

Victor BK5: Ch27

Book 5: Chapter 27: Reunion

The next day, in the late afternoon, the legion set up camp a few miles west of the Shadeni hunter clan's winter and spring campground, and Victor, Polo, Rellia, and Valla rode forth with the hopes of meeting with Thayla, Tellen and all the other people Victor had been missing rather dearly. Rellia had wanted to bring Borrius, but the one-time legate insisted they'd have a warmer reception without him—his reputation among the Shadeni hunter clans wasn't born of friendship. As for Lam, she had insisted on staying with the army; too many leaders away might encourage a lapse in discipline.

They'd only cleared the army's encampment by half a mile when figures emerged from the grass, and Victor laughed, spurring his Mustang toward them. The others followed, though slowly, likely to give him a chance to ensure they weren't hostile. "Hi!" he shouted as he rode up, for lack of a better greeting.

"Is that you, Victor? Where'd you get that fiery-eyed steed?"

"Forget that one, Victor. How'd you grow so much?"

Victor laughed, slowing his mount near the two scouts—hunters from Tellen's band, ones he'd rescued from a monster high in the hills to the east. "Visha! Kolo! It's great to see you again!" Victor dropped from his horse's back and approached them as they shifted the tips of their spears upright. He spread his arms as if to embrace them, but Kolo, wary as always, backed up a step.

"You look like Victor. You sound like Victor . . . you're different, though. You know my name . . ."

"I sure do, Kolo. I remember finding you in a cursed keep in a blood-soaked ravine. I remember killing a real asshole to get you and the others in Tellen's party to safety . . ."

"It's him, Kolo," Visha said, stepping forward to reach up, trying to clap Victor on the shoulder. "Who else would call that devil an asshole?"

"Will you tell us about the changes in you?" Kolo asked, also reaching out to grasp Victor's other arm in his wiry fingers. "You're enormous. Ah! Look at his axe, Visha!"

"She's pretty, no?" Victor winked, then added, "I'll tell you many stories, but first, we should get to the clan. I need to speak with Thayla and Tellen."

"Yes, you should!" Kolo whistled shrilly, and out of the tall grass to the south, a small, sturdy roladii trotted forward. "I'll ride with them, Visha."

"Of course, you will," Visha sighed.

"It's my turn!" Kolo cried in mock outrage.

Victor motioned for Polo and the ladies to ride closer and said, "These are my companions."

“Aye.” Kolo eyed Valla’s mount. “I remember the great cat.”

Rellia, riding her beautiful white vidanii, laughed. “Only around my daughter would my poor Tigala escape notice and praise.” She gently stroked the animal’s neck, and it bleated, making a high-pitched sound almost like a honk—Victor had never heard Thistle make such a noise. When she looked up, she eyed Victor and Guapo. “I suppose she’s a bit outshone by that great beast of yours, too.”

“How do you think Hob feels?” Polo asked, slapping his big hand on the thick neck of his stocky bull roladii.

Victor laughed, slung himself onto his Mustang’s back, and said, “Who wants to race?” Everyone ignored the questions; they’d all seen him tearing across the plains over the last couple of weeks and knew full well he was being facetious. Shrugging, he started forward, waving to Visha as he rode past.

Kolo rode up beside him. “What news? We saw your great army. Been watching since you crossed the old bridge.”

“Should have said hello.” Victor chuckled. “I have much to share, but I need to speak to Tellen first. Sorry, Kolo.”

“I understand—Ban-tok business.”

“Right. At least for now.”

“Is that mount as fast as he looks? What beautiful eyes! Why do his hoofs spark with magic when he walks? Is he a creature from this world?”

“He’s a spirit animal.” Victor patted the Mustang’s muscular shoulder. “Aren’t you, guapo?”

“Is that his name? Handsome? Fitting . . .”

“Yes, it is,” Valla answered before Victor could respond.

“Well, I guess so.” Victor whooped as the Mustang started prancing, lifting his feet high and arching his neck, turning sideways so his eye could flash at everyone, especially Valla. Victor continued to laugh, saying, “He likes you, Valla! I think he might be in love.”

“Oh, Ancestors!” Valla cried, urging Uvu to turn and put a bit of distance between herself and Victor.

“Chandri’s going to love him,” Kolo said, chuckling along with Victor, admiring the huge, prancing mount.

“Is she well?”

“Oh aye, busy, busy with the young hunters. Since your little one, Deyni, came, she’s taken on a teacher role. A dozen youngsters hunt with her.”

