

Victor BK5: Ch43

Book 5: Chapter 43: Room to Breathe

Victor watched Pazra's corpse swaying in the breeze, the rope creaking on the gibbet. It was strange to see his dark idea brought to fruition, strange to feel no horror or guilt at what he'd done to the man. He'd thought his justice would be hollow, that he'd probably feel worse after it was over, but that wasn't the case. Instead, he felt good, especially after hearing the cries of vindication from the army in the distance.

The Shadeni hanging from the noose didn't look much like the Ridonne Victor had fought, but he could see the resemblance in the face. Regardless of his recognition, when he'd been in his Inevitable Huntsman guise, he'd felt that this was Pazra—he'd known. This was the man who'd needed to taste justice, just as much as the woman he'd found with him was the one who needed to deliver the word of his fate to Tharcray. Victor didn't come to those decisions with logical inner dialogues. He'd simply known that was how it should be. No, he corrected himself; the huntsman had known.

He glanced down the hillock his army's Earth Casters had constructed, then over the grassy plains to the encampment, and saw the sergeants calling their units to order, getting the soldiers into marching positions. It was time for them to get back on the road, to start making progress again to their destination. A small cluster of people were walking through the ranks, heading his way. He studied them for a moment—Valla, Lam, Rellia, Tellen, Thayla, Borrius, and even Kethelket.

Things had gone well with the Naghelli. Kethelket had been smooth with his words and promises, and, more than that, he'd been convincing, believable. It truly seemed like the Naghelli were intent on changing their image, on finding a place of their own where they could peacefully coexist with the settlers of the Untamed Marches. The one-time prince hadn't hesitated in agreeing to sign a contract with the legion and had promised his soldiers would do the same, all 312 of them.

Victor sat down on the edge of the gallows, allowing his Iron Berserk to drop, and as he watched the leaders of his army approach, he thought about Kethelket's words. Victor had asked him where all the Naghelli had come from, reminding the swordsman that Vellia had told him only thirty-something of them lived in the pocket realm with Belikot. His question had brought forth an interesting tale, one in which the Naghelli found Belikot's secret writings. Reading them, they learned that he'd entombed nearly three hundred of their kin in a kind of stasis, waiting for him to wake them. That was where the Naghelli had been in the last months, solving the riddles of Belikot's wards, opening the prison he'd created, and waking the rest of their people.

The rope's creaking distracted him, and Victor looked up at the corpse again. It felt like a dream, his ride to snatch up the Ridonne and bring him back to face justice. "What happened to you?" he asked the body. Something had drained all the power out of the man, reversed whatever bloodline enhancements he'd gone through, and turned him into a mewling weakling. Victor had figured he'd need to subdue the Ridonne before hanging him would work, but the man he'd brought back had succumbed to the rope quite easily. He'd almost hated to see how frail Pazra had become; could such a thing happen to him?

“An interesting spectacle,” Kethelket called as the group of leaders trudged up the new-made hill.

“That’s a way to describe it . . .” Rellia said, sort of under her breath, her head tilted toward Valla. Victor figured she hadn’t meant for him to hear her words, but his ears missed very little these days.

“It was for the troops and for Tellen’s clan. I think it’s important that our people know we won’t tolerate crimes against them. It’s important that we frame this man’s actions that way, as crimes—attacking children and civilians as they flee isn’t something the rulers of any people should be permitted to do, not if they expect to keep their positions of power.”

“Yes,” Borrius grunted, breathing heavily from the climb. “You explained as much yesterday when you asked us to build this . . . stage.” He waved vaguely at the gallows upon which Victor sat.

“Do you disagree?” Victor’s dark brows drew together.

“Not at all. This will work mightily in our favor. The Ridonne should know fear when they think of attacking us. Our troops, our people, should know that no one, of any station, is free to assault them.”

“As he says, Victor, my people are greatly heartened to see that you are able to stand up to the Empire’s strongest.” Tellen nodded to Borrius as he stopped before Victor, standing with the others.

