

## Victor BK5: Ch41

Book 5: Chapter 41: Death Tallies and Camaraderie

Victor tried to explain the Naghelli to Valla. He found himself going back to when he and Thayla had found the skull containing part of Belikot's spirit, and then, in frustration, he said, "I'm just going to have to explain all this again when the others get there!"

"True." Valla sighed and stretched, then she looked at Victor critically and let her eyes run down his form, stopping somewhere below his waist. Before he could get excited about her gaze, she said, "You should put on some different pants. Those are completely ruined."

He looked down and saw that his legs were mostly exposed, only threads holding together the remnants of the once fine, magical garment. "Yeah, I've been kinda busy." He shrugged and summoned a new pair out of his storage ring. While Valla perused the battle map, he pulled off his boots, which had held up significantly better, the magic within them slowly repairing the damage they'd suffered, and changed his pants. He'd just pulled his boots back on when he heard conversation coming from his foyer. "Here they come," he grunted, straightening up and moving to lean on the table near Valla.

"Well, you've some explaining to do," Rellia said by way of greeting, striding up to the table and standing across from Victor, storm clouds in her eyes.

"I . . ."

"What madness!" Borrius marched into the room behind the red-haired, crimson-eyed noblewoman. "What mad fool keeps an army of Naghelli lying secretly in reserve? I might have believed the Ridonne would do something so foolish, but my ally? The leader of my own legion? And now you want to add them to our ranks?"

"Yeah, um . . ."

"Excuse my impertinence, Tribune," Edeya stepped out of the shadows beyond the doorway, holding up a pointer finger toward Borrius, "but we'd be dead if not for those Naghelli. You and I, for certain."

"Remember your place, Lieutenant. Stand there," he pointed to the far wall, some five yards removed from the table, "and take your notes!"

"Easy, Borrius." Lam stepped up behind the much more diminutive Ghelli, resting a hand on Edeya's shoulder, holding the young woman in place even as she tried to follow Borrius's command. "I know we're all a little stressed. I no less than you; the Naghelli are cousins to my," she pulled Edeya close, "our people, after all."

"Any chance you could all chill out and let me explain?" Victor asked, trying to regulate his breathing. He felt himself, almost subconsciously, channeling some

inspiration-attuned Energy into his pathways and felt quite a lot better as it began to permeate his being. As the others grew quiet, he took a deep, steadying breath. “I’m not from Fanwath, obviously. Maybe that’s why I was willing to listen to Vellia. That’s the woman who introduced their leader, Kethelket, to us. It seems that you all have a deep fear of the Naghelli.”

“For good reason!” Rellia barked.

“It’s true.” Lam nodded to Rellia, signaling her support.

“This is madness!” Borrius growled again, leaning forward, his pale blue skin darkening, flushing angrily.

“You all won’t listen to Victor?” Valla’s voice was severe, cutting the air like a knife, and the implication was clear—were they all so willing to dismiss his words, to ignore his desire to speak? How far would they take their disobedience? Would they mutiny? As silence fell and everyone began to come to grips with the fact that Victor was, in fact, their leader, Victor found himself standing with everyone’s eyes on him, their mouths closed, demonstrating their willingness to listen, if nothing else.

“Thank you.” He released his hold on the edge of the table, straightening up, rolling his neck, and squaring his shoulders. With a deep inhalation through his nose, he began to speak again, “I listened to her after I killed the mage that had been ruling the remnants of her people. He was a left-over from a time when Fanwath was at war. More than it is now,” he said, nodding as memories came back to him. “Her people had sworn to serve him. Belikot was his name, and there was a time, not long ago, when speaking it aloud was dangerous.”

Victor let his words sink in, looking around, meeting each of the other commander’s eyes, and when they all remained respectfully silent, he continued, “Vellia didn’t use that as an excuse. I asked her point blank if she was just a victim, and she told me the truth: she and her people had done terrible things. They were vile, their souls darkened by their deeds. They joined Belikot for power, not because he forced them.” He saw the disgust twisting Borrius’s face and the way Rellia’s eyes had turned down, and her lips had begun to frown. He knew they were thinking similarly to how he once had when he’d thought he might have to slay all the Naghelli.

