

Victor BK5: Ch8

Book 5: Chapter 8: Counterbalance

Victor expanded, as he was wont to do, and ap'Gravin fell away from him, collapsing onto his rump, scrabbling toward the wall between the door to his cell and the next, closed one. Victor was thankful for his Iron Berserk upgrade, specifically his ability to keep his rage simmering in the background, because, truth be told, he was angry enough as it was. Something was wrong with his approach, his bullheaded charge for the answer to his burning question.

Ap'Gravin had been prepared, somehow resisting Victor, because if Victor were any judge of a person, he'd say the man was plenty frightened. He either didn't know the answer, or he was hiding it. Victor chose to believe the latter. That left him with a choice. De-escalate, start over and try to work his way to the answer in a roundabout way, or, more to his liking, escalate things further. If simple fear wasn't enough to crack the man, then perhaps a taste of Quinametzin-inspired madness would do the trick.

"Good," he growled, voice deep, grating and cracking off the walls of the circular stone room. "Grovel there. Sit and watch what I do with my foes." Victor glanced over his left shoulder to see Oylla watching him, small now, at least next to his hulking form. She had a strange, purple-red shimmer in her eyes, perhaps shielding herself from his aura now that she'd recovered from her earlier surprise. When their eyes met, he gave her a brief nod, trying to reassure her, then he reached into his storage ring and pulled out the night brute prince's heart.

Grinning madly at ap'Gravin, looking into his wide, haunted eyes, he lifted the heart from its container and tore into it, ripping a huge, bloody chunk away, chomping it, and swallowing it noisily. Victor had thought about this, briefly, sure, but he had thought about it. He didn't know what would happen when he ate this heart, but he figured it would be impressive, and the night brutes had been fear-attuned creatures; maybe the spectacle caused by eating the prince's heart would help convince ap'Gravin to take his questions more seriously.

Tes might not approve, or, Victor thought, swallowing another bloody chunk, she probably would. She'd probably laugh and give him that eager look she always had when she watched him doing something stupid, brave, insane, or brilliant. He almost forgot what he was doing, thinking about Tes like that; he started to picture her eyes, her smile, and hear her voice in his ears. He began to wonder about his slowly growing feelings for Valla and if it was really something he should pursue—hadn't he determined someday to be worthy of pursuing Tes?

"What in the name of the Old Father's bones is this madman doing?" ap'Gravin cried, pushing away from Victor, who was hunched in front of him, dripping great gobs of night brute blood onto the stones as he chomped and chewed the dark, steaming heart, kept fresh and hot in Tes's magical jar.

"He's a Quinametzin Titan, and you've driven him to this madness. Pray the heart sates his hunger," Valla said, and Victor could hear the amusement in her voice.

Victor took his third bite, chewed it, and tried to refocus on what he was doing. He squatted lower, holding the dripping, bloody organ before him, his great form hanging over ap'Gravin as he chewed. With each bite, he grunted and growled, letting the juices sluice off his chin to form a puddle that ran between his feet toward ap'Gravin's robes. His grin widened and grew more savage as he saw the man try to melt back into the stone wall.

Something was happening in his gut. It was starting to roil, and Victor felt strange, tingling lances shooting out into his torso, but nothing painful, nothing that might cause him to look away from the haunted professor's eyes. He was more than halfway through the enormous heart now, but his hunger had barely abated—something about eating hearts when he was in his titan form kept him ravenous.

“What's happening to him?” Oylla asked from the side, perhaps echoing ap'Gravin's unspoken question because he nodded frantically at her words. “He's exuding shadows . . .”

“Guard yourself,” Valla said, and this time her voice wasn't amused; Victor could hear her moving away up the steps. As he took another bite, perhaps the penultimate one, he was dimly aware that Oylla had stepped sideways into ap'Gravin's cell and had pulled the door halfway closed. Ap'Gravin, for his part, began to wail, writhing this way and that but going nowhere. How could he? Victor's giant form hung above him, madly grinning as the blood pooled on the stones and dark shadows began flowing from his flesh.

