

Victor BK5: Ch16

Book 5: Chapter 16: Command Council

Victor walked, surrounded by cheering, excited troops, toward the command structure. He was no longer the size of a titan, and his banner had faded away some time ago, disappearing in sparkling motes of golden Energy; he'd nearly drained his Core dry of glory and inspiration, and he didn't think rage or fear would serve his needs at the moment, so he'd let his spells drop and shouldered Lifedrinker, slowly making his way back to the center of the encampment. That said, he still felt like he towered over everyone around, even Lam, who'd landed to walk beside him.

The soldiers around him were abuzz, noisy, and eager, talking about the campaign, commenting on Victor's display, and speculating about when the order to march would come down. Even with their excitement and noise, he heard Lam clearly enough as she spoke up, "That was impressive, Victor. You've gained much strength since I saw you in the arena with Rellia."

"Thank you," Victor said, slowing his pace slightly so he could more easily return Lifedrinker to her harness.

"She's fully Heart Silver now, I see. What about the fire? How'd she learn that trick?"

Victor appreciated Lam referring to Lifedrinker as a person. "She drank the life out of an ancient wyrm, one with magma for blood. Well, not really magma, but it felt like it." Victor kept his eyes forward, his long legs easily devouring the distance. In minutes they'd be walking up to the central palisade, and he'd have more than Lam throwing questions at him.

"Did I do something to upset you, Victor?"

Her words startled him, and Victor slowed down, giving her more of his attention, meeting her emerald eyes. At the concern on her face, his steps faltered, and he stopped, turning to look at her squarely. "What do you mean?"

"You were, oh, I don't know, cold toward me earlier. When we met on the airship platform."

"Uh," Victor felt heat rising in the back of his neck, his old awkwardness returning so forcefully that he could almost forget that he'd just whipped six thousand soldiers into a frenzy, could almost forget that hundreds of soldiers were still following him and the captain, were, in fact forming a big circle around them, though standing a respectful distance away as they spoke. "God, Lam. No, I'm not mad at you! I'm just an awkward fucking guy when it comes to women I happen to idolize. It caught me off guard when you hugged me, and yeah, I had some paranoid thoughts, but really, I think I was just surprised that you'd done it. We're good, okay?"

Lam smiled, and Victor noticed a scar above the right corner of her mouth that formed a kind of extra dimple when she did it. She nodded and reached her wiry, tattooed right arm toward him, holding her hand out. Victor took it, wrapping his long, powerful fingers around hers, surprised at

their length and how she could grip his enormous palm. “I’m glad we’re good, Victor.” She released his hand and nodded. “Come now, let’s get to the command fort. I’ve got a million questions for you, and so do the others, I’m sure. Let’s start with that banner of yours—it’s amazing. It’ll be invaluable on the battlefield. How often can you create it?”

“Probably anytime I need to. It has a similar cooldown and Energy cost to my basic Berserk spell. We can talk about that and other things later, but first, Lam, tell me about your tattoos. I don’t see many Ghelli with marks like that.” In his mind, Victor thought he was being clever, changing the topic, and turning the focus back on Lam. Later, on reflection, he might think it was clumsy and might have sent the wrong signals to the captain, but she handled it well, nodding and holding up her left arm.

“Largely, they’re from my time in the Legion. From my time in Urwa ap’Challa’s cohort and later, after I was given my captaincy, from my cohort. Most of them are commemorations of deployments and battles. See, like this one,” she pointed to a scene depicted on the inside of her arm. It pictured a pile of skulls on a field littered with broken spears. In the background, a crooked stone tower stood before a mist-covered moon. “This is from my time with Urwa’s cohort. The battle of Rook Tower—not a pleasant memory. At this battle, our entire legion was wiped out, and the supporting legion lost half its troops rescuing survivors like me.”

“Shit,” Victor sighed, shaking his head. “Sorry for bringing it up.”

“It’s not your fault I carry my memories on my flesh. It’s not your fault one of the emperor’s cousins went mad, created an army of golems, and tried to usurp the throne.”

“Seriously?” Victor slowed again, not wanting to arrive at the palisade before finishing the topic with Lam. “Was he a Ridonne?”

“Oh yes. A Golemancer with a full-fledged Ridonne bloodline. I never laid eyes on him, but it was enough to see his creations. I’ll tell you about them sometime over some very strong alcohol.” Lam gestured ahead, “We’re here. Thanks for your interest, Victor.”

“Yeah, of course.” Victor stepped up to the wooden gateway where Valla, Rellia, Edeya, Polo, and four others, all Ardeni whom he didn’t recognize, waited.

Lam stepped ahead of him, taking a position by Rellia’s side and speaking into her ear, though not so quietly that Victor couldn’t hear, “Our troops are ready to follow him into the abyss.”

