

Victor BK5: Ch35

Book 5: Chapter 35: Sacrifice

Victor and his five hundred cavalry soldiers sat atop their mounts, arranged in a V pattern, outside the battlements of the army's encampment. He'd wondered at the wisdom of getting set outside the walls; wouldn't they make a target for all the Ridonne's troops? Borrius had come up with the plan to give them an obstacle-free charge at the enemy lines, however, and when Victor saw how it worked, he once again realized he needed to start wrapping his head around how things were different in wars that involved magic.

First, Borrius had ordered the engineers to clear a path for Victor's unit to charge through, removing pits, spikes, and barriers. They did their work under the guise of adding more such things, hiding their efforts with piles of grass and fresh dirt, making it look like the clear runway was, in fact, riddled with traps. Then he'd called in the air and water-attuned casters, giving them orders to gather fog around the entire perimeter of the encampment, and they'd done so, somehow forming a dense bank of thick mist that seeped up out of the ground to completely obscure the walls, the defensive traps, and Victor's men when they silently rode out the gate to form up.

Victor thought the fog was a great idea, regardless of how it hid him and his soldiers. When he'd remarked as much to Valla and Lam, they'd agreed but pointed out that the Ridonne had casters, too, and they'd probably conjure a wind to blow it away when they charged. Regardless, it would be too late to stop Victor and his troops. Borrius was sure the Imperials would already be committed, spread out in a thin ring to encircle the entire encampment, attacking from all angles in the hopes of finding a weak spot in the defenses, a place to focus their efforts and bring an end to Rellia's "uprising."

Victor looked down at Guapo and grinned with pleasure; he'd summoned the mount with fear-attuned Energy, and though he was still handsome and impressive, he was a mount fit for a nightmare. The Mustang was jet black with the fear Energy coursing through him, his mane wild and long, his eyes glowering purple through the flowing shadows that bled off him like heavy smoke. When he ran, rather than sparking hooves, he left a trail of those shadows that clung to the ground and seemed to grasp at people who moved through them. The effect was spooky and gave no small amount of distress to his troops, but when Victor had spoken to the soldiers who'd won the opportunity to run into battle with him, he'd explained that the shadows had no hunger for them; they were for their enemies.

The lottery had been quite a distraction for the troops, and several brawls had broken out when jealous rivals had tried to demand the winning tokens from squad mates. The sergeants and lieutenants had quickly restored order, though, and it wasn't long before the five hundred had been mounted and the order of the charge had been established; the strongest, most hardened troops were in the front lines, ready to break any resistance. As they'd been assigning those positions, the most violent outburst, the loudest objection to being left behind, had come from Polo.

When Victor heard him arguing with Borrius, the older man insisting that all active, troop-commanding captains must be present for the defense, Victor had stepped in. The great warrior was built for this sort of mission; he wore heavy armor, was stronger than any five Imperial grunts, and he'd stand a good chance of winning free when Victor finished his work. More than that, Victor

knew his presence would inspire the others. Borrius had acquiesced when Victor suggested they give Polo's command to the captain Sarl had replaced, a man named Agus-dak.

"How will we be sure to charge at the Ridonne?" Polo asked, sitting atop his huge, armored roladii at Victor's left. The question broke Victor from his recollections, and he cleared his throat to answer, but then Lam spoke up.

"I had the same question."

Victor looked at Lam and, beyond her, Valla. When his eyes locked on his Tribune Primus, he said, "I have a plan for that."

"Can we know it?" Lam pressed.

"Sure. I have a spell that will let me feel where they are. I didn't really want to use it because it kind of makes it hard to use my other spells that'll help the troops more; my inspiration and glory-attuned ones. It doesn't matter, though—we have to know we're charging in the right direction, or we'll all get killed for nothing." He spoke in a low voice, his words meant only for the champions by his side.

"When you feel them, can you not drop it and summon your other powers?" Pollo asked.

"Maybe. The spell has a weird effect on me. I'll probably be able to cancel it and summon my banner, but I don't want to promise. Be ready to kick ass regardless."

"We'll be ready." Valla moved one of her hands from Uvu's reins to rest on Midnight's pommel.

"That in mind, I think you three should move back." Victor turned to face the first row of soldiers lined up behind him. There were ten rows of troops, each one longer than the one in front of it, with the toughest soldiers, hand-picked by Polo, in the front row and at the outer edges of the formation. "Spread yourselves among the troops. I think you'll each have more impact on morale that way."

"Agreed," Polo said. "I'll take the center of the second line. If the front line caves, I'll bolster things up."

"I'll go to the left, outside edge." Lam nodded as if it were settled, then, to Valla, she added, "Can you take the right?"

"Of course." She shifted that way but lingered while Lam and Polo moved off. "I wanted to be with you. In case the two Ridonne are more dangerous than you think."

“Yeah, I figured you’d feel that way. You’ll be able to see and hear me fighting those two assholes, though.” Victor looked over his shoulder at the troops again, then leaned close to Valla and whispered, “I won’t tell you to stay out of it, but if you see me losing, really think about getting the hell out of there. You can fight free if you try; those guys won’t stop Uvu.”

