

Victor BK5: Ch33

Book 5: Chapter 33: Parley

Victor sat atop a titan-sized Guapo, dwarfing his companions and their mounts. Rellia rode to his left, Valla and Borrius to his right. Borrius, like Rellia, rode a vidanii, a beautiful creature with dark gray hair and shorter horns than those on Starlight and Thistle. It was barded in glittering brass-colored chain armor, a showy creature, clearly never before used in an actual battle by Borrius, but still impressive looking. “Do you think he knows who I am?” Victor asked, nodding toward the distant figures waiting under a bright blue standard—the Empire’s signal for parley.

“He knows much about you, no doubt. He’s fought you for one thing,” Rellia said—they’d seen through her spyglass that it was the spiked Ridonne, the burly tough bastard Victor had tussled with outside of Persi Gables, who’d come to talk. The other two beside him, riding simple armored roladii, were Shadeni, both wearing Legion regalia. “He no doubt has spies among the nobility in Persi Gables and Gelica, and the Ridonne are well known to have powerful Augurs in their ranks.”

“Despite all that, I’d like you and Borrius to do the speaking. I’ll listen and interject when I think it will be effective. I may just lurk behind you and glower the whole time. Don’t prompt me to speak. Act like I’m not there.”

“A clever ploy.” Borrius nodded. “Keep them guessing about his standing among us.”

“Don’t attack them.” Valla’s words were soft, clearly meant for only Victor. Of course, the others could hear her, but they held their tongues, and Victor wondered if this had been discussed earlier; were they leaving the dirty work up to Valla?

“I know what parley means, Valla.”

“I’m sorry.” She reached up fruitlessly; his hands were well out of her reach while he rode the gigantic Mustang.

“No worries,” he chuckled, “I’ve done some boneheaded things in my day. You guys don’t suppose he’s here to surrender, do you?”

“The Empire doesn’t surrender,” Borrius said, but then he amended himself, “Not mere mortals in the Legion, at least. Perhaps a Ridonne could suffer a loss and not be killed outright.”

“Mortals?”

“The Ridonne view themselves as something more than the rest of us. They think their bloodline makes them special and gives them the license to treat us as lesser beings, even though anyone who improves their race enough could

extend their lives similarly. I suppose it comes from them having access to more racial advancements than most of the populace. Some say the Emperor has been alive since the forming of Fanwath.”

“Hah. What is that four hundred years?” Victor scoffed. “They should meet the Warlord, eh, Valla?”

“I hope not. I’d hate for them to learn the things he knows.”

“Shit. No kidding.” Victor scowled, memories of his time in Coloss flashing through his mind.

“If he doesn’t wish to surrender, the best we can hope for, Victor, is for you to goad him into an early assault. If the right moment seems right, don’t hesitate to impugn his honor, to give him an ultimatum that may push him into hasty action.”

“Is that wise?” Rellia looked at Borrius, eyebrows arched. Victor could see she was irritated at not being consulted about Borrius’s machinations.

“I believe so. The more time they have to recover and prepare, the less we can hope to seize from the boon their losses in the night granted us. We should be quiet, however. We’re close enough for good ears to hear us now.” Borrius demonstrated his caution by speaking in a harsh whisper.

Victor grunted his agreement, and everyone stopped talking. He watched the Ridonne’s raptor-like mount grow larger as the distance closed. It was an impressive creature, but he thought it looked ugly and small compared to Guapo. Its bumpy flesh was dark black, but the orange and yellow stripes on its side and head were kind of neat, he had to admit. It had a broad, flat skull and big, vertically slit eyes that shone amber in the bright sunlight—the black clouds had nearly all drifted away.

As they came to a stop a dozen yards from the Ridonne’s delegation, Rellia in the middle, Valla and Borrius flanking her, and Victor looming largely behind, the Ridonne said, his voice booming, “Rellia ap’Yensha, I presume?”

“That’s correct. I’d love to hear your name and reason for using an Imperial army to attack my troops unlawfully.”

“I am Pazra-dak, and nothing I do on these lands is unlawful, for I am Ridonne.” His mount fidgeted and snorted through its slit-like nostrils, its thick hide pulling back from a dense row of dagger-like teeth. A low growl rumbled in its chest, but Pazra-dak jerked his reins, and it quieted.

