

Victor BK5: Ch34

Book 5: Chapter 34: A Lottery

“Well?” Victor stood to one side of his map table, looking around at his commanders. “Let’s hear it.” The lighting in his little library was comfortable on the eyes, though a lamp above the table kept it well-illuminated. Borrius, much recovered from his several brushes with death during the night, stood on one side of the map, frowning as he stroked his chin. Valla and Lam stood opposite him, and across from Victor was Rellia. Everyone stared at the map, and Victor wondered who would speak first. He’d been expecting it to be Rellia, but she’d grown quiet and introspective ever since the Ridonne had outed her as the reason for their army’s current troubles.

“I have several ideas,” Borrius said, finally, clearing his throat and gesturing at the map currently on display—a close-up, hand-drawn depiction of their encampment, and the surrounding grounds, all the way to the Blue Deep. The big paper had been marked, probably by Darro, with Imperial troop locations as observed by the army’s scouts.

“Well, let’s start with your best one,” Victor prompted.

“My best one? It involves a great deal of personal risk to you, Legate.”

“Go on.” Victor’s words were almost instantaneous, heading off any protests from Valla or the others.

“I considered many ploys. However, we’re rather limited by the terrain—no passes to take advantage of, no cover to speak of, and entirely surrounded by a larger force. We don’t even have true fortifications. You’re aware of all this, but I feel I need to explain my reasoning. If I could think of a clever ruse or feint, if I could devise some way to escape this encirclement without massive losses to our non-combatants, I wouldn’t suggest what I’m about to say.”

“Oh, for the love of . . . out with it!” Lam growled.

“I suggest that we continue our entrenchment. We fight a massively defensive battle and stall for time while Victor charges forth and slays the Ridonne. I know you can thrash common soldiers, but we should wait for them to attack so that you aren’t overwhelmed by sheer numbers. Even you cannot slay indefinitely, or am I wrong?”

“Hah. No, you aren’t wrong. As my injuries mount and time drags on, my Energy fades. I could fight free, using my size and abilities, but if I want to fight one, or probably two, Ridonne, it would be hard if I had thousands of tier-two soldiers on my back.”

“They’ll surround themselves with just such a force, and not only second tier; they’ll pick out their best troops, tier-threes, and a few fours. If they have ten thousand troops, they’ll keep two around the Ridonne.” Valla thumped the table with her fingertips as she spoke.

“I had a similar thought.” Borrius nodded, gesturing to the drawing of their encampment. “This might be a problem if we weren’t so solidly entrenched and if we didn’t have an extra five hundred ranged fighters, newly added to our ranks.”

“The Shadeni clan,” Rellia spoke for the first time in the meeting.

“Yes, so they’ll help to bolster the defenses. What’s that to do with Victor and his gambit against the Ridonne?” Lam asked.

“It will allow us to send troops with him,” Valla said, nodding in understanding.

“Suicide!” Rellia shook her head. “Victor may be able to fight or jump free, but what of those troops? They’ll be deep behind enemy lines, outnumbered . . .”

“I won’t take a bunch of people to die so I can have an easier fight.”

“Do you wish us to win this battle? Do you want to keep even greater numbers from dying?” Borrius’s voice rose, brittle with disdain, scowling at Victor.

“Sacrifices must be made in war! I hate to label them as sacrifices so bluntly, but the soldiers who go with you will risk everything to save the entire army.”

“How many?” Rellia asked.

“An elite force of five hundred should do,” Borrius immediately answered, clearly having thought his idea through to logical conclusions.

“And if I’m right, and thousands of troops guard the Ridonne?”

“Five hundred strong men and women can create a large enough perimeter around Victor for him to do his work. If they hold until he’s won, there’s no guarantee the Imperials won’t break, and many of those heroes will live to fight again.”

“I’ll lead them,” Lam said, looking at Victor, meeting his eyes and nodding solemnly.

“Like hell!” Valla’s eyes sparked with outrage. “I will lead them. You can come if you want.”