“Victor!” Edeya said, blushing and glancing quickly at Rellia and Lam, but unable to contain herself, “Those spells! Your aura! It was amazing. I’m so excited to be a part of this expedition with you!”

“At ease, Lieutenant,” Rellia sighed.

“Lieutenant? Nice one, Edeya,” Victor chuckled, holding out a fist nearly the size of the young Ghelli’s head. Edeya smiled at him but didn’t move to bump his knuckles, so Victor pulled it back with a sigh; Valla would have understood. At the thought, he looked at Valla, saw the wry grin on her face, saw how she stood close to Rellia, and wondered how things had gone with her mother while he’d been out rallying the troops.

“Victor, we have much to discuss. Would you like to join us in the map room?” Rellia asked, her voice terse, probably trying to head off any further small talk.

“Yeah, all right. Valla?”

“Right here,” Valla said, moving away from Rellia to stand at his side. Victor smiled at her. His intent had been to ask if she was coming along, but he liked how she was demonstrating her loyalty to him.

“This way.” Rellia turned and walked through the gateway, Lam close behind. Everyone else waited for Victor and Valla to pass through before following. The inside of the little palisade was much as Victor had imagined. A rough rampart lined the wall, stables for the officer’s mounts were on the right, a practice yard was on the left, and directly in front of the gate was a two-story wooden structure, rough but sturdy looking.

Seeing the stables brought Thistle to Victor’s mind, and he said, “Hey, I don’t suppose anyone got our mounts from that inn in Persi Gables, did they?”

Valla looked at him with amused eyes and said, “Some of us were in much closer contact with our Farscribe books. I believe our mounts are at Rellia’s estate.”

Rellia glanced over her shoulder, offered Victor a nod, and said, “I’ll have them brought over unless you two are planning a trip into the city?”

“It depends,” Victor replied. “Have you or Lam,” he spoke up so Lam would recognize he was including her, “managed to get any information about Olivia Bennet?”

Rellia held up her hand to forestall Lam’s response and said, “We have information. Let’s speak after we’ve handled some legion formalities and have a smaller group of ears.” With that, she walked up the steps and inside. Everyone followed her through a spacious, if rough, entry hall, then left, through a wide pair of double doors, and into a well-lit room featuring a huge table with a map at its center. It wasn’t as nice as the map in Rellia’s home back in Gelica, but it was plenty detailed to Victor’s eye.

“We’re roughing it a bit out here, but after the incident on your airship, we felt it wise to be with the troops. We have two airships, now that you’re back, scouting the area for any signs of aggression,” Lam said as the group filed in.

Rellia stood before the map table, and Victor remembered the last time he’d seen her doing so; she’d been missing a foot. His gaze fell to her shiny black boots, and when she caught him looking, he offered her a slight shrug. She cleared her throat and said, “Edeya and Darro, sit to the side and take notes, please.” Edeya, her little wings pulling close under Rellia’s scrutiny, hurried to the side of the room where a row of straight-backed wooden chairs lined the wall and sat down. One of the Ardeni Victor didn’t know joined her; a young man with bright red hair and eyes, wearing an unadorned uniform, much like Edeya’s.

“Can we start with introductions?” Victor asked, pulling one of the large wooden doors closed. Valla closed the other one, nudging Polo to move further into the room so he didn’t block the doorway. “I’ll start.” He turned to face everyone, those he knew and those he didn’t. “I’m Victor Sandoval. You all can call me Victor, but if we’re in front of the troops, be sure to use the appropriate title, which, I’m learning, is Legate. Yes?”

“That’s right, Victor.” Lam nodded her approval, but she looked to Rellia to introduce herself next. It seemed to Victor that Lam had taken on a subordinate role with Rellia, and he felt a little relieved to see it; he didn’t want to be caught in the middle of power struggles between those two.

“Oh, all of us, Victor?” Rellia frowned as he continued to stare at her. “Well, you all know me, but I’m Rellia ap’Yensha.”

“And your role with the army?” Victor pressed.

Rellia’s eyes narrowed, and she nodded to him, his heavy-handed game made clear, “I’m the noble sponsor of this legion, and, as for rank, I thought we could discuss that. I have several ideas.”

“Good, good,” Victor looked at Lam, raising one eyebrow.

“Lam of the Blue Deep, newly minted Lady of Gelica, Captain of the Imperial Legion, and hopeful Tribune of this fine fighting force.” She snapped a perfect salute, her fist and heels striking in unison, and stared directly into Victor’s eyes.

“I’m Valla ap’Yensha, Victor’s Tribune Primus.” Valla spoke quickly, stepping away from Victor’s side so she could face them all, filling the brief silence after Lam’s salute. Victor hadn’t heard the term ‘Tribune Primus’ before but could infer what it meant and didn’t disapprove. He’d told Valla back on the airship that he wanted her close, that he was relying upon her above all others. Looking back, her show of formality made more sense now. He nodded, face solemn, but that didn’t forestall an objection from one of the older men in the room.