“You’re just saying that to appease your conscience. You know very well that I won’t flee the field if I think you’re losing.” Victor was his normal size, riding a normal-sized Guapo, but he still loomed over her, much higher on the Mustang’s back than she was on Uvu’s. Even so, she reached up, and he leaned further toward her so he could take her hand. It was cold, and he wrapped his fingers around the back of it, gently caressing her palm with his thumb.

“It’s cold in this fog, huh?”

“Your hand’s not cold . . .”

“Nah, I don’t really get cold or hot too easily these days.”

“I wish I could feel your warmth on more than my hand right now.” Her voice was soft, full of layered meanings. Before Victor could respond, she freed her hand. “Come, Uvu; we have Imperials to slay.” As the cat grumbled his cat noises and started to turn, she locked eyes with him again. “Kill them, Victor. Give the Ridonne in Tharcray a reason to fear us.”

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Pazra-dak looked at his brother, watching the witch do her work, tattooing the lines of the rite into his flesh, lines that matched the design of those on the wooden boards upon which he sat. The witch sweated; her hands shook as she mumbled her prayers and painstakingly etched upon his sibling’s fine, golden flesh, ruining the perfection, the pride of his family. “Steady yourself, witch!” he growled. “One wrong line and we all may die when the rite is invoked, my brother’s sacrifice for naught!”

“I am poisoned!” she hissed, her usual self-control beginning to fray. “I nearly died to save this great man’s life, and you bark at me while I bleed my life into this work? Kill me now, then! Kill me, and let’s see how this rite fares with my loss!”

“Brother,” Rosh-dak wheezed, his voice frail from his ordeal. “Please don’t antagonize Senena further. She does good work, work that no one within a thousand leagues could replicate.”

Pazra bit back his retort. If his brother wanted peace, he would have it. What else could he do to show his appreciation, his respect? Instead, he paced; he walked in a wide circle around the wooden platform where Senena worked on the rite. They were inside his tent, though everything had been

packed away other than the platform. The wood was special, some sort of heartwood from the grove of his ancestors, valuable in its own right but priceless in its ability to hold the Energy of his bloodline, its ability to form the magical connections that would rip open the veil between this world and the plane where his Ridonne ancestors lingered, hungry for conquest.

The rite was taught to all Ridonne children, all who touched the bloodline and began to exhibit a connection to it. Pazra shook his head, correcting himself—the rite wasn't taught to children, only the history of it. No, the rite itself was only known to those who may survive it, those who reached an adequate rank in the bloodline. Senena was an exception, her value as a spiritual guide, teacher, and historian more important than her unclean blood. Rosh was one who'd reached the required status, however. He had been for decades. "Yes," he muttered to himself, "Rosh will hold the ancestor on this plane for a good long while."

"Are you talking about me, brother?"

"I only wish to reassure myself. I only sing your praises, brother. You will make our kind proud tonight. You will crush the giant, then lay waste to the walls of that encampment, slaughtering countless rebels!"

"Aye, I will. With luck, our ancestor will be pleased with me and drag me back to the Vizashath with him." Rosh's voice was hoarse and soft, but his lips turned up in a smile at the thought. Pazra hoped he was right, hoped the tales of the Vizashath weren't lies meant to coerce unwilling Ridonne into accepting the rite. Supposedly the Ridonne, in their heyday, before the System, before the joining of the worlds, learned to open a portal to the plane they called the Vizashath, a place they conquered and claimed as their home. The entity they'd summon would be coming in spirit on a torrent of Energy, and he'd transform Rosh into a true Ridonne for a time—until his body, the vessel, came apart from the strain.

"Ancestors," Pazra prayed almost silently, "let it take him. Let Rosh-dak travel to the Vizashath."

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"This is the best place for us?" Rellia asked, looking at Borrius skeptically. He'd positioned his command platform on the northeastern edge of the encampment. It was a tall structure, a tower made of great logs that were kept in one of the storage wagons when not in use. A gangway ran from the tower's center to the wall's ramparts, but ladders led up another thirty feet from there to the wide platform upon which she, Borrius, and Edeya stood. From their vantage, they could see the entire encampment, its walls, and the surrounding plains over the top of the roiling fog banks that hugged their fortifications.

"Yes. Victor rampaged on the southeastern enemy encampment toward the Blue Deep. The troops out here, toward the canyon and destroyed bridge, will be the freshest and least fearful. They'll charge more swiftly and strike this section of our wall first. I want to be close. More than that, I want us to be evident here,

hence the use of the tower so close to the wall. It presents a tantalizing bait for them, a distraction for their eyes. Thanks to us dangling ourselves here, Victor's unit will have an easier time with their charge."

"Ah, so nice to be useful," Rellia grumbled, looking out over the walls, proud of the soldiers, hunters, and casters standing ready. They knew an army was coming soon but stood firm and resolute. She was sure Victor's earlier speech helped with that. She still couldn't believe how many of the soldiers had wanted to join his charge. "Their readiness hasn't suffered from the wait. Not yet."

"No, they'll hold that way a good long while." Borrius chuckled, shaking his head in amusement at a memory. "Victor stirred something up in them, and they've all got their Heartfast potions ready. Our alchemist has been quite busy."