As Victor lifted the last morsel of the prince's heart to his mouth, chomped it with his mighty teeth, and swallowed it down, he thought he was losing consciousness for a moment because his vision grew darker on the edges. When he glanced around, tearing his eyes from the whimpering, cowering ap'Gravin, he saw the room was filling with tangible, wispy, clinging shadows that poured from his flesh. The effect reminded him of a smoke bomb; they were streaming thickly out of him, filling the area with their dark influence.

“Huh,” he grunted, lifting a hand to watch the dark ribbons wisp away from his skin, obscuring the man before him. Victor didn't worry about that; the last he'd seen, just a moment ago, ap'Gravin had been muttering some repetitive phrase, his eyes squeezed shut and his entire body trembling in a paroxysm of terror-fueled spiritual fervor. The wisps of dark, clinging Energy began to pack the space, what was left of it, anyway, after considering Victor's fifteen-foot bulk. He sat down, falling out of his squatting position, and kicked his legs out to either side of where he'd last seen ap'Gravin—no sense letting the worm wriggle away.

Perhaps it was his Berserk state, perhaps it was his increasingly Quinametzin mindset, but Victor wasn't particularly worried about what was happening, not yet. He'd anticipated the heart having a profound effect; he'd banked on it, in fact, expecting to not only improve himself but disturb the subject of his interrogation. Still, it was weird how quiet everything had become, how thick and heavy the darkness around him was. He reached out a hand to swipe at it, and that's when he realized he couldn't really feel his body anymore. Was he unconscious?

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Oylla-dak stepped back from the stairwell, away from the hulking giant and the strange, clinging shadows erupting from his form. She'd felt his aura, felt the weight of his power, and she wasn't sure she should try to intervene, at least not yet. She wasn't entirely sure she could stand against him, and even if she could, there would surely be collateral damage if things came to blows. No, Valla ap'Yensha was from a reputable clan, and Jaxin-dak had instructed her to be lenient with the human's request. She'd wait and see what happened here.

Something about how the giant had looked at her, nodding slightly, had instilled her with some confidence; he wasn't disregarding her admonishment about harming ap'Gravin. Whatever he was doing with the gruesome display of eating that monstrous heart and erupting with clinging shadows had something to do with the interrogation; he was setting a stage, trying to break the professor down. Oylla got the impression that Victor had been surprised when ap'Gravin had resisted his initial questioning but also that he was far from discouraged.

She reached through the partially closed door, feeling the wispy shadows beginning to compound on each other, filling the space. They clung to her like greasy, slick silk, sliding against her flesh as she pulled back, sending shivers through her skin and reminding her of when she was a child, fearful of things in the dark.

What sort of Energy was this? Was this giant a Mind Caster? No, this was different. It felt primal, emotional, even. A spirit caster, then. Yes, it made sense—when he'd grown to the size of a giant, she'd felt the heat of rage in his aura, felt as though it would be wise to vacate the area, a deep urge in the pit of her being to get away from him. Could she stop him if he went mad? If she hit him unawares with her most potent abyssal Energy blast, perhaps.

"Perhaps," she repeated softly, pulling her hand back as the stairwell filled with dark Energy. It continued to compound on itself, rapidly multiplying as the thick shadows piled up. She couldn't see the giant or ap'Gravin any longer, and, not wanting herself to be engulfed, she pulled the door shut. "What do I do now?" she asked, looking around the cell that had previously held the disgraced professor.

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Victor felt something happening at his Core. At first, he felt a surging, pulsing sensation that seemed similar to cultivating, similar to how it had felt when the Energy from other enemy hearts had replenished him. Something was different, though, and unable to see anything outside his eyes, he turned his vision inward. He could see the dark Energy in his pathways, flowing through them to his Core, but then he saw the problem he'd created for himself—the dark Energy was only feeding one aspect of his Core, his darkly throbbing and pulsing fear-attuned orb.