“Excuse me, but is that true?” the Ardeni asked, his piercing yellow eyes looking up at Victor.

“It is. Introduce yourself before we speak further.” Victor turned the full focus of his glower on the man.

The white-haired, medal and ribbon-bedecked fellow swallowed noisily and cleared his throat. “I am Borrius ap’Gandro, former Legate of the Imperial Legion and a close friend of the ap’Yensha clan.”

“Ah,” Victor said, nodding. Now he saw why Borrius might be annoyed at Valla’s high rank. He dug deep for what he hoped were the right words, trying to imagine how Tes might smooth things over, “Thank you for bringing your experience to this army, Borrius. As you must know, however, some qualities are less tangible than experience. Some qualities that a Legate must heavily value—good judgment, bravery, loyalty, strong character, intelligence, grit, brilliance under pressure; I could go on, all day, really, about the fine qualities Tribune Primus Valla has shown me over the last few months, but I think I’ve made my point. I’m not saying you aren’t similarly endowed with fine qualities, sir, but at this late hour, I must consider what I know, not what I hope.”

“As you say, Legate,” Borrius said, snapping a salute, his face stony. “May I ask what rank you’ll bestow upon me?”

“Tribune, of course.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ahem,” Polo said, “Well, I’m Polo Vosh, and I’ve been filling the role of Captain, commander of the seventh cohort.”

Victor held out his hand for Polo to grasp, and as the two large men gripped each other, Victor grinned and said, “Captain, it is, but let’s not forget your other duty—sparring with your Legate.”

“Aye, sir, I’ve a trick or two with the axe I haven’t yet shared.”

Victor turned to the only man left to speak, a tall, well-muscled man wearing just a handful of medals on his uniform. He had a severe, hawkish expression with bright silver eyes that, as was the norm for Ardeni, matched his hair. Like Victor and Valla, he wore a weapon openly, a short, broad-bladed sword that hung from his belt in a gold and black scabbard. He was the only other person in the room with a weapon on display. Even Polo Vosh kept his axe in a dimensional container, so Victor wondered if this last member of their little group might have a conscious weapon.

“I am Ordus ap’Yensha, Rellia’s youngest, most handsome uncle.”

“Ugh,” Rellia said, then looked mortified that the sound had escaped her lips.

“Ordus?” Victor frowned, rubbing his chin. “I don’t think Rellia mentioned you to me. What capacity do you hope to fill in the army?”

“He’s been acting as captain of the newly formed tenth cohort,” Rellia supplied.

“Just so,” Ordus smiled, offering a rather sloppy salute, his fist thumping his chest long before his heels haphazardly clicked.

“Right. Good to meet you, Ordus.” Victor looked at Rellia and asked, “Shouldn’t there be eight other captains here?”

“Exactly right,” Rellia nodded. “I’m sorry, but, Ordus, you and Polo should head outside; ap’Jinna is gathering the captains to see to restoring some order to the camp in the wake of our Legate’s . . . enthusiasm.”

“Of course,” Ordus said, showing off a dazzling, sharp-toothed smile and sketching a half bow.

Polo snapped a much cleaner salute and turned to leave, but Victor called after him, “Polo, meet me in a few hours outside, huh? I need to work out some tension.”

“Will do, Victor.” With that, he and Ordus slipped out the door, closing it behind them.

Victor looked at Edeya, then over to the other young officer, and asked, “Do we need him? I’d like to speak frankly about a few things, Rellia.”

“Darro is one of mine. He’s fine, Victor.”

“If you’re sure. Um, not to be overly blunt or to offend anyone, but are we good?” He gestured around the room, “To speak openly, I mean.”

“As the only other person here with whom you’re unfamiliar,” Borrius said, “I can only assume you’re concerned about my loyalty. Yes?” When Victor didn’t reply, he pressed on, “Fear not. I stand with Rellia on all matters, even those concerning the fools in Tharcray who sent assassins your way.”

“I trust Borrius,” Rellia added.

“He’s clean,” Lam added. “I spent a pretty penny vetting him and a few others.”

“You what?” Borrius’s voice rose an octave with outrage.

“Relax,” Rellia said. “I encouraged her. It’s for the best, Borrius; my word alone wouldn’t suffice for Lam and Victor to feel comfortable speaking their minds otherwise.”

“Right. Well, let’s get down to the meat, then,” Victor said, voicing something that had been on his mind ever since Chokodo-dak told him who he was, “Is the Empire going to attack us?”

