

Victor BK5: Ch32

Book 5: Chapter 32: A Lull

Pazra-dak looked at Rosh, writhing on his bed, sheets tangled around him, soaked in sweat. His eyes rolled in his sockets, bloodshot and wide. Some living terror wracked his mind, driving him to gibber and froth, his once handsome face nothing but a sick caricature of itself. What had that devil done to him? “Brother. Speak to me. What do you see? What torments you so? Your wounds are healed. The scars, while severe, will fade with time and bloodline advancements.”

“It comes! Devil! Wings! Hide! Must hide . . .” he turned and buried his face in the mattress, pulling his wet sheets toward his golden, hairless skull.

Pazra whirled and screamed at Bothelio-dak, the highest-ranking surgeon in their combined armies, “What are you doing to fix this?”

“It’s a sickness of the mind, Lord! Something has corrupted him, tainted his spirit. Perhaps your aide, the Wanact witch . . .” his words were lost as Pazra struck him with the back of his hand, knocking a tooth loose and sending the fool sprawling.

“Only I will refer to her as such. She is not available, but when she is, rest assured, she will mend this great man’s spirit.” Pazra looked around his tent at the crestfallen tribunes, the useless legate. He opened his mouth to speak but paused, listening to the distant screams and roars coming from the upstart’s encampment. “And why have you not attacked? Why have you not seized this opportunity to follow on the heels of the pact breakers?” His words were spoken to the room, but Legate Ghel-dak knew they were for him.

“Lord,” he started, his once haughty voice tremulous. “Our lines are in disarray. Many of the pact breakers were officers. I fear any assault now would be haphazard and lead to massive losses. The, um, upstart’s troops seem to be handily crushing the pact breakers. To attempt to capitalize now would lead to . . .”

“Silence!” Pazra waved his hand in disgust, pacing back and forth near the mewling, broken shadow of a man that used to be his glorious brother. His mind worked furiously, wondering where Senena was, why she hadn’t come to him, why she didn’t know he needed her help. “Damned witch!” he hissed.

“Lord!” a new voice said, interrupting his fuming reverie. He whirled, looking for the one who’d spoken, and saw it was one of the lieutenants, one of the Command Book scribes.

“What?”

“Captain Chelna reports that the Wind Casters have failed to maintain the clouds. They were exposed to the horror that roamed the ranks. Many were breaking, fleeing, and the pact invocation cost us nearly half their number.”

“Ancestors, damn it!” Pazra roared, smashing a huge, black-clawed fist onto the table where he kept his map. The blow broke the support arm that held up the leaf, and it flopped to the floor, spilling his map and scattering the carefully placed markers. As his aides scurried to clean the mess, he paced, trying to think of a plan. What would he do? His brother would know. Pazra looked at the broken man and almost screamed again, almost struck something. He had to do something before he lost control of the armies. When his brother’s Legion learned of his condition, would they hold firm? They had better! “Well?” he said, whirling on his command staff.

“Lord?” Ghel-dak asked.

“Lord?” Pazra mocked. “You worthless bastards! What would you do if I weren’t here? Our lines crumble, we’ve lost the darkness, and their hellspawn beast has brought low one of the Ridonne, one of our greatest! Do we have an accurate headcount? The creature seems to have retreated or left—do we have any men remaining? What will you do to manage that gigantic mongrel that I fought on the plains? My brother won’t be much help at this rate!” He gesticulated madly while he ranted, pointing left and right and finishing with a flourish at his pathetic brother.

“Lord, I believe it would be best to stall for time. We need to regroup, to gather our men, fill in the gaps in command, and, hopefully, find a way to help your brother.”

“And how shall I do that? How shall I stall?”

“You must bluff,” one of his tribunes said, jumping in to rescue the foolish Legate. Pazra motioned for him to continue, and the slight, neatly dressed man said, “Act as though the removal of the clouds was done as a gesture of goodwill, a chance for them to gather their corpses and consider your offer.”

“My offer?”