“Thank you for continuing to listen.” Victor leaned forward again, placing his hands on the table. “She told me that much changed during their exile, during the decades, centuries, maybe—I don’t remember—that they spent in the pocket realm with Belikot. Most of them began to regret their crimes and the things they’d done in the name of power. Most of them grew to resent Belikot, and though they felt his control was absolute, they began to loathe everything he wanted, the plans he made. She was stunned when I killed him. Stunned and

grateful. She swore that she and the faction led by Kethelket would work to atone for their sins.”

Rellia cleared her throat and held up a hand as though asking for permission to speak, but Victor said, “Just a minute. I have a bit more to say. I’m not naïve, or at least not as naïve as I used to be. I know those guys are dangerous. You saw how they fight. Every single one of them has some magic that makes them incredibly fast, and they’ve had a long, long time to practice with their weapons. That said, there’s no damn way that a hundred or two hundred, whatever it is, can threaten this army, not with me here.

“Finally, I want to say that I agree that we need to get some answers from them. First, we need to find out why there are so many of them. Vellia told me there were something like thirty. Secondly, we need to learn their intentions. What do they want with the Untamed Marches? What do they expect? Will they sign a contract the way our troops did? If so, would that make you all feel better?” Victor paused, looked at their faces again, and saw some lessening of the tension in Rellia’s brow and an almost thoughtful expression on Borrius’s face. Lam leaned on the table, resting her chin in her palms, and Victor couldn’t guess what was going through her head. He turned to Valla and said, “I’m done.”

“I will be greatly heartened if they’ll sign a contract,” Borrius said immediately.

“They could kill us all in our sleep.” Lam’s voice was soft, and Victor stared at her, willing her to look into his eyes, but she continued to stare, almost dreamily, at the map.

“I will listen to them.” Rellia turned to Victor. “Can we bring their leader here? We should settle this as soon as possible. We should be marching again by noon to ensure we don’t allow the opportunity for another Ridonne ambush.”

“Yeah. Let’s meet with Kethelket.” Victor turned to Lam. “What’s going on, Lam? They’re not going to kill us all in our sleep.”

“Tell that to the residents of Night Boughs.”

“Night Boughs? I haven’t heard of it . . .” Valla started to say, but Edeya spoke up from Lam’s shadow.

“She’s talking about a city from the old world—before we were formed into Fanwath. It’s an old Ghelli story about how a hundred Naghelli, moving like shadows of death, slit the throats of an entire city.”

“Is it true?” Valla’s eyes were wide with horror.

“My grandmother certainly thought so,” Edeya replied, resting a hand on Lam’s shoulder, just beneath one of her glittering wings.

“Well,” Victor said, “these Naghelli are not here to kill us all in our sleep! Why the hell would they help fight off the Imperials if they wanted us dead? Be honest: is there something about their bloodline that makes them evil? Is it possible there’s some prejudice involved here? I’m not saying they never did anything wrong, but don’t you think a war between factions might have led to some atrocities and the entire group might have gotten labeled evil? Maybe things written in your histories were . . . slanted.”

“I will admit to the possibility,” Rellia turned to Lam, taking up Victor’s cause, “that in times long past, there were Naghelli who weren’t reviled. Could not their losing role in a great conflict have driven the remainder of their kind to seek desperate bargains, to join with scoundrels like this Belikot fellow?”

“History from the old world is rather spotty. Tales of the Naghelli are mostly whispered at night from elders to children.” Lam sighed and straightened up, taking Edeya’s small, delicate hand in hers. “I’ll listen to this Kethelket fellow.”

“Good. Now, before we move on to that, we should talk about the Imperials and the Ridonne. I’m certain one is dead, but the other never showed his face.”

“Their army is broken. We slew more than half their number. The survivors are scattered and on the run. If we march with purpose and haste, there’s no possible way another of the Legions could be moved into a position that will threaten our progress into the Untamed Marches.” Borrius sounded sure and confident.

Still, Victor pressed him, “You’re certain of that?”

“Yes! These two Legions were the closest; one of them must have come all the way from Twilight Home, and the other was meant to be patrolling the frontier. We’ve destroyed a third of the Empire’s standing army! They need their remaining troops to keep the Free Cities in check and to hold back the hordes in the North. The Emperor will never let the Legion in Tharcray march forth. If he truly wants to beat us now, he’ll have to conscript new troops, taking some cohorts from the existing Legions as a backbone, but that would take months. Winter will be upon us before he can hope to march the new army against us. We’ll be deep in the Marches by the time spring rolls around. We may even have a base of operations built before they could hope to challenge us.”

