

## Victor BK5: Ch42

Book 5: Chapter 42: Pazra

Pazra-dak suffered. His body ached in a way that he couldn't ever remember happening before. Even when he was young, a child in Tharcray, he'd never been made to hurt so badly. His back ached, his stomach grumbled, his mouth was dry and raw, and his feet bled. Feet! His glorious, shiny black hooves were gone. He'd been running for more than a day now. Running and walking, he silently corrected; his body could no longer sustain the effort of a run for more than a few minutes at a time. How shameful!

The rite, that damnable, mysterious ritual taught to his ancestors by the Ridonne who'd ventured into the Vizashath, had ruined him. Had Rosh known it would do this to him? Had he been aware that his little brother would have to pay some of the toll? Pazra groaned and fell to his knees in the tall grass of the plains. He'd been steadily moving northward, and he thanked his ancestors that it was tall grass he ran through and not forests or mountains. His feet suffered enough.

He fished around in his ring for another drink, pulling forth a bottle of rare wine that he could have traded for a small apartment in Tharcray. He had no water. Why would he, a Ridonne nearing epic advancement, require such a mundane beverage? "What a fool," he chided himself, sipping at the wine, wincing at how it stung his swollen lips. He struggled to stand, but his knees quavered with the effort, his thighs burned, and his feet screamed for reprieve. Time to rest then, he decided.

He wondered how long his luck would last, how long he could avoid the predators that hunted these plains. Thus far, he hadn't seen anything larger than a feyris scurrying through the grass. Were the big game animals hunted out? Had the Shadeni driven the boyii hounds away? He hoped so, but the further he traveled, the less likely he'd be able to avoid them. "Shameful," he wheezed, this time saying the word rather than thinking it. Before the rite, he could have smitten a pack of boyii without effort. Now, he feared them. No small surprise, that fear—his Core had become a pitiful thing, his attributes embarrassingly low. Had they ever been so meager? Surely, when he was a child, but not in his memory; his family had fed him fruits and cakes, bolstering his race early on.

With hopeless tears in his eyes, Pazra fell to his side and curled his knees toward his chest. He drifted into an uncomfortable, feverish sleep, with tall, blue-green grass shielding him on every side. His sleep was plagued with nightmares. Most revolved around his mother, confronting him and blaming him for one mistake or another. Occasionally, images of gigantic warriors would march into his mind's eye, shattering any peace he might begin to find. It was after one such dream that his eyes snapped open, and he found himself in the dark.

The sun had set, and why shouldn't it? He had no idea what time he'd fallen asleep. Still, he wasn't used to the darkness. Before the rite stole his advancements, he'd been able to see at night just as easily as in broad daylight. Something tickled his nose, something spicy and comforting. Tea? Pazra jerked upright, ripping a groan of pain from his lips as his abdominal muscles protested. A dark figure sat nearby, a tiny kettle simmering before it on a brass, Energy-powered camp stove. The figure was shrouded in darkness, with black robes obscuring its form and features.

"I'm pleased you live, Pazra," the figure said, and he recognized the voice—the witch, Senena.

“Lord Pazra-dak, witch.” His rebuke fell flat; his voice croaked and came out sounding like a pubescent child’s.

“No longer, I fear. Your Ridonne bloodline seems to have been stripped from you. Perhaps with the right investment, you might recover it, though I think the Empire might have better uses for such resources, considering your failure.”

“You dare!” He struggled to sit further upright and crawl over the flattened grass toward the woman.

“I do, yes. I dare. I could crush you like a bug, Pazra. Don’t test my patience. I’m going to keep you alive, after all. I’ll help you get to the capital so you can make your report, confess your sins, and suffer the judgment of the Emperor. Should I leave you, I would say it’s a safe bet you’ll be dead before you leave these grasslands.”

Pazra sat there, stunned. He’d never heard such insolence in his life, let alone from this woman’s mouth. Senena had served him. She was his witch! Was he truly so bereft of power? No, no, he shook his head and tried a different approach. “I may have lost my power, but the blood of Ridonne still beats in my veins. With enough investment, I’ll soon be able to stand on my own. I have wealth beyond your dreams, Senena! Help me recover, and I’ll make it worth your while!”