“Yes, Lord. We’re here because the noblewoman has raised a full legion without Imperial sanction. She’s been overheard speaking about Imperial corruption. Tell her she can turn herself over, disband this illegitimate army, and we’ll let those she deluded with false promises walk away, their lives intact.”

“What is your name, Tribune?” Pazra stalked menacingly toward the man, looming imposingly over him and the two aides by his side.

“I am Venis-dak, Lord.”

“Venis-dak, I hereby promote you to Legate. Ghel-dak will serve as your second.”

“Lord!” Venis said, clapping his fist to his chest in a sharp salute.

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Victor watched the dark, ominous clouds drift through the sky, a stiff breeze helping to undo the work of the Ridonne army’s casters. He let his gaze fall to the wrecked airship outside the western fortifications—Rellia’s ship, Balestar. It had finally limped home, smoking and with a much-lightened crew, carving a trench in the ground as it slid to a crash landing. The surviving sailors had spun quite a tale about a flying squadron of Imperial troops that had attacked ThePetal, overpowering its crew and then turning their Energy-driven ballistae on the Balestar.

Rellia’s ship didn’t go down easily, though, and ended up winning the engagement, though it had barely made it home. “Two weeks?” he grunted, looking down at Lieutenant Darro.

“That’s what the engineers say, sir. Two weeks to get that ship back in the air.”

“Assuming the army besieging us doesn’t do more damage in their attack.”

Victor stretched, cracking his back noisily as he scanned the distant horizon. Even here, facing westward into the grasslands, he could see the line of encircling troops, their fortified trench lines, and fires. Smoke lazily drifted into the pale sky. Changing the subject, he asked, “How’s Edeya?”

“She puts on a brave face, sir, but Lam has given her light duty. I’m told she almost died.”

“Yeah, she looked dead when I joined the fight. I’m glad she was only injured.”

“Aye, sir, but to a Ghelli, the injury is rather bleak. I know she couldn’t fly yet, but she’d had hopes.”

Victor frowned at the words and said, “That’s nothing to worry about. When she advances her race sufficiently, she’ll grow new wings, right?”

“I believe so, though such advancements are few and far between . . .”

“Bullshit. If we were in town, I’d buy her what she needs right now. Hey, do me a favor. Go find her and send her to my travel home. I’ve got a job for her while we’ve got a lull in the action.”

“Aye, sir!” Darro turned to hurry away, but Victor grasped his shoulder.

“Hold on. After you do that, find Valla and the other commanders and tell them where I am, but then go to the Shadeni encampment and tell their Ban-tok I’d like a word. Lead him to my travel home.”

“Understood,” Darro said, and when Victor released his shoulder, he walk-jogged toward the wooden rampart steps and charged down them. Victor turned and started in the same direction at a much more relaxed pace. It wasn’t that he was particularly at ease; being surrounded by enemies, knowing they could attack at any time, gave him a certain baseline of stress that would probably have been overwhelming a year ago. These days it felt like just another day.

Borrius was sure the Imperials wouldn’t attack that day, arguing that they’d need time to reestablish chains of command and formulate an organized strategy. His money had been on an attack coming the following day at dawn. Victor wasn’t so sure; the Ridonne seemed to like the dark, and he wondered if they wouldn’t wait until Victor’s army was lulled into a false sense of ease, expecting a morning assault, and then strike in the middle of the night. In any case, Victor had left that discussion and plans for further fortifications and prep work to other commanders. He’d wanted to walk around the wall, take stock of things, and let the troops feel his presence.

The sky still seemed overcast, but, wrinkling his nose, he knew much of that was due to the pyres the troops had built on each side of the encampment. They were burning huge piles of Imperial soldiers with magical flames. Of course, the dead, twisted men and women had been searched first, their magical talismans, weapons, and storage devices collected by the quartermaster and his assistants. Victor reminded himself to ask how such things might be distributed.