“Meanwhile, our army will continue to grow in strength.” Lam locked eyes with Borrius, nodding in agreement.

“Exactly! So long as we continue to win, volunteers will continue to trickle in, and our troops will gain levels from the conquest. This legion will soon be a very

tough nut to crack!” Borrius’s eyes lit up with excitement as he spoke, and his fist pounded the table to emphasize his enthusiasm.

“So, we don’t need to worry about the Empire anymore?” Victor frowned, not so sure things could be that simple.

“Not in the near term, no. If we establish our own lands in the Marches, though, you can be assured that the Empire will view us as a threat. In a year or five or ten, I’m sure a very large army, indeed, may come against us.”

“Leaving them open to their other enemies.” Rellia shook her head. “I’ve thought about this a great deal, Borrius. If we aren’t hostile to them, I think the Ridonne will leave us be, especially if our power continues to grow. When we have a foothold and open some portals . . . you can imagine the influx. People grow weary of the Empire’s stagnation.”

“I wish that bastard Ridonne hadn’t gotten away,” Borrius growled. “I’m not sure which one of them ordered the attack on the Shadeni clan, but I hate to think one of the responsible parties has escaped.”

“I can catch him.” Victor looked down and locked eyes with Valla, nodding. “I should. I think it’s important that there be consequences for the leaders of this Empire when they attack us. We need to set a precedent. They need to learn that they’re not untouchable anymore.”

“I like that idea.” Borrius slammed his fist on the table again. Victor was enjoying seeing this side of the old man, fired up and ready for action. “Let’s get Kethelket in here, and then you should go, Victor. You should seek out that bastard. We’ll get the army sorted, get us ready march. Do you reckon it will take you long?”

“No, I don’t think so, Borrius.” Victor chuckled, then looked at Edeya. “Can you message Polo in the book? Have him go escort Kethelket here. I think he’s the least likely to be nervous about a job like that.”

“Yes sir,” Edeya said, suddenly very deferential. In a way, it made him sad. He felt like he’d gained her respect but that he’d begun to outgrow their friendship, that she’d forgotten that he was just the dummy from the mines who’d always had his foot in his mouth. He resolved to spend some time with her soon. Maybe they could go over the contents of that bag of jewelry she was supposed to be cataloging for him . . .

“Sirs,” Edeya said suddenly, looking up from the command book and interrupting his musings, “there are reports on casualties from the captains.”

“Well, let’s hear the bad news,” Borrius sighed.

“Casualties, including deaths and disabling injuries, are as follows: First Cohort: 70,” Edeya read the number clinically and clearly, but Victor could hear a bit of a quaver in her voice as she continued, “Second Cohort: 18 . . .”

“That’s better,” Rellia interrupted, “They were on the south wall, right?”

“Correct,” Borrius replied. “Continue, Lieutenant.”

“Third Cohort: 188.” The table grew quiet at the tally—Third Cohort had been stationed on the wall where the Imperials had breached. “Fourth Cohort: three.” Valla let out a pent-up breath, relief evident on her face. “Fifth Cohort: 31, Sixth Cohort: 21, Seventh Cohort: 94, Eighth Cohort: 62, Ninth Cohort: 357 . . .”

“Old Bones!” Borrius cried.

“They were at the breach as well. They must have taken the brunt.” Rellia shook her head, making a tsk sound with her tongue.

“Tenth Cohort: Nine.” Edeya closed her book, blinking rapidly.

“850,” Lam said.

“Aye,” Borrius agreed, “Close to a cohort and a half. Do we collapse one of them to bolster the numbers of the other nine? Or do we keep the ten and let those devils who lived serve as the backbone as we add new troops to their numbers?”

“It stands to reason that the survivors in the Ninth and the Third saw the most action and gained the most experience,” Valla said. “If you break them up, it will hurt their morale. I think you should keep the cohorts intact and add to them as we gain new troops. We’re due to pass by, what, two towns and half a dozen villages once we skirt Starfall Ridge and turn south?”

“That’s right,” Borrius nodded. “Don’t forget that we probably have a hundred troops with Farscribe Books, sharing their exploits with their families back home. Our victories will bring more and more adventurers and fortune seekers. The numbers will swell.”

“Did Polo reply to you, Edeya?” Victor interrupted the talk of casualties and troop counts.

“Oh, yes. He did right away.”