“Ridonne you are, sir, but we’re at a loss.” Borrius gently stroked the neck of his beautiful vidanii, calming it in the face of the enormous raptor’s show of hostility. “Would you be kind enough to explain why your army has been so hostile?”

Surely, the murder of small children can't serve to further the storied history of this great Empire."

"Where a threat to this Empire exists, I cannot afford to be sentimental. Come, ap'Yensha, do your people not know why we are here? Will you feign ignorance?"

"I cannot feign that which is genuine, Lord Pazra-dak." Rellia's brows turned down in a scowl. Her vidanii hadn't budged, standing stock still, and Victor had to admire her poise in the face of the Ridonne's accusation. He was an intimidating figure, golden armor gleaming, black spikes protruding from his shoulders and legs, but most of all, his great bulk dwarfed the others—all save Victor.

"Your family was granted a writ of conquest, yes?"

"More than a century ago, sir."

"And in that writ, were the restrictions on household army sizes waived?"

"Household army sizes . . ." Rellia genuinely sounded puzzled.

"There is no household in the Ridonne Empire that may raise a levy of more than three thousand soldiers. Nor can any combination of households put together their levies to circumvent that limit."

"Lord Pazra-dak, the citizens were enthusiastic about a push into the Untamed Marches!" Borrius interjected, "How well-known is that limitation? Has anyone tested it? I've never heard such a rule in all my days . . ."

"No one has tested it because it would be madness. Such an openly hostile act against the Empire is tantamount to suicide. Yet here I am, ready to enforce it." Pazra spoke loudly, quickly, cutting Borrius off.

"Sir," Rellia tried again, "if there is such a law, it is not in any book or code that sits in the very extensive libraries of house ap'Yensha!"

"If? Do you call me a liar, woman? Let us set aside that transgression. Will you deny the reports coming out of Gelica that you've openly spoken to members of your family about, and I quote, 'corruption in Tharcray?'"

"I . . ."

"You cannot deny it, can you? Lady, trust me when I say I can smell a lie." He paused and looked at each member of Victor's party, staring at them for long seconds, everyone except Victor; when their eyes met, Pazra smirked and quickly moved his gaze to Valla. "Will you see your daughter die here on these plains, Rellia? Will you see the many thousands of fools who've come to follow

you die to appease your ill-formed, sentimental idea that there's been some sort of mishandling of justice? Turn yourself over, and all these people may walk away with their lives. Even this brute who dared to cross blades with me. I'll favor him with my benevolence and presume he knew not whom he faced."

Again, Rellia started to speak, "I . . ." and again, she was interrupted, this time by Valla.

"Absolutely not!" Uvu took two quick lunging steps toward the Ridonne, growling in that deep, throaty rumble that only a great cat can make.

"Tribune Valla, calm yourself and your beast," Borrius barked.

"Yes, young woman," Pazra said, glowering at her. It was good, Victor mused, that he looked at Valla and not at him. Victor felt sure his glowering expression was enough to either send the Ridonne into retreat or spur him into a fight.

"If you think we'll stand idly while my mother sacrifices herself for us, you've very little understanding of the loyalty this army has to her." Valla jerked Uvu's reins while she spoke, wrestling the angry cat back under control and getting him to back up a few paces.

"Is the army so loyal they'll throw down their lives?" Pazra scoffed.

"They are," Borrius said, voice calm and cultured. "They are very loyal, and more than that, they are weary of supping on the dregs of the Empire. We'll claim our lands in the Untamed Marches, or we'll die fighting for that right."

"You sound confident," Pazra said, "but I've known confident men to be wrong. Are your men so eager to die after what they experienced in the dark?"

"Surely you jest." This time it was Borrius who scoffed. "We suffered very light casualties while slaughtering more than a thousand of your troops. No, forgive me, not just troops. We counted more than fifty officers among your dead. Tell us true, Pazra," the Ridonne bristled at Borrius's omission of an honorific, "are you here to try to coax a surrender because your army is in disarray?"

"Hah," Pazra forced a laugh, but Victor saw the twisted grimaces on his companions' faces. They weren't so good at bluffing. "I assure you, I could command this army without any officers. I am Ridonne. My bloodline is gifted with leadership abilities that will make crushing a much, much smaller army trivial. Now, speak, Rellia! Are you ready to hand yourself . . ."