“Valla . . .” Rellia started to say, then she stopped, looking at her daughter, looking up at her daughter, taking in her wyrm-scale armor and the determined, fiery look in her bright, green-blue eyes, and she shook her head. “I’ll join you.”

“Bah!” Borrius growled. “We cannot have all our commanders out there! Rellia, you must stay with me.”

“Hold on a fucking minute,” Victor growled, leaning his prodigious bulk on the table. “I didn’t agree to this shit yet. I might go along with the idea, but first, we need to agree that only volunteers are going to join this fight. If we can’t come up with five hundred volunteers, I’ll go with however many we get. If Lam and Valla want to come, obviously, I’d be a horrible hypocrite to try to stop them, but that doesn’t mean I like it. Rellia, I agree with Borrius—we need you here.”

“This isn’t right.” For the first time in a while, Victor saw genuine anger in Rellia’s eyes. “This entire problem is because of me! Because I trusted the wrong people in my family, let my lips loosen with too much wine, and blathered about my distrust of the Empire, spoke my treason to traitorous boot lickers. I can end this now. Let me go to the Ridonne and accept his parley offer!” When she finished speaking, Rellia was looking at Valla again, staring into her eyes, tears pooling in her own.

“Absolutely not!” Valla growled.

“No.” Borrius held up a hand, and to Victor’s surprise, he was chuckling. “No, dear Rellia. Firstly, I promised your mother to protect you, secondly, we,” he gestured around, obviously not meaning only those in the room, but everyone outside it, the entire army, “are not interested in having our conquest cut short. We will see victory here, and then we will see it again in the Untamed Marches. We’ll have that, or we’ll have death.”

“You speak for everyone?” Rellia snapped.

“Indeed, I do! That’s what it means to join a legion! Those men and women out there,” again he waved his hand in a big arc, “joined this endeavor for many reasons, but they all agreed to follow our command. We will not be stopped by these Imperial conscripts.” When he said conscripts, he sneered, and Victor had a feeling it was an old insult.

“What do you mean? Conscripts? The Legion isn’t voluntary?”

Lam looked at Victor and cleared her throat. “Not for everyone. I joined freely, though many in my station wouldn’t have. Nobles, on the other hand,” she nodded at Valla, “usually enlist. Even so, many, many soldiers do not willingly sign up for war. They’re recruited, and sometimes they’re rather reluctant.”

“We would crush Pazra-dak’s army if another hadn’t come to support him. If you kill the Ridonne, Pazra and the other, then we will crush them still. We’ll have them fleeing before an hour passes if you cut the head off the snake,” Borrius continued speaking as though the topic hadn’t diverged.

“So?” Valla steered the conversation back on course, “How will we get our force through their main lines to defend Victor?”

“With a charge, with Victor as the spearpoint.” Borrius pointed at the map, placing his finger near the gate of their encampment, and then drew a straight line over the grasslands to the drawing of a tent labeled “Ridonne.”

“Cavalry? All of us?” Lam frowned, and Victor could see she was trying to wrap her head around the logistics.

“Do we have that many mounts?” Valla asked.

“No, closer to two hundred . . .” Rellia said, but then her eyes widened, “the Shadeni.”

“Will they let us use their roladii? A few hundred?” Valla looked to Victor with her question.

“Yeah, they will, but it sucks we have to ask it of them.”

“Their lives are just as dependent on this action as the rest of ours.” Borrius shrugged. “If you could uncast the die that threw their lot in with ours, I’m sure you would, but there’s no going back. The hunter clan is with us, for good or ill.”

“Well,” Victor straightened up, “I’ve been putting off talking to Tellen and Thayla. I’ll go do it now and break this news to them.” He looked at Valla and Lam, “Gather the troops, and I’ll address them in a few minutes, say half an hour.” They nodded to him, and Victor turned to leave.

“Victor,” Rellia said, and he turned back, raising an eyebrow. “Thank you. Thank you for not throwing me to Ridonne, and thank you for risking yourself to try to win this confrontation.”