“Good.” Victor rubbed his hands together as though wiping them after finishing some work. “How long ‘til we march?”

“Less than an hour. Most of the preparations are made.” Lam came to a halt next to Kethelket, and it was interesting to see their similarities and differences. To Victor, it was almost like comparing a moth to a butterfly, Lam being the butterfly. Despite the ochre and crimson patterns in the Naghelli’s wings, he was like a shadow to her bright light. From her brilliant emerald eyes and hale, rosy cheeks to her dragonfly wings that dusted the air with Energy motes, she simply outshone him.

“Good! Anything I need to do?” Victor slid off the edge of the gallows, a few feet from the gently swaying corpse, and looked at the leaders of his army one by one, making eye contact with each.

“Nothing with regard to the troops.” Rellia’s voice was tentative, but her eyes drifted to the corpse, and she continued, “We were wondering what happened to this Ridonne. Why is he so frail?”

“No idea. Well, that’s not true. After I killed the huge, powerful bastard during the battle, he withered away down to a sickly version of the Ridonne I had fought earlier. I wonder if something similar happened to this guy.” Victor jerked his thumb at Pazra’s corpse. “Maybe whatever they did to power up the other one took something out of them—something permanent.”

“I’ve never heard of a person losing their racial enhancements. There are those who can give up Energy, even enough to lose a level, with ritual magics. It’s something certain Blood and Death Casters can do, though it’s always done willingly; to rip someone’s power away like that would be to do battle with their will and at a massive disadvantage.” Kethelket idly tapped the hilt of one of his swords. Victor, again, noticed he had one on his belt and one over his shoulder. He wondered at that—was it for a particular fighting style? He also wondered if the man’s swords were both conscious. They’d certainly looked impressive the other night on the battlements.

“Shall we ride, Victor?” Valla asked. Victor looked at her, and off to the left, down the hill, he saw Uvu slipping out of the tall grass like a ghost.

“Yeah, I guess we should. We can push eastward, scout ahead a bit.”

“I wish you’d stop by the wagon and see Deyni.” Thayla stepped toward him, hesitantly, finally speaking up, her eyes darting from Victor’s face to the hanging corpse, a frown creasing her brow as she spoke.

“I will. Can she ride with us?”

“You’ll keep her safe and not stray too far?” Thayla’s scowl deepened, and she shook her head. If Victor had to guess, she was annoyed with herself for asking; she knew Victor would do anything to keep Deyni safe.

“Yeah, of course.” He held a hand toward her, slightly bridging the gap between them, but let it fall as she wound her fingers together with Tellen’s.

“Very well. Thistle can pull the wagon if you want her to ride Starlight . . .”

“I’ll ask her, but she might want to ride with me on Guapo.” Victor turned his gaze back to Rellia and Borrius. “Let’s talk about cohort numbers and placements when we camp tonight. I’d like to discuss ribbons to commemorate the battle—for all the troops, but special medals for the third and ninth. I want you to talk to the sergeants and lieutenants. Get me a list of soldiers who stood out for exemplary bravery or prowess. I’ll hand out special awards if we can get some nominations.”

“Very good, Legate.” Borrius’s use of the title and his grave nod told Victor he’d said something the old commander approved of.

Victor started down the hill with Valla beside him, deliberating whether to summon Guapo then or wait until he'd found Deyni when Lam called out, "Victor!"

He looked back at her. "Yeah?"

"Can Edeya ride with you? You should have someone with a command book along, and it will do her some good to . . ."

"Yeah, of course." Victor waved and smiled, hoping she could see that further explanation wasn't necessary.

"What kind of mount does Edeya have?" Victor asked Valla as she reached up to scratch Uvu's ear. The cat had stalked up to them without a sound.

"I think just a roladii."

"Think she'd like to ride Thistle?"

"Hah!" Valla shook her head. "Of course! Who wouldn't? Come to think of it, her roladii might be dead; we lost something like three hundred during the battle."