Several people spoke at once, Lam, Borrius, and Valla, but Rellia held up her hand in the din, and Victor focused on her as she said, “None of us know, but we should have a better idea soon. My people are interrogating Chokodo and that Imperial consort as we speak. I can tell you this much,

though, don't believe anything that man told you. Princes aren't known for being honest, and anything he said would likely have been engineered to avoid having the Ridonne pull the bones from his still-living body."

"So, no intelligence to share?" Valla asked.

"Not yet. Let's save it for our next meeting. Victor, might we talk about my placement in the ranks. It will be important as we deal with the troops, the nobility, our enemies, etcetera. I had hoped to operate as a co-Legate with you."

Victor frowned at Rellia's swift co-opt of the meeting, at her redirection of the discussion away from what he felt was the only truly important topic. Still, he indulged her, saying, "Rellia started this whole endeavor; the Writ of Conquest belongs to her family, and I wouldn't be here if not for her. I'm open to her idea, but what do you all say?"

"It seems fair." Borrius nodded to Rellia, and Victor mentally noted that he was likely a member of the campaign as a dependable vote for Rellia.

"I," Lam started to say, but then shook her head and started again, "Rellia has staked her entire future, and that of the family members she cares about, on this campaign. I've also poured a fortune into it, but only a fraction of what she's done. I won't object."

"Thank you, Lam," Rellia smiled at her almost sweetly, and Victor found himself suddenly mentally rearranging certain ideas he'd taken for granted. He'd thought Lam was mostly out for herself, that she didn't really like Rellia, and that she'd work to undermine the noble at every turn. It seemed either she'd come to trust and like Rellia, or she was playing a more subtle game than he'd anticipated.

"Valla?" Victor prodded.

"Me? Well, I'm biased, as you know. Rellia, being my mother, has my loyalty and support, but as your Tribune Primus, I must always act in your best interest. I believe it's important for the troops to have a clear line of command. Should you and Rellia ever disagree, what would they do? Would it result in military strife? No, just as there is a Tribune Primus, there must be a Legate Primus. Victor should take the top role, for without him, Rellia's family standing would have been diminished to the point that she couldn't have possibly mustered these troops. In any case, it's clear the troops would favor him."

Victor nodded. The idea sounded good to him; it gave Rellia legitimacy with the troops but kept things clean in terms of rank. "What do you say, Rellia? I'm happy to say, here, in front of all and for the record," he nodded to Edeya and Darro, "that I don't intend to make any major decisions without discussing matters with you and Lam. I understand I lack experience in some . . . arenas."

"Interesting choice of words." Rellia nodded, her lips quirking into a half smile. "My daughter is wise. It's to be expected, considering she sat at my knee and listened to councils much like this for a large part of her childhood. I will accept

the role of subordinate Legate with regard to military matters. On matters of diplomacy and budget, I must insist on an equal role. Can we draw up a contract to reflect those terms?"

"Yeah." Victor nodded. "I'm not sure how this usually works, but, just so we're clear, I'm not signing any contracts that require me to bind my Energy to it. I did that at Fainhallow for a short minute, and I wouldn't say I liked it. It feels too much like enslavement. I won't have any of you do it either. Not for this army."

"Well, Victor." Rellia shook her head with a baffled, rather condescending smile and said, "How else do you plan to guard against treason? Usually, everyone in the command structure signs Energy-bound oaths of fealty to the legion."

"Yeah, and who writes the contracts? Who keeps them? Who would be the responsible party? Me? 'Cause I'm at the top? I don't want people enslaved by magic to my cause!"

"You didn't say any of this at Fainhallow," Valla interjected.

"I've had time to think about it since then. It felt too much like when the mines owned me. I don't like the idea of people's free will being taken away!"

"Victor," this time it was Lam trying to get past his stubbornness, "we can phrase the contract in such a way that no freedoms are lost, other than those that might lead to our defeat. Something simple like, 'Before you may act in a way that you believe would be detrimental to the legion, you must resign your post.' That way, we'd at least have a bit of warning when a person was disgruntled or not intent on helping us secure our victory."

"So, what? We'd just imprison or kill anyone who resigns their post?"

"No! That could also be a part of the contract on the legion's side; we have to allow people to walk away from their post unharmed." Rellia seemed earnest, seemed like she wanted to find a compromise.

Victor sighed and held up his hands. "I'm not trying to be unreasonable. I hear you. Let me think about it, all right? I'd like to think our cause is worthy of loyalty, that we are worthy of loyalty. I know that's naïve, but when I preach a certain philosophy, I feel I should practice it."

"It's not naïve," Valla said. "It's admirable." Victor looked at her, then at Lam and Rellia, and as he saw the concern and willingness to listen in their expressions, he sighed and nodded.

"We can find a compromise. Thank you for working with me. Now, let's talk about when you want to march."