"This is bullshit," Victor growled, letting his voice rumble deep in his chest.

"Excuse me? Bull . . . shit?"

“Yeah, Pazra. You’re scared shitless right now. I know it because I can taste it coming off you like a stench, like a sick, sticky, rotten fish odor. Where’s the other one? The tall, pretty one. The one I fucked up last night?”

“You!” Pazra’s eyes widened, and despite Victor’s antagonistic, disrespectful tone, rather than shout obscenities or threats, rather than charge forward to confront someone speaking to him in a way he’d probably never experienced, he shrank back, and, in that moment, everyone could see the fear behind his eyes, not only Victor.

“That’s right,” Victor said, flooding his pathways with dark, purple-black fear-attuned Energy and releasing his aura so it fell, heavy as a lead blanket, on everyone around him, causing the mounts to fidget and whine and their riders to groan uncomfortably, even his allies. Victor leaned forward, his entire form limned in black, smoky shadows, and growled, “I’m going to give you one warning and one chance, Pazra. Take your troops, every single one of them, and flee this place. Slink away like the child-killing worms you are, and I won’t hunt you down and kill you tonight.”

When Victor paused, to gather his thoughts and take a breath, Pazra opened his mouth to speak, but Victor snapped, “Don’t speak! Listen! Take your fucking army and leave this place, or I swear, I’ll come again each night that you try to lay siege to us, and I will kill you in the darkness. I’ll kill you and every officer in your army.” He nodded to the two Shadeni flanking Pazra, shrinking back from Victor and his dark aura. “I’ll kill them, and I’ll drive your men to madness, bleeding your army, drinking the fear that pours out of you until there’s nothing left.” Victor let Guapo know what he wanted with a thought, and the horse pranced forward, snorting, stopping just in front of Rellia and Borrius.

He reached down and rested a hand on Lifedrinker’s haft, then he said, “Borrius, how many days can you hold our fortification against an army, even one twice our size?”

“Days? I can hold our position for weeks.” Victor was proud of the firmness in the older man’s voice and reassessed his earlier opinion that the man wasn’t as strong as he was clever.

“It will be a matter of days before I’ve destroyed your army, Pazra. If you think I’ll hand Rellia over for some bullshit charges, some hearsay from jealous nobles in Gelica, you need to think again. I’ll tell you this one time—we’re not interested in your Empire. We’re not interested in your family. We’re heading outside these lands, and if you, or anyone from Tharcray or the other Imperial Legions, come to try to stop us, we’ll destroy them, and if any more of my people are harmed, I’ll take the fight to the capital. I won’t stop until the Ridonne are a memory, forgotten and cursed like the Yovashi. Take this chance, this one chance, to save yourself and the poor, foolish soldiers who follow you.” He spun Guapo, the great Mustang’s hooves sparking, to face the others. “Let’s go.”

Victor watched as Rellia, face pale and eyes wide, turned her vidanii and started to ride back toward the encampment, Borrius and Valla right behind her, then he spun and faced Pazra again. “You’ve got until morning tomorrow to break your siege and march north. Not south, not into the forest, and not east or west. You need to get your asses further into the Empire.”

“How dare you!” Pazra managed to hiss, his pinched, reddish-gold face darkening as it flushed with blood.

“How dare I? For too long, your family has monopolized true power in this world. Think about it. How would you treat Rellia if I weren’t here? How would you act right now if I hadn’t visited you in the dark and destroyed the morale of your troops and if you hadn’t thrown away a huge number of them because they had the audacity to fear me? Imagine what you’d do to Rellia. Now understand that I can do the same to you, and I really want to, Pazra. Believe that. When the sun rises in the morning, if your army isn’t marching, I will come out of that encampment, I will find you, and I will kill you.”

Guapo lifted his front hooves, whinnied loudly, and then charged after the others, leaving Pazra and his lackeys to watch with mouths agape. When he caught up, Rellia looked at him, something like fear in her eyes, and said, “I can’t believe you just threatened the entire Imperial family.”

Victor pulled back his aura and let his Core absorb his fear-attuned Energy. Then he said, “I mean, could I really make things worse?”

“No,” Borrius chuckled. “I don’t believe he’ll take his army away, however. No, I believe he’ll muster his troops and attack us with everything he has. Excellent job, Victor; he’d never be able to live down such a disgrace. No, he’ll gather his forces, his allies, and he’ll try to win a decisive victory tonight.”