“Wealth, have you?” Her voice carried amusement as she lifted the kettle and produced two cups, into which she began to pour the luxurious, steamy liquid.

“Yes! In my rings, I have enough beads to buy half of Tharcray! My brother handed me his before he submitted to the rite . . .” Pazra’s words trailed off as he held up his hands and beheld his naked fingers. “You!”

“Oh, yes.” Senena offered him a cup of tea, and Pazra’s traitorous, trembling body wouldn’t let him refuse it. He shakily reached out and took the drink. “Yes, dear, Pazra. I’ve liberated you of your rings and the medallion you wore beneath your shirt. I’m sorry, but this is the rule of the land; the weak must bend to the strong, and you are weak now.” She leaned forward so the dim orange light of the stove illuminated her hooded face. Pazra looked into those pale magenta eyes set deep within tattooed eye sockets and shivered. “You may rail about the unfairness; you may report my theft to the Imperial Adjudicator who hears your case, but I assure you, nothing will come of your protestations.”

Pazra fell back, any glimmer of hope he’d once held deep in his heart flickering and winking out. No, he silently objected, sipping from the rich, potent tea. There was one more hope; he simply needed to see his mother. Surely, they’d allow that. Surely, they’d let him go to her. He was her last

son, after all. She'd help him! She'd take his wealth away from this impertinent witch! "Very well, wit . . . Senena. You may hold onto my wealth, but when we reach Tharcray, there may be a reckoning for the way you've treated me.

"That's good, Pazra. Hold onto that hope. It will serve you well as we travel."

"You're here, so I'm assuming my inclination to flee was well-founded?"

"That's right. The nightmarish warrior from another world has defeated the ancient Ridonne. I watched from afar, and a good thing I did—such destruction was eye-opening. The Legion was defeated and sent running, scattered. Most survivors make haste through the Blue Deep, hoping the nightmare won't come to them there."

"Would he do that? Hunt them down?"

"No one, not even our wisest ancestor, knows what he will do. I left when I saw the arrival of the Naghelli."

"What? Naghelli?"

"Yes, Pazra; he has an army of them. They came to his soldiers' aid as our Legion swarmed his encampment. You and Rosh-dak were fools. The ap'Yensha woman was never the one to worry about. Legate Borrius was not the head of this snake. The otherworldly champion was the threat. You should have come with ten Ridonne and put him in the ground when you could. It's too late now." Senena sipped her tea, shaking her head and clicking her tongue at him.

"Are you mad? How many times did I ask you for advice on this matter? How many times did I ask you to scry that man and guide me in the destruction of this army? Did you not encourage me to call for my brother's aid? How was I to know what a monster he was?"

"Simply opening your ears might have worked. Your Emperor sought answers and gave you the freedom to choose your own path, and you chose very stupidly! You never had to attack them! Did you seek counsel from those in Gelica who'd dealt with the giant? What of Persi Gables? No, you found a whispered rumor of ap'Yensha's treason and ran with it! You could have confronted her, traveled with her, even. You could have allowed me to get close to the off-worlder, allowed me to see what we were dealing with. How many times did I say I could not view him from afar? How many times did I counsel caution? It was only after you had your fool princep attack him that I suggested you ask your brother for help.

"That's not . . ." Pazra began to object, but Senena cut him off.

“I grow weary of this. I don’t care what you think, in any case. You’re an insignificant mortal. As I said, I’ll keep you alive long enough to give your answers to the Imperial Adjudicator. In the meantime, I’ll have your silence.”

Pazra opened his mouth to reply, but Senena’s eyes flared with dangerous silver Energy, and he clamped it shut; he had to play her game—for now. He sipped his tea, allowing the magical brew to run through him, bringing him energy and strength. Senena tossed him a heel of bread, and he ate that, too, satisfying the unfamiliar gnawing at the center of his gut. While he ate, she produced a pair of soft leather slippers and tossed them to him. They were far too small for him, but she let him bond with them, and they expanded to fit him comfortably.