When he got to his travel home, set up on a slight rise near the southern, central portion of the encampment, he noticed that Rellia’s vidanii and Uvu were tethered near her travel home, next door to his. “So, Valla and her mother are having a conference.” He shrugged and went into his house. He felt like being alone or at least only seeing certain people. The night’s activities had taken a lot out of him, and the thought of listening to people discuss strategy and make demands of him seemed a bit much at that moment. “Time for that in an hour or two.”

He walked to his library and leaned over the map, making a liar of himself as he started trying to imagine the layout of the nearby land, the size of the Imperial army, and what he could do to make up for the still-huge gap in their numbers. He lifted Lifedrinker from her harness and set her on the table before him, gently caressing her dark, star-filled, living-wood handle. “We counted eleven hundred corpses around the encampment. If we’re optimistic and guess I killed hundreds more, say four hundred, which I have a hard time believing, that still leaves us outnumbered almost two to one.”

Lifedrinker trembled under his touch, and he heard her sharp, smoky voice in his head. One or ten thousand—the numbers mean nothing. Can a thousand ants slay a great wolf? Kill them; if they begin to overwhelm you, depart. One such as thee cannot be held by such as they.

“Ah, I know you know me better than that.”

Aye. You will not leave your pack. So, we must slay their alpha and take his pack.

“Shit, chica,” Victor chuckled. “Were you a wolf in a past life?”

I have memories from before I was me. The haft you made for me, that wood you caress in your mighty hands, love. It came from a great tree, standing tall and proud in a dreamy place where stars shone like lanterns in the night. I remember wolves, many, many wolves. I watched them, no, the tree watched them. I see dreamy memories of them challenging each other, loving each other, and raising pups to be new leaders and hunters. Love, you are like some of those great wolves. If you desire it, you can take your challenger’s pack. If they won’t have you, kill them or send them running—they should not tarry in your presence.

“Seriously?” Victor asked, stunned by Lifedrinker’s verbose response. “I had no idea you could remember things from before you were . . . you. I remember the name of the place where this wood came from. The woodworker told me,” Victor scratched at his jawline, searching for the memory. “Something Vale. Starlight? No, that’s just me thinking of the image you painted in my mind. Coruscating.” Victor snapped his fingers, “Coruscating Vale.”

It matters not what others call it. The name is the memory in my mind—blue grass, the breeze making the branches of my children dance beneath my bows. The birds and animals that frolicked in my . . . Victor! Are you tricking me? Those aren’t my memories; they’re like the memories of a parent. My memories start with thee! Lifedrinker sounded genuinely peeved, and Victor almost laughed, but he was too worried he’d offend her. Instead, he moved his hand to the Heart Silver of her blade and rubbed his thumb against the warm metal.

“Okay, chica. Okay. I didn’t mean to confuse you.”

If she had an answer for him, it wasn’t forthcoming, at least not in time to keep Edeya from interrupting. The lieutenant had entered his home, and he heard her calling, “Victor? Legate, Sir?”

“In here, Edeya. I’m alone, so drop the legate shit.” He straightened up and watched as the young, diminutive Ghelli stepped into his library. She stood straight, her shoulders back, and he saw a new scar notching the pale brown eyebrow over her left eye. Her two left dragonfly wings stood out proudly from her back, but only jagged stumps were visible on the right side. He was proud of her in that moment, standing tall, putting on a brave face despite the injuries she’d just suffered.

“Hey, Victor.” She offered him a half-hearted smile, one that evoked a lot of memories of Greatbone Mine and the times they’d been assigned to the same task, joking about other delvers on their team.

“It’s been a long time since we were in the mine together. I mean, not really all that long, but it feels like a hundred years, yeah?”

“Yeah.” She approached, stopping near the table. “Roots. If I’d known how you’d turn out, I would’ve treated you differently.”

“Well, I’m glad you didn’t.”

She smiled again, then looked at the map, frowning. “You wanted me for something?”

“Yeah, I have a job for you. Just a sec.” Victor ran a hand down his wyrm-scale hauberk, magically parting it, and then he began thumbing through the various pouches and little sacks hanging from his magical belt. “I collected a bunch of jewelry from those Imperials back there near Fainhallow, the ones who tried to kill me,” he said, untying the heavy, supple leather sack. “I know a bunch of it is magical, and I’m sure there are a few dimensional containers. You know, one of those guys was a prince, and one was a consort or some shit—a woman meant to be one of the emperor’s wives.”