“Okay.” Victor looked around at the filthy, exhausted members of his command council. “I think we could all use a drink, huh? Maybe some refreshments? Let’s move the meeting to the big table, and I’ll get some stuff together.”

“I could kill for a stiff drink.” Borrius turned, oblivious to his poor choice of words.

“You did enough of that tonight already,” Rellia quipped, and, at first, Victor thought she was talking shit about his management of the troops. He opened his mouth to try to forestall a fight, but Edeya beat him to it.

“I was impressed with how you used that mace, Tribune Borrius! You saved me from several arrows, too.”

“Well, you were no slouch up there, Lieutenant. I saw you fighting with that arrow in your hip; that couldn’t have been easy!”

“Nothing some pliers and a little healing salve couldn’t fix, sir.” They continued their banter, exiting the library and walking toward the kitchen area. Victor inhaled deeply through his nose and blew it out, trying to send his tension with it.

When he and Valla were alone in the room, he turned to her and said, “I thought Rellia was giving him grief about his command of the troops!”

Valla winked at him. “I think she might have been. Luckily, he’s full of himself enough that it went right over his head.”

“Did he do badly?” Victor tried to keep his voice hushed.

“I know about as much as you, but I’ll try to get the gossip from my mother later.” She took hold of his arm above the elbow, and they started after the others. “I wish I could take this armor off, but I want it on when we speak to Kethelket.

“Yeah, I was thinking the same thing. I mean, he already saw me when I was titan-sized, but I still feel a lot more substantial with Tes’s armor on.”

“It truly is wonderous stuff, isn’t it?” Valla let go of him as they entered the dining and kitchen area, but she continued to speak, “I was struck so many times in the melee and when I charged with Uvu. Nothing got through these scales.”

Victor nodded, running his palms over the front of his armor, looking at it closely. “That big, winged bastard had some spells that got through it, but it stopped a lot of the damage—seems to have repaired itself just fine, too.”

“Are you going to cook?” Rellia asked, standing near the kitchen.

“I could, but I have a lot of hot food in my storage containers.”

“Probably for the best.” Rellia smirked and then moved to the table, sitting next to Lam.

“Was that an insult?” Victor asked the room, letting his eyes dart from one face to the next. Edeya held a hand over her mouth, avoiding his eyes. Lam looked at him directly and nodded, grinning slyly. Borrius grumbled something incomprehensible and started leafing through the command book he’d taken

from Edeya. “Hey, I’m trying, you know! I only have basic cooking, but I’ll never improve it without practice. I didn’t hear any complaints when I made steaks the other day . . .”

“Rather hard to ruin a steak.” Borrius didn’t even look up as he spoke.

Valla snorted and tugged at Victor’s arm. “Come on. Let’s pull out some hot dishes and set up some platters. That Naghelli will be here soon.”

“Victor,” Rellia called over her shoulder, “if you have any of that good cheb-cheb, I’d owe you dearly for a glass.”

“Me too, Victor!” Lam echoed.

Victor paused and looked back at the four sitting at the table. “Borrius?”

“Hmm?”

“What do you want to drink?”

“Wine,” he grumbled, flipping a page in the book. “Always wine for me, Legate.”

“Edeya?”

“Oh, um, am I allowed?”

“Of course!” Rellia laughed, “We fought a battle more difficult than most encounters I’ve seen in dungeons! We’re sisters in blood now, Edeya. If I’m drinking, you’re drinking.”

“In that case, Victor, do you have any mead? Something sweet like honey . . .”

“I’ve got a bunch of it.” He laughed and nudged Valla. “Come on; I know what you want.”

“The pale ale from Fainhallow?”

“Yep. It’s cold as ice, too.” As they worked to fill some platters with various types of food they’d purchased while in towns and cities, Victor could hear Edeya asking Rellia about her time in dungeons, and every so often, Lam would chime in, remarking about things she’d heard or experiences she’d had. It was nice to see them relaxing, he decided. He was glad none of them had died in the battle.

Of course, those thoughts reminded him of the death toll for the army, and he knew there were people in the camp who were mourning friends or even brothers and sisters. He knew there were people living far away who’d learn about a son or daughter who died in this battle, and his expression turned dark, a glower overtaking his face as he said, in a low, raspy growl, “Yeah. I’m going to have to go and find that piece of shit Ridonne who ran away.”

Valla set down the hot, cheese-and-herb-covered flatbread she was arranging and looked at him. He was afraid she would object, but she just nodded. “Yes. I suppose you are.”