The sun began to turn the eastern horizon shades of yellow and pink, and Senena urged him to stand. In that pleasant light of dawn, they started their long trek through the grasslands. The two Imperials traveled that way, Senena setting a pace that Pazra could just barely match for the entire day, pausing only so that Pazra could drink water and occasionally eat a morsel Senena doled out. In the evening, she fixed him more of her magical tea, and he immediately fell into a fitful slumber.

Sometime early in the morning, before the sun brightened the sky or shared its warmth, Pazra was woken by a feeling of dread that clutched his heart like a steel vise. When his eyes sprang open, and he searched for a sign of Senena, he found her sitting still as the ice sculpture he’d had commissioned for his nephew’s birth. Her eyes were wide, the whites reflecting an unearthly pale glow that seemed to be coming from behind Pazra. Something was there; he could feel it. Something like dread incarnate hung in the air behind him, and Pazra gulped, expecting death to fall upon him.

He closed his eyes, waiting, but when the feeling persisted, and his life didn’t end, he opened them again. Senena still sat where he’d seen her, unmoving, barely breathing. With a terrible effort of will, Pazra took a breath and croaked out, “What is it?”

“Justice,” a deep, soulless voice said, shivering the hairs on the nape of his neck. Such was the power in that voice, the weight of the aura hanging over him, that Pazra voided his bladder, unable to keep his body from reacting to the fear that coursed through him. He felt adrenaline flood him, and without a thought, he lurched to his feet and started to run. He only made it one step before a mighty grip squeezed his neck, holding him in place. The hand was like steel, hot and full of power. Pazra’s knees began to quake, shamefully knocking against each other as he lost control of his body. He hung there, in that terrible grasp, waiting for his judgment, too afraid to try to turn his head to look at the one who held him.

“I will take this one,” the horrible voice boomed, and Pazra realized his captor was speaking to Senena. “He will face those he wronged. You will carry word of his fate to the others like him. Ridonne is not welcome where we go.” Pazra was still facing Senena, and he saw her shrink back as his captor spoke to her,

flinching with each word. Nevertheless, she managed to nod, and then Pazra felt himself being lifted by his neck.

As the man who held him turned, Pazra was brought face to face with a nightmare, a beast of shadow and fear, with eyes of purple Energy glaring at him through drifting smoke-like darkness. It reared, snorting more of that terrible horror smoke, and Pazra's heart began to hammer as his helpless body twitched. "Hush," the emotionless voice rumbled, and then the beast was still. Effortlessly, his captor flung him over the broad shoulders of the nightmare, and then Pazra felt him mount the beast, resting a hand on his back to hold him steady. Pazra still hadn't summoned the courage to look at the one who'd taken him.

In a haze of black shadows and wispy, palpable fear, the beast began to run. Pazra could feel its shoulders working, could see the grasslands, dimly, drifting by outside the cloud of shadows, but the ride was smooth, and the pressure on his back never relented, holding him still as stone on the terrible mount. The tall grass became a blue-green blur as the mount's speed increased, and Pazra had to close his eyes lest his stomach empty itself through his mouth.

After a short time, a terrible pressure of Energy began to form nearby, and Pazra knew it was coming from his captor. The Energy built and built until it seemed the world would implode upon him, and then, with a release that felt like a massive bubble popping, something happened. The world faded, Pazra felt himself becoming transparent, felt his body coming apart, and then, with a snap, he was back to normal; the pressure was gone, and the grasslands were streaming by just as before.

He had no idea what the spell was, but it happened again and again, a dozen minutes or so passing between each weird occurrence. After each one, Pazra felt his sanity slipping further and further away, found himself losing sight of where he was, who he was, and what had brought him to such straits. After some time—he had no idea how long—he felt the massive, horrible steed begin to slow. As it came to a halt, Pazra's captor slid off and pulled him down, dropping him not onto grass but rough dirt.