“I thought maybe he’d be scared enough to bail. I am

going to kill him if they don’t leave.”

Borrius nodded to Victor, smiling. “You did us a favor. Rather than wear us down, saving his troops, he’ll come at us madly, and his soldiers are, indeed, going to be wary—after his losses in the dark, we’ll have a good chance.”

“We have more than a chance,” Valla said. “If Victor rides forth and kills that giant bastard, they’ll break.”

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Pazra fumed. He rode atop Xinz, the great raptor his father had purchased from the world of Era’neh, and he contemplated murder. He wanted to kill that bastard giant who’d dared to speak to him with such insolence, but he wasn’t sure he could. That doubt troubled him the most; had the brute been right? Was Pazra afraid? If he didn’t think he could win, he must contemplate flight, and if he

genuinely took that possibility seriously, he had to consider the men who rode with him. At the very least, he would have to murder them. Better he murdered all his commanders and blamed the rebel army. He knew the folly of that road, though; his mother would see through his lies.

Pazra looked at his two tribunes. They avoided his gaze, eyes down, no doubt wondering if they were about to die. “Do not speak of this meeting. It will further degrade our morale. I will know, and I swear to you, if you utter one word of that mongrel’s ultimatum, I will have your hearts fed to Xinz.”

“Yes, Lord!” they both said in unison.

He waved their words away and continued, speaking calmly, regally, if he were any judge, “Of course, I’ll ignore that buffoon’s demands. We’ll crush these worms; I don’t care how strong he is; he won’t stand against my brother and me.”

“Is the prognosis good, then, Lord?” Venis-dak asked, and Pazra decided to indulge him; after all, the man had shown promise.

“Even now, Senena works with him. She will purge the poison from his mind, have no doubt.”

“Wonderful news, Lord. We’d feared she’d been lost in the fray . . .”

“Fool,” Venis said, distancing himself from Ghel-dak. “Lord, I had no such fear.”

Pazra scowled at Ghel-dak and finally settled on sighing with displeasure. Let the man stew on things, wondering how angry Pazra was, how he might find himself punished when the time was right. He turned to Venis and said, “Get me a full accounting of the troops, make certain you’ve enforced new contracts on the promoted officers, and report to my tent in an hour. I will speak with Senena and my brother.” Without awaiting a response, he urged his raptor to run, and soon he’d left the two men behind.

When Pazra entered his command tent, he stepped through the foyer and sitting room into the rear, curtained-off area where his bed, study, and bath lay. Through another curtain, he found Senena burning incense and muttering over the shivering form of his withered brother. “How goes it?”

She didn’t answer at first, and he contemplated slapping her. He decided her aid of his brother was too important to interrupt. Perhaps she couldn’t speak; she seemed strained, her lips rapidly moving as she feverishly muttered her nonsense. He stared at her for several long moments and was about to ask her again when her eyes shot open. She began to cough, a great racking cough that left her face dark purple and her eyes watering before it calmed. Wheezing, gasping for air, she looked up at him through the dark, black hollows of her eyes.

“Well?” he pressed.

“He comes back to us. I fought the poison in him, took much of it, and destroyed it in my Core, but some still lingers and festers. He’ll need my betters at the capital to make him well.”

“Will he recover enough to fight?” Pazra eagerly stepped toward the bed, reaching down to grasp his brother’s long, golden arm. It was clammy and cool. “Sickly,” he tsked, “unseemly.”

“Brother,” Rosh-dak croaked, cracking open one blood-washed golden eye. “Did we flee?”

“No, brother. We still encircle the upstart and her army.”

“The nightmare, the . . . the beast . . .”

“Yes, brother. I know it hurt you.”

“It’s too strong. We must perform the rite, no matter the cost.”

“The rite?” Pazra recoiled, released his brother’s arm, and began to pace. He glanced at Senena and jerked his fist toward the curtain. “Get out.” She ducked her head, the bones and charms clicking in her braids, and scurried away. Pazra looked at his brother and said, “Will you bear the cost?”

“I’m ruined, brother. I will bear it.”

“So be it,” Pazra said, and in that moment, he couldn’t have been prouder to call Rosh-dak brother. A true champion of the Ridonne, a true, glorious paragon. It was time to make that bastard giant pay the price for his insolence!