“My little one . . .” Victor started to protest but decided it wasn’t worth it. He kind of liked the idea that he shared some responsibility for Deyni. When he saw the questioning look on Polo’s face, Victor spent some time describing Deyni and talking about how he’d left Starlight for her, filling him in on a bit of his backstory with the clan, and by the time he paused to take a breath and scan the horizon, he saw the low, earthen longhouses arranged in a circle—the clan’s campground. More tents were standing in the center of the clearing near the well, and the paddock for the roladii seemed more extensive, but other than that, it was much the way Victor remembered it.

They didn’t have to wonder where Tellen and Thayla might be; a crowd of Shadeni had gathered near the campground’s perimeter, and Victor saw Chandri, Chala, Tellen, and Thayla all standing together near the front. Deyni sat atop Tellen’s shoulders, and Victor felt a foolish pang of jealousy before he wrestled it away and let his joy at seeing them all color his expression.

He didn’t ask him to, but Guapo broke into a gallop, leaving the others behind, racing over the distance. He came to a sliding stop before the crowd, whinnying proudly and prancing before them. Victor saw the delight in Chandri’s eyes, and once again, his stupid heart ached, remembering holding her hand and kissing her under the starlight. He tore his gaze away from her magenta irises and the sly smile on her black-painted lips, instead focusing on Deyni. He held out a hand and said, “Hand me up that little huntress, Tellen!”

“Are you sure?” Tellen asked, laughing as Deyni began to kick her feet, urging him to hurry.

“Come on, little dragon,” Victor laughed, grabbing her wrist. She weighed almost nothing, and he swung her up before himself. “Are you ready to fly like the wind?”

“Victor! Yes!” Her little hands were like clamps on the forearm he held in front of her, keeping her close as Guapo began to trot around in a big circle.

“Don’t steal my daughter!” Thayla called out, but there was laughter in her voice.

“Not to worry,” Victor replied, making eye contact with her and Tellen when Guapo finished his circle. “We’ll be right back!” Then, answering an unspoken command, Guapo reared up on his hind legs, whinnying again. When his front hooves fell, they sparked with glorious Energy, and then he was off, galloping over the plains, his back rolling with his gait but smoother than any truly physical animal could run. Victor ripped past the rest of his party, and all the while, Deyni screamed her pleasure, digging her fingers into his wrist, her dark, braided hair whipping in the wind, tickling Victor’s neck and chin.

They ran for several minutes, and then Victor urged Guapo to turn. The horse seemed to challenge himself not to let Valla and the others reach the campground ahead of him, kicking into a gear Victor had yet to experience—the grass became a blue-green blur, and the wind drowned out Deyni’s yips and cries of excitement. Seconds later, they slid to a stop, once again before the gathered Shadeni, and Guapo pranced some more before Victor slapped his shoulder and calmed him down with his will. “You big, goofy show-off!” he laughed, turning to see that the rest of his party had ridden up behind the wild Mustang.

Deyni was dumbstruck, unable to speak, but giggles wouldn’t stop welling out of her as she leaned forward on Guapo’s neck, hugging her arms around him and rubbing her cheek in his thick, rich mane. “Do you like him?” Victor asked.

“I love him, Victor! I’ve never seen such an animal!”

“Come on, young one.” Chandri stepped forward and reached up toward Victor, her hands barely coming to the top of Guapo’s shoulder. Victor lifted Deyni and handed her down, then hopped off the great steed, a little wobbly on his feet after moving so fast.

“He’s even faster than I thought,” Valla said, giving Uvu a slap on the rump, sending him off to hunt in the plains. “No roladii!” she called after him. The big cat grumbled, not quite a growl, but definitely not a happy sound, then he was gone, slipping into the grass. After that, Victor couldn’t have recounted precisely what happened because he was overwhelmed with hugs, questions, comments about his size, his mount, his armor, his axe, and question after question about where he’d been and why he’d returned with an army.

Victor savored the attention, despite knowing that Rellia, Valla, and Polo were standing off to the side, somewhat awkwardly, probably waiting for him to wrap things up so they could get down to business. It was Thayla, though, who brought an end to the impromptu gathering. She stood off to the side, still flushed with mussed hair after having been engulfed in a Victor-sized bear hug, and yelled, “That’s enough for now! We’ll feast tonight, but now we must meet with these esteemed guests. Leave your Ban-tok and me to do business!”

Victor was impressed by how quickly the crowd dispersed. It seemed Thayla was more than Tellen’s new mate; the clan respected her. When everyone had left, Chandri, Chala, and Deyni last, quite reluctantly, and not without securing a promise for some one-on-one time with Victor, Tellen turned to him. “You never fail to impress. Will you introduce your companions?”