"Shit," he muttered or thought he did, but he couldn't hear himself. He tried to reach out with his will, tried to pull some of that Energy away from the fear-attuned orb and shove it into the smoldering red sphere of his rage. It moved with his will but slid off his rage-attuned orb, quickly flowing back to his fear affinity. "Shit," he repeated and tried again, this time trying to steer some of the Energy into his inspiration orb. Just as before, it moved in response to his will

but simply passed around the white-gold orb, flowing directly back into the now-surgingly globe of fear-attuned Energy.

Panic began to enter his mind, even stubborn as it was with the effects of Berserk and his bloodline. He'd hardly begun to process the dark Energy in the air around him, and his fear-attuned orb was rapidly swelling, becoming more prominent and denser than his other two affinities. Oynalla's words came back to him, her many warnings about never letting his fear affinity outweigh the others. Suddenly Tes's admonition about waiting until he was stronger before using the heart struck home; she'd meant his Core.

He tried to push the Energy out of his pathways, forgoing the boost it was trying to offer him, but it was impossible; the shadows might have manifested outside of him, but the heart was in his belly. No matter how he pushed and strained against it, it just slipped around, finding another opening and surging to his Core. His will was prodigious, though; he tried to form barriers at all his pathways, blocking the Energy from his Core. He held it for a while but then began to suffer bone-deep pain as though his very being was coming undone.

Fearing the worst, that he'd literally burst from the pressure, he eased his resistance and watched as the dark Energy streamed into his Core, further swelling his rapidly expanding fear affinity. It grew so much that its outer edge approached his other two orbs. If Victor had to guess, he'd say it was nearly double their density. "Pinche fucker," he groaned, "that heart was strong!"

What would happen to him if his fear affinity so badly outweighed the others? Oynalla had thought it would spell disaster for his mentality. Would it change his personality? Would he become ruled by fear or his desire to spread it? He thought back to when he'd first cast his Aspect of Terror spell and how he'd nearly gone wild, terrorizing the countryside, starting with Valla. No, he couldn't let that happen; he wouldn't become a Fear Caster.

If his other two affinities wouldn't absorb this dark Energy, then he'd have to think of another way, and only one thing came to mind. When he'd built his inspiration orb and his fear orb, he'd done it with Energy taken from his other affinities. First, he'd made his inspiration-attuned orb with the remnants of the shattering of his original rage-attuned Core. Then, he'd broken the attunement of some of his Energy from his inspiration and rage orbs and created his fear affinity. Hadn't Thunderbite said he had other affinities lurking within his spirit? Was it time to find another?

It was the only thing he could think of, so while he continued to think and speculate, Victor began to pull Energy from his three orbs. For every one part of rage and inspiration, he drew four parts of fear, and he began to wind them into a fourth ball, forming it in opposition to his fear orb. The Energy from the heart continued to flow into his fear-attuned orb, but he was draining it faster than it could grow. He pulled those threads of Energy down, wound them together, and with the considerable pressure of his will, he began to press and grind them, smashing them into each other, breaking their affinities.

Victor didn't have Thunderbite to tell him when to stop, to tell him when he'd taken exactly enough to create an orb that was a fourth of his total Energy, so he had to eyeball it. He watched the muddy orb he was forming start to pulse and lose its color, becoming a slowly growing globe of gray,

unattuned Energy. Still, it was smaller than the other three, and the fear-attuned orb was too large, so he continued pulling threads into the gray sphere, squeezing and pressing them until they took on that same gray hue.

He'd been at it for what seemed a very long time when the Energy from the prince's heart finally tapered off and ceased to feed his fear orb. Sighing with relief, Victor measured his new orb against the other three, and when it seemed they were in balance, he stopped pulling Energy from his three affinities. He stared at that new, gray globe and wondered what he was supposed to do now. He didn't have Thunderbite's wisdom. He couldn't even speak to Valla; he was oblivious to the world around him.

It seemed to him that his rage and fear were a more potent force on his mind than his inspiration. To him, his fear affinity was a negative influence, and his rage was sometimes negative and sometimes positive. He enjoyed his inspiration more than the other two and wished his affinity with it was stronger. He wished it could counteract those other two more easily. Wouldn't it be nice if he had another affinity he found to be positive, another affinity to act as a balance to his fear? What if he couldn't find an affinity at all? Would this Energy be lost? Would he ever wake from this weird state?

