it all the time."

“God? Yeah. I mean, no, if you ask my abuelita. We’re not supposed to take his name in vain, but I think most people just accept that they’re being naughty and hope he forgives them. I mean, if they really believe.” He felt like he was babbling. It seemed like Valla had tuned him out as she pressed herself against him, absorbing his warmth and eliciting all sorts of responses from Victor’s body.

He tried to lean down, maybe to kiss the top of her head or sniff her hair, but it was too far with her so close, so he reached inside himself and cast Alter Self, reducing his size by a foot or so. Valla didn’t even flinch, but she used the reduction in his bulk to get a better grip on his torso with her arms. Chuckling, enjoying the affection, Victor did what he’d wanted to do earlier and kissed her head through her hair, noting the smell of ash, sweat, and, unsurprisingly, blood.

“Don’t sniff me,” she mumbled, face still buried in his chest.

“Maybe we should take a bath . . .” he tried, but her laughter cut him off.

“Oh, you’d like that! No, the others will be here soon enough. Let’s just be close for a while. Let’s just savor our victory and thank the ancestors or . . . gods and enjoy this small reprieve from the madness to come.”

“You think we’re in for some madness?” Victor asked, stroking her hair, pleased that she’d let it grow a bit and that it had come loose from her usual tight bindings.

“Undoubtedly. The others will soon be in here, hysterical about those Naghelli you apparently invited to join the campaign.” Suddenly she pushed back from him and looked up with narrowed eyes. “Tell me about that woman, Victor. The one who so blatantly flashed her cleavage your way.”

“Oh, God,” Victor sighed.