“Yeah, of course.” Victor cleared his throat, unable to banish the smile that had already made his cheeks ache. “This is Rellia ap’Yensha, a great woman from Gelica and the chief sponsor of our campaign into the Untamed Marches. Beside her is my dear friend, companion, and one of the leaders of our army, Rellia’s daughter, Valla ap’Yensha. And this big man, this big, fuzzy man with the friendly face, is Polo Vosh. He’s a great warrior and an even better instructor in the ways of the axe.” Victor slapped Polo on the back and draped his arm over

his shoulders, making his use of the word “big” to describe the Vodkin something of a joke; Victor was a solid foot taller.

“You’re going to regret those words next time we spar, pup,” Polo grumbled.

“Heh, I’m sure I will.” Victor squeezed his shoulder, then he turned to Thayla and Tellen and said, “This is Tellen, the Ban-tok of this clan, and Thayla.” Victor released Polo and, reaching into his Core, cast Shape Self, reducing his size to something closer to what he’d been the last time he’d seen Thayla. He stepped toward her, and by the time he grabbed her into a side hug, the spell had finished its magic. “She’s also ruling this clan alongside Tellen, but I don’t know her proper title.”

“She’s our Clan Mother, Victor. She’s working terribly hard to fill the hole Oynalla left behind.”

“I’m honored,” Rellia said, stepping forward and ducking her head, reaching for Thayla’s hand with hers.

Thayla, to Victor’s surprise, didn’t reach for Rellia’s in return. She stared at her coolly. Her dark magenta eyes narrowed, and she said, “I’ve met you in passing. I was at the estate of that magistrate . . . his name eludes me. The estate where you tried to kill Victor.”

“Ah.” Rellia managed to maintain her smile, but she pulled back her hand and looked imploringly at Victor. “We’ve put that behind us, though, haven’t we, Victor?”

“Yes. Come on, Thayla. We’ve been over this . . .”

“Well,” Thayla’s stony countenance crumbled as she looked into his eyes, “if Victor can forgive you, then I will try to put the memory behind me. Shall we go inside? If my brief discussion with Victor earlier in the month was any indication, I’d say we’ve much to discuss.”

“Yes. We’ve cleared the dining hall of our lodge. Come, refreshments await. I’m sure your throats are dry from the ride.” Tellen paused and looked at Polo’s roladii and Rellia’s beautiful vidanii. “Would you like your mounts seen to?”

“No, no,” Rellia said, checking to make sure Polo nodded along with her, “They’ll be fine here; plenty of grass. Perhaps some water . . .”

“I’ve got that.” Suddenly Polo was holding a short barrel, staggering under its weight as he squatted to set it on the grass.

“Why not just pull it from your container directly onto the grass?” Valla shook her head, a crooked smile aimed at the big Vodkin.

“I . . .” Polo shrugged and made a funny sound through his fuzzy lips.

“All right, let’s go.” Victor spread his arms as if corralling everyone and walked behind them as they made their way between two long, grass-covered buildings to the entrance of Tellen’s lodge. True to his words, the big hall at the entrance of the first level was abandoned, though the first of the five long tables was set with a pale-yellow cloth and platters of fruit, meats, and cheeses. Clustered in the center were pitchers of fruit juice, wine, and water.

“Sit, please,” Tellen said, and then he led by example, pulling out the bench and sitting down near the center. Thayla sat next to him and watched as Victor, Rellia, and Valla sat across from them. Polo, ever his own creature, sat next to Thayla. “So,” Tellen began, producing six carved bone cups that Victor recognized well. “I know what you told Thayla, Victor. Your words caused many a sleepless night for her and me.”

“That wasn’t what . . .”

“No, no. I wasn’t insinuating anything.” He’d lined up the bone cups, and a dark glass bottle, bulbous and round, with a long slender neck, appeared in his hands, and Victor’s mouth began to water.

“The good stuff,” he breathed softly.

“Aye, my best cheb-cheb. Let us toast.”

“It’s been too long,” Polo said, grunting as he scooted a little closer, watching as Tellen unstopped the bottle. Tellen grinned, looking from Polo to Valla, then to Rellia and Victor. After he poured the rich, vaporous liquid into the cups, he slid them over the table until everyone had one in front of them.

He picked his up and held it out, and everyone else followed suit. “To old friends and new.”

“To crushing our enemies!” Polo said, hot on the heels of Tellen’s words.

“To those who warm our hearts,” Thayla said, turning to gaze upon Polo with narrowed eyes.