"All right. Let's find her; I'll have Deyni ride with me on Guapo and leave Starlight for Thayla's wagon."

"She's there." Valla pointed toward the encampment, and sure enough, Edeya stood on the wall looking down, watching some engineers leading their massive storage wagons around the perimeter, collecting the non-permanent parts of the fortifications. Victor waved his arm, whistling shrilly until she looked down at him, and then he gestured for her to come over. Valla asked, "You like her, hmm?"

"She's an old friend—one of the first I made in this world. She's almost died a few times since I met her, and I'd like to help her stay alive. Besides, she owes me an accounting of some storage rings and other jewels. We can talk about it on the ride."

"Understandable. I like her too, for the record." Valla gave his shoulder a playful shove with her knuckles. "Let's have a nice ride, yeah? It'll be good to put death and battle behind us for a little while—give ourselves a little room to breathe."

"Yep." Victor threw an arm over her shoulders, pulling her into his side. Uvu grumbled but passed it off as a yawn, bounding after something that rustled in the tall grass as Valla leaned into him. "We'll have plenty of killing to deal with in the Untamed Marches. Let's enjoy this little lull, yeah?"

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Lesh'ro'zellan gazed through the tall trees at the strange city. It had high white-washed walls and tall, gabled buildings within. The sight was very different from the cities in his homeland, especially the cave-riddled peaks of his home. He sniffed, his nose tickling with all the strange scents carried by the wind. The air was cool, the sky soft and blue, and the weird, lush vegetation made him feel

sick for his home. “I’d give much to smell some ash and taste some blood,” he growled, contemplating his decision to maintain a peaceful demeanor.

He’d met many soft people in this world, many scaleless ones who’d do just as well roasting over his campfire as sitting beside him. Nevertheless, he’d played his friendly act, unsure of the power structure of this strange place, unsure if the weaklings belonged to stronger foes, perhaps the rulers of this soft land. He had a person he needed to kill, and having armies or champions hunting for him would only impede that aim, would only slow his return to Ashenshoal and Yassa.

His tolerance for the soft ones had paid off, however. His encounters with pleasant, red and blue-skinned people had led him to this city. It seemed the one called Victor had made a name for himself in parts of this world. The villagers and field tenders had heard of him—a great man who fought in arenas and vanquished foes thought stronger than himself. The rumors had led him steadily southward toward this place, this city where the man was supposedly raising an army. Lesh cared not; he’d call the man out, confront him before his troops, and demand single combat. If he lacked the honor or his fear was too intense, Lesh would reap the Energy of any soldiers who stood between them.

“An army or not, I will battle this man.” His voice rumbled up from his thick throat as he began trudging over the soft ground, his talons digging into the leafy soft soil as he mounted the berm along the road. The people he’d met had been apprehensive, many exclaiming their lack of experience with “people such as he.” He chuckled, imagining how they’d feel if he unleashed his aura or allowed his Breath Core to swell his stature. Regardless, he kept a tight hold on himself and endeavored to match their pleasant expressions.

He stepped onto the road near a wagon filled with bales of agricultural products, some sort of green grass, and red fruit; Lesh had no idea of its use. His people took their meat from the creatures they killed; they didn’t harvest it from plants. The funny little animal pulling the wagon shied away from him. It had leathery gray skin and bright feathers around its neck, and it made a timid honking sound as Lesh looked down his snout at the wagon’s driver. The little red man looked ready to bolt or do something even stupider, so Lesh tried to forestall any hysterics, “I mean you no harm, small one.”

“Great Ancestors! Thank you for saying so, sir. I’m not familiar with your kind; forgive my brief panic.”

“Tell me,” Lesh ignored the man’s words, “is this Persi Gables?” He gestured down the road to the tall gate and the small crowd lining up to get through.

“You’ve come to the right place if it’s Persi Gables you seek, aye.”