A moment later, he felt a shift in the Energy around him. The fear began to fade, the weird, cold presence as well, and then, as the shadows fell away, Pazra blinked up into a bright blue sky. He scrambled to his knees and started to stand, but then a different voice addressed him, and that same, powerful hand grasped his shoulder, hot and hard as iron. "Hold still," it said, and Pazra knew who it was—Victor, the off-worlder. With the fear Energy faded away, he managed the courage to turn his head, to look up into the giant's angry, amber eyes. He only held that gaze for a moment before looking away in shame.

"What do you want . . ."

"Quiet." Victor jerked his shoulder, forcing him to turn toward another familiar sight, the encampment of his foes. He and the giant were a hundred paces from the wall, standing atop a mound of fresh soil. Why? Why had they built this mound here? The wall was covered with soldiers, and the ground before it, as well. Was this their entire army? Had the giant brought him here to gloat? The giant grumbled behind him, "I wish you hadn't fucked yourself up so badly. Not

the same image—hanging a puny asshole versus a giant asshole with spikes and hooves. Doesn't matter, I guess. You've got crimes to answer for."

"Hanging?" Pazra had a hard time following the giant's vernacular. He used curses that weren't familiar, and what exactly did he mean by "hanging?"

"Walk." The giant squeezed his shoulder and directed him to turn to his right. A new sight filled his vision, then. A wooden platform, like a stage, with steps upon which the giant propelled him. Pazra stumbled up the steps onto the wooden planks, his footfalls silent next to the resounding thumps of Victor's boots. A device had been constructed at the center of the stage—two poles connected via a beam. They were sturdy posts and tall. Hanging from the thick wooden beam was a rope fashioned into a loop. A short ramp of steps sat in the center of the posts, and Victor pushed Pazra toward it.

"What's happening here?" Pazra managed to ask before the giant squeezed his neck, painfully cutting off his words.

"Stand on the top step." Pazra could only comply, and when he stood there on the step, facing the eerily silent army in the distance, he felt his body begin to tremble, perhaps instinctively knowing what sort of trouble he was in before his sluggish mind could put the pieces together. Victor released his hold and reached up, pulling the rough, thick rope down over Pazra's head. When it had settled around his neck, Victor adjusted the knot until it felt snug.

Absurdly, the whole while Victor fidgeted with the rope, Pazra could only think about how good the man smelled—like spices and smoke. The sky was bright, the blue beautiful, and Pazra tried to remember the last time he'd looked at the sky and appreciated the color. How odd, he thought, to find such a pleasure amid such a resounding defeat. The breeze blowing over the plains was cool but not cold, and he savored it, trying to think of how these sights and smells, these good feelings, were a sign—he might be defeated now, but he would come back from this. He'd find a way to grow in power again . . .

"Soldiers!" Victor roared, interrupting Pazra's reflection. "This is the Ridonne who ordered the attack on our people. Not once, not twice, but at least three different times. Not only did he attack me and the leaders of this army unlawfully and without any sort of trial, but he also ordered his troops to launch arrows into fleeing civilians and children!"

Pazra's eyes bulged as he looked from the grumbling, shouting, stomping army in the distance to the giant beside him. What was this? A trial? Where was the Magistrate? Where were his witnesses?

"He might not look like a Ridonne right now, but he is. This is Pazra-dak. Let his name forever be cursed!" Victor roared, and then, without any warning whatsoever, he kicked the stand of steps out from under Pazra.

The one-time-great Imperial fell, tightening the noose around his neck and cutting the blood flow to his head. His mind tried to race, tried to grasp the strangeness of his situation, but he was weak, and the lack of oxygen to his brain rapidly affected him. He jerked and thrashed, arching his back as he heaved for breath that wouldn't come. Despite his mind's surrender, his body tried valiantly to hold onto life. But then, a heavy hand took hold of his ankle and tugged. With weird, terrible pressure in his neck, the world shrank away, down to a pinprick that burst in a shower of sparks, just like the fancy light shows he'd seen at his mother's last birthday. When they faded, all he knew was black emptiness, and Pazra was no more.