Victor tried to remember how Thunderbite had led him to his fear. He remembered answering questions about his actions, about his motivations, but it was all sort of a blur to him. He shook his head and decided to try another approach—he wanted something like inspiration, and he remembered how he'd found that. He'd been in one of the lowest points of his life, lost, discouraged, deep in Greatbone Mine, and left for dead by some thugs. He'd let his mind wander and thought of Lam, streaming in, wings glittering, and smashing the shit out of some monsters, saving Victor and inspiring him to act beyond what he'd felt was his quitting point.

“That felt good,” he said or tried to; again, no sound of his voice came to his ears. What else felt good in his life? His mind immediately went to Thayla and Deyni, how he loved how he'd helped them, how it felt good that he'd done the right thing for once. This led him to other thoughts like that. He remembered killing Jikrak and saving Tellen—how he'd rampaged all night long, celebrating his victory. That brought to mind the arena battles he'd been in, how it felt to hear the crowd's adulation, and how he loved to put on a display, despite his protestations. Even when he was angry at the people, at their bloodlust, he loved to hear them cheer, to feel the energy rolling off them.

Perhaps because that feeling of joy in victory was something that had been with him since he was just a kid, first learning to wrestle, Victor focused on it, on those moments of glory. He grasped the common thread among those brief, joyful triumphs in his life and tried to push that feeling into that slowly pulsing, flat gray orb of Energy at his Core. Almost as quickly as he remembered his fear affinity forming, the gray sphere flared with a sparkling golden luster, starting at the very center and then warmly populating the whole mass.

Victor sighed with relief as he saw and felt his new affinity; it might not be wholly good like inspiration, but it was certainly more positive, at least in his mind, than fear. He'd done it, kept his fear from growing out of control, and formed a new affinity all on his own. He smiled at that

warmly sparkling golden Energy, a stark counterpoint to his glowering, purple-black fear affinity—Glory.

Victor opened his eyes and wasn't surprised to see the shadows had gone and that he was once again able to see and act. Whatever state the prince's heart had put him in was gone now that he'd dealt with its Energy. He found he was no longer Berserk but was still seated in front of ap'Gravin, a leg on either side of him. The man had pulled his knees to his chest and buried his face in them, his dark robes completely obscuring his form. Victor decided to ignore him for a moment. Instead, he focused on the System messages that had appeared in his vision:

*****Congratulations! You have gained a new Feat: Born of Terror.*****

*****Born of Terror: You have a strong affinity for fear and have consumed the heart of one born of its dark cousin, terror. Your will attribute will be doubly effective when dealing with fear, terror, or their related affinities.*****

*****Congratulations! You have improved your Core and gained a new affinity: Glory.*****

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 50 Titanic Herald, gained 6 strength, 11 vitality, 6 dexterity, 6 agility, 6 intelligence, and 6 will.*****

*****Level 50 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Human Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 60. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.*****

“Well shit,” Victor said, pleased beyond his greatest expectations. Ap'Gravin looked up at him, his eyes bloodshot, streaks of moisture at their corners and on his cheeks. Victor grinned at him but held off speaking just yet. He wanted to look at the numbers:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Advanced 7

Class:

Titanic Herald - Legendary

Level:

50

Core:

Spirit Class - Advanced 5

Energy Affinity:

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

Energy:

11823/11823

Strength:

220

Vitality:

335 (369)

Dexterity:

100

Agility:

123

Intelligence:

92

Will:

473

“Not bad,” he said, chuckling.

“You’re a madman,” Ap’Gravin said, his voice cracking and quavering.

Victor rubbed at his chin and glanced to the left, where Oylla-dak had pulled the cell door open. He could hear Valla returning down the stairs, her boots scuffing gently against the stone. He turned back to ap’Gravin and said, “Not really. Anyway, tell me something, Professor. Are you ready to talk?”