Lesh snorted and looked from the man’s sweating face down to his unkempt, dirty clothing, then over the contents of his cart. Curiosity getting the better of him, he asked, “Why do you carry bound grass in your wagon?”

“Oh, sir, that’s not just grass; that’s Meadow Dew. Dairy farmers pay a handsome sum for it—makes holbyis milk rather sweet.”

“Holbyis?”

“Aye; we breed ‘em for wool, for meat, and for milk.”

“Hmm.” Lesh’s mouth began to water at the thought of some fresh meat, but he decided not to raid his storage ring for a snack. He’d soon be at the gate. “Good luck,” Lesh said, stepping away from the little wagon and the rather tasty-looking beast that pulled it. He trudged past the line of other carts, wagons, and basket-burdened people waiting to have their wares examined. Another guard monitored pedestrian traffic, and Lesh stopped before him.

“State your business!” The thinly armored man cried, lowering his pike toward the big dragonkin. Lesh wore a heavy, black-stained leather cloak over the burgundy furs of fire hounds fashioned into leggings and a vest. His cudgel, Belagog, hung from a hook on his thick girdle, but he didn’t reach for it. Instead, he turned up his dark, partially scaled lips, exposing long, white fangs, attempting to smile like the weaklings he’d met on the road.

“I am here for trade and to seek a friend. Perhaps you know him? His name is Victor Sandoval, and he won a great arena fight in Gelica against some noblewoman or other.”

“Oh? A friend of Victor’s? Aye, sir, I know of him. Everyone in Persi Gables knows of him. You’re a bit late, though; his army marched off weeks ago.” The guard, one of the slight, blue-fleshed people, lifted his pike, resting the butt on the cobbles, and shrugged. “You’re welcome to come into the city to trade, though.”

“His army left?” Lesh grumbled.

“Aye, sir. Um, do you mind me askin’ where you’re from? Is it the same world as Victor? Are you a different kind of . . .” he looked over at his fellow guardsman, a strange, short, furry individual. “What was it he was called?”

“Hoomin,” the hatchling-sized, hooved one replied, waving through a pair of women pulling a handcart filled to the brim with roots and tubers.

“No.” Lesh looked around, peering through the gate at the throngs of strange people wandering up and down the cobbled street. He frowned and reached up to run his thick fingers over the smooth surface of one of his three horns, a gesture that always served to calm him. He looked down at the small blue fellow again and said, “Where did his army march?”

“Uh, they’re off to try to claim land in the Untamed Marches. I’m not sure exactly where that is, but it’s off to the east at the edge of the Empire.” He shrugged, looking up at Lesh, and something in the dragonkin’s expression must have

alarmed him because he took a step back and lowered his pike slightly. “Is everyone from Victor’s world gigantic?”

“I’m not from his world, soft one. East, you said?” Lesh turned in the direction from which he’d come, gazing down the tree-shrouded lane. “This road turns north and south beyond these trees. Is there another that leads east?”

“Not nearby; the army was out on the plains. I’m sure you could pick up their tracks. I almost joined them, you know? My wife, though, she wouldn’t have it. We’ve a newborn at home, and she needs my help in the evenings, otherwise she’d never get any sleep. With the rumors going around, I’m feeling a bit relieved that I stayed home.”

“Rumors?” Lesh leaned forward, bridging the gap between them slightly; the man only stood as high as his waist.

“Aye. Word around the city is that the Empire is against them—rumors coming in through Farscribe Books tell tales of Ridonne nobles attacking them personally. There are family members of some of the soldiers claiming Victor killed a Ridonne and that they defeated two Imperial Legions; it can’t be true, can it?” The guard shook his head. Lesh couldn’t help noticing how he’d lowered his voice to a hush when he discussed the “Empire’s” supposed actions. Just as back home, it seemed politics were complicated in this world.

Lesh reached into his dimensional ring and fished out a platinum nugget. He flicked it toward the guard and turned, marching down the cobbled lane toward the rising sun, sparing not a second glance at the stunned man as he stammered his thanks.