“To hope,” Valla said, her voice small and her eyes downcast.

“To a just society.” Rellia held her cup high as she spoke.

Victor grinned as everyone’s eyes turned to him, and he said, “To glory.”

“Yes!” Polo growled, and everyone drank, slamming their empty cups on the tablecloth. “Bearded Turtle, that was good!” Polo moaned, rocking back and holding a hand to his heart.

“Truly, it was.” Rellia smiled unctuously at Tellen.

“Well?” Victor prompted, tired of everyone being coy. “What did you two decide? Are you bringing the clan with us?”

“We have a few questions.” Thayla reached over the table to wrap her long, slender fingers around his wrist.

“Such as?” Rellia pressed.

“Are the rumors true? Is the Empire against you?”

“Fah!” Rellia growled. “Word has traveled this way already?”

“I heard a whisper on the wind . . .” Thayla winked at Victor.

“Oh, God,” he groaned, “You’re already talking like her.”

“But truthfully,” Thayla turned back to Rellia, “tell me.”

“We don’t know. We’ve been attacked by . . . representatives of the Empire, but there hasn’t been an official condemnation of our campaign. We’ve not been declared outlaws, and when I sought answers in Persi Gables, the magisters professed ignorance. People we’ve captured all have geases silencing them, cast by a Mind Caster stronger than mine, it seems.” She shrugged. “Soon, we’ll be quit of the Empire’s lands, and it won’t matter.”

“It matters to us if the Legion decides to descend on your army before then. If we’re dragging our homes, children, and livestock along in your train, we’ll be massacred.”

“No fucking way,” Victor growled. “I won’t let that happen.”

“You have what? Six thousand soldiers?” Tellen asked. “The Empire can muster more than forty. Am I mistaken?”

“It’s true the Empire has seven full legions.” Valla’s voice almost startled Victor; she’d been quiet for so long. “However, it would take a monumental effort to bring them all together. Two are needed for peacekeeping near the Vinduv Confederation, the Free Cities. Two patrol the northern and western frontiers. One sits idle in Tharcray. That leaves the legion garrisoned at Twilight Home, but that’s a month’s journey away through the Blue Deep. If we’re swift, I believe the chances are good that we’ll reach the Granite Gates unmolested by any Imperial armies.”

Thayla looked at Valla as though gauging the veracity of her words; then she turned to Tellen. “That makes me feel better.”

“That’s wonderful . . .” Rellia started to say, but Tellen cut her off.

“What terms do you offer for our aid? What will we gain in this new country?”

“Everyone, from me and Victor down to the lowest foot soldier in our army, will be rewarded with land. The bigger the part you play, the more land you will earn. Victor, Lam—you know her, yes, Thayla?” At Thayla’s nod, she continued, “Victor, Lam, and I will divide the conquered lands among us, and then we each will award plots to the soldiers, officers, and,” she nodded to Tellen and Thayla, “contributors to the effort. We’re not talking about small parcels—the Untamed Marches stretch far beyond the Granite Gates, millions of acres of forest, grassland, rolling hills, mountains rich in resources, crystalline lakes, and a coastline that rivals that along the Great Western Sea.”

“Humor me and explain this like I’m a child: why hasn’t the Empire moved into those pristine lands?” Tellen asked.

“Because they’re fat, complacent, and the nobility fights too much, too scared to commit the resources. I’ve bankrupted my family for this venture. Failure will lead to my death and our ruination. More than that, it’s fear. Fear of what the System will throw against them when they descend through the Granite Gates.”

“The System will challenge us?” Thayla frowned, perhaps remembering the System-controlled dungeon she’d traversed with Victor.

“Yes, but we’re up to the challenge.” Polo sounded confident as he forlornly spun his empty cup on the table.

“We have Victor,” Valla said softly, and everyone’s eyes turned toward him.

“Ah,” he smiled sardonically, “there’s that old familiar pressure.” He chuckled and started to speak, aiming to reassure everyone, but the door to the longhouse opened, and a tall Shadeni scout dressed in damp, dark leather stepped into the light.

“Tellen!”

“What is it, Lefen? We discuss important matters.”

“I was scouting near the forest. Dark clouds came in, unnaturally fast, rolling over the Deep. Hail began to fall, Tellen, and, as I turned toward home, I saw many figures moving among the trees.”

“How many?” Victor asked, scooting back, sliding the bench despite Valla and Rellia sitting upon it.

“Hundreds. Thousands. Darkness comes with the clouds, Ban-tok. What is it?”

“Ridonne,” Rellia hissed.