“Yes—Chokodo-dak and Reesha-dak.” Edeya nodded, then asked, “You didn’t turn those things over when you handed off the prisoners?”

“Huh? Hell no. I killed those guys and captured the other two. These are my spoils. I mean, some belong to Valla, but she trusts me.”

“I see.” Edeya’s eyes said she thought he should have shared the loot with Lam if no one else. Victor turned the sack upside down, spilling out the exquisite jewels, from Reesha’s veil to the many rings and necklaces. Edeya gasped, “Roots!”

“Yeah. You can see from the quality of what they wear on the outside that the things inside the dimensional containers are probably pretty good. I want you to go through all this stuff and catalog it.”

“Now?”

“You can take it with you. I trust you. If you’re worried about being robbed or something, you can keep this stuff in my house and do your work here. Understood?”

“Yes, Victor. I can do that.” Edeya nodded, and, with wide eyes and careful fingers, she began to gather up the jewels, putting them back into the sack.

“Now, I want to talk to you about something else.”

“Yes?” Her voice was small as she continued to look down, slowly turning a beautiful diamond choker in the light.

“I don’t want you to worry about your injuries.”

That got her attention. Edeya dropped the choker and looked up at Victor, a startled expression on her face as though he'd said something alarming. She narrowed her eyes, her brows pulling together, and growled, "I . . . Victor, you have a way of saying the worst thing!"

"Ah! There's the old Edeya! Don't get mad, though! Hear me out, okay?" As if he were afraid she'd try to run away, he reached out and grasped her wrist, not hard, not forcefully. He just wrapped his big fingers around the slender, bone-thin appendage. When she didn't pull away and didn't say anything, he continued, "In my adventures, I've come across a lot of things that are probably considered very rare by people you've known—things even Lam would be amazed to see. I bet Lam tried to comfort you by saying she'd work to help you advance your race, yeah?"

"Yeah." Edeya's eyes started to well with moisture.

"Lisen to me. We're going to get all sorts of spoils on this campaign. These," Victor lifted the sack from her hand and let it thunk down onto the table, "are just the start. I won't be surprised if one of those rich pendejos has just what you need in one of their rings—a racial advancement treasure. If you find one, I'll give it to you."

"Victor . . ." she started to protest, but he kept speaking.

"If you don't, we might find one after we defeat this army out there." He waved vaguely toward the wall. It didn't matter which direction; the army was all around them. "If we don't, then we might find one when we get to the Untamed Marches. If we still haven't found what you need, I'll go to a city, buy one or two or three, and get you fixed up better than ever. Do you understand me? You're my friend, Edeya, not just a lieutenant in my army. I take care of my friends." At his words, the tears brimming in her eyes began to stream down her cheeks, and Victor pulled her in, crushing her against his stomach.

"Oof!" She laughed, sniffing noisily. "I'm glad you opened your armor, but your body is hard as wood. At least you're warm." She wormed her arms around his waist and dug her face into his shirt, sniffing and sobbing, and Victor held her there for several minutes, happy he'd said the right thing for a change.

He was thinking about how to push her away without upsetting the perfect moment when he heard Valla call from his foyer, "Victor! Are you here?"

"Yeah," he replied, gently extricating himself from Edeya's grasp. Her face was a mess, red and puffy, and her eyes bloodshot, but she seemed happy.

She smiled at him. "Thank you, Victor. Thank you for looking out for me so many times."

"Bah." He chuckled and jostled her shoulder. "I only saved you once or twice, right? I'm sure you kept me out of trouble just as many times."

“Victor!” Valla said from the doorway, her voice breathy like she’d been running.

“Yeah?” He looked at her, raising an eyebrow.

“The Ridonne is out in the grasslands. He’s flying a parley flag; he wants to talk.”