"Heartfast." Rellia's eyes shifted to the potion hanging on Edeya's belt, a small vial of bubbly blue liquid. "Have you ever taken it?" She asked because she had not; she'd heard of it from Valla and knew it was supposed to make a person eager, alert, and brave. Valla said it was like being a little drunk, excited for your battle the way you might yearn to see a boy you had a crush on. Rellia thought it sounded like mind magic, and she didn't fancy the idea of someone mucking about with her thoughts or emotions.

"No. I've never needed it, not in my command position. I'm eager as it is." The look on his face made a believer out of Rellia; the man's eyes were bright, his posture leaning forward, and he repeatedly drummed his fingers on the railing of their platform as he scanned the horizon.

"You love it, hmm?"

"Of course! This is the greatest game, Rellia. Never mind that nonsense the nobles play on their fancy boards in their parlors! Look at the pieces arrayed before us," he gestured widely with both arms. "Look at the board upon which we play! This game matters, Rellia; this game has real stakes! Our very lives are forfeit should we misstep! I know what you'll say, that politics has just the same thrill, and it may be true, it may be true, but I can't stomach the idea that my moves might take months or years to bear fruit. No, give me a battlefield, and I'm a happy man."

Rellia eyed her old mentor, her lips pursing, trying to think of a way to scold him for treating people's lives like a game, but then she thought about his words, that he'd included himself in the accounting; it was true—he and she would be dead should the Ridonne win the night. She saw, over his shoulder, that Edeya looked disturbed, and she frowned at the girl, wishing Darro was with them in the tower instead of down with the captains. "You have something to say, Lieutenant?"

"No, ma'am."

Borrius glanced at Edeya, then waved his hand dismissively, “Until you’ve risen to command, don’t try to judge me, girl. Many, many nights of sleep have I lost thanks to my mistakes, mistakes that cost many lives—more than I can count. The only way I find peace is to remember my victories and the lives they saved. The ancestors know my work, and they’re keeping an account. I’ll see the tally when I’m dead. Until then, I won’t listen to criticism from those who can’t fathom my decisions.” Rellia knew he was speaking for her benefit as well as Edeya’s. Ever the teacher, Borrius knew, despite her protestations, that Rellia had much yet to learn.

“I’m sorry if my face betrayed my foolish thoughts, sir.” The girl’s tone almost made Rellia sorry for her, especially as her eyes drifted to the young Ghelli’s wing stubs. Like most people born without wings, she had a hard time thinking of their loss the same way she might have an arm or leg, but she knew Ghelli felt differently. To them, wings were more essential even than fingers.

“Go easy, Borrius. When I was her age . . .” Rellia was cut off by the distant sound of horns, long, brassy-sounding notes that began in the south then rapidly spread, reverberating off each other as more and more metallic throats took up the call. Soon the horns were calling out from every direction, confirming what she already knew—the attack was coming from all sides.

“Imperial war horns,” Borrius said, perhaps for her benefit, perhaps for Edeya’s—neither of them had served in the Legion. “It’s time.”

Rellia hurried to the southern edge of their platform, leaning over the railing, looking out over the battlement where Victor and her daughter had arrayed their force. The fog obscured them, for the most part, but she knew they’d charge out of it soon, waiting just long enough to ensure the Imperials weren’t feinting, that they were truly attacking. “How soon will we know if it’s real?”

“Very soon. They’ll bring their artillery to bear, try to soften us, and when we resist, when our preparations and casters prove too much, they’ll charge.” Almost like he’d called for it, the sky lit up with bright, fiery balls—flaming, alchemical missiles fired by trebuchets. Rellia’s mouth fell agape as she tried to count them and lost track after twenty. Weird shadows danced on the grasslands and the fortifications outside the walls as the balls of fire surged through the air.

“Ancestors! We’re sitting like feyris for a hawk!” She’d never seen such a sight, so much destructive power hurtling toward a single target; all her fights had been on a much smaller scale.

“We’re not helpless. As I said, we’re well entrenched. See there,” Borrius pointed to the battlement below where several uniformed men and women were raising their hands, frosty Energy gathering around them, thickening the air and raising a rime on their hands and sleeves. Rellia glanced left and right, knowing similar groups of casters stood, spread out along the battlements, ready for such an action. She watched, wondering if they’d launch a counter to the incoming projectiles, but nothing flew forth.

Edeya gasped and said, "They're going out!"

"What?" Rellia jerked her gaze to the sky, and sure enough, the incoming, meteoric missiles were winking out, one by one, their fire extinguished. The dark, smoking balls continued to fly toward the encampment, but something had been taken from them, some of their momentum dulled by the countermagic. They fell to thud in the grass, well short of the walls, rolling impotently until they fell into a pit or cracked against a barrier. Not a single soldier was injured.

As the troops below cheered and jeered, Borrius said, "They'll see the futility in bombardment soon. Write this to the captains, Lieutenant: praise your troops and bolster them with encouragement. Remind them that the test is yet to come. Remind them that our Legate Primus risks his life this night for them, that they have yet to earn the sacrifice he and his soldiers will make."