“We’ll win, Rellia. We’ll win, and don’t thank me. Thank the soldiers, though; I think it’ll mean a lot coming from you.” Victor hurried out of his home, and, with purpose and haste, he made his way through the encampment to the Shadeni wagons and tents. He didn’t have to announce himself—he was a spectacle going through the camp, receiving shouts of welcome and drawing a small crowd everywhere he moved. The Shadeni saw him coming, and one of them must have alerted Tellen and Thayla, for they were waiting when he walked between two large wagons.

“Victor!” Tellen rushed forward, Thayla behind him, wearing a less enthusiastic expression. “I’ve been hoping you’d find time to stop by!”

“I should have come sooner, Tellen, but I kept getting interrupted.” Victor laughed at the absurdity of his words. “Well, you know what I mean.”

“We saw your speech in the darkness. Saw you standing atop your wagon, stealing the hearts of our people.” Thayla wore a slight smirk, betraying her real

feelings. “Victor, did you punish them? Did you make them pay for what they did to our people?”

“I did, Thayla. I killed more than I can count. I drove them mad with fear until their vile contract twisted them into monsters and sent them here to be slaughtered. I know it wasn’t all of them, and no matter how many there were, it will never bring back the people you lost, but I hope you’ll feel some justice was done. I’m not finished, either.”

“It wasn’t your fault, brother.” Tellen grasped his shoulder, and Victor smiled. Had Tellen ever called him brother before?

“Not directly, but I can’t help feeling if we’d taken another route and if I hadn’t been set on trying to recruit you to our cause, they never would have bothered you.” He frowned and added, “I have more to ask of you, more pain to cause you.”

“Out with it.” Thayla stepped closer and dropped the haughty, angry act. “You know we’ll help where we can.”

“We need your people on the walls, anyone who can shoot a bow or throw ranged magic. Our fortifications won’t hold without the number of troops we’ve designed them for, and I have to take almost a full cohort out on an attack—five hundred troops.”

“You’ll take five hundred against more than ten thousand? Don’t look surprised—we have ears. We know their numbers.” Thayla took Tellen’s hand while she spoke, and Victor could see the worry in her eyes, the dark circles there. She’d been crying, probably consoling the families who’d lost loved ones in the flight from their winter camp.

“Yeah. I’m going to take five hundred and punch through their lines when they next attack. They’re going to fight to give me a chance to kill the leaders, the Ridonne.”

“They’ll die . . .” Tellen said softly.

“Probably. At least a lot of them, which makes my next ask a little hard.”

“What?” Tellen pulled Thayla close as though using her to brace for Victor’s bad news.

“To make a successful charge, we’ll want mounts, and we don’t have enough cavalry, enough mounts. We need . . .”

“You’ll have them. However many roladii you require! We have nearly eight hundred here,” he jerked his thumb back toward the Shadeni section of the encampment.

“Really? I’d thought you’d be more upset . . .”

“If you and your troops will risk your lives, then we can risk some livestock.”
Thayla sighed. “Don’t you know us by now?”

“Yeah, of course I do. It’s just that I feel shitty ‘cause we’ve done nothing but bring you trouble so far. I’m going to make it up to you!”

“I know you will, Victor.” Tellen held out his hand, and Victor engulfed it with his big fist, squeezing the man’s wrist. “Tell me, though, why wait for their attack? Why not rush out now and attack their leaders?”

“The idea is that if they’re mid-attack when we charge out, we won’t have their whole army trying to stop me from killing the Ridonne, hopefully just a couple of thousand. My troops will try to keep them off me while I fight.” Victor shrugged; it made sense to him, but he didn’t know if it was the right move. He was trusting Borrius to know how the Imperials operated. “Anyway, if you wouldn’t mind choosing three hundred roladii and driving them toward the gates, I have to go figure out which soldiers will go on this . . .” he almost said suicide mission but didn’t want to be flippant about the lives his soldiers would be putting on the line. “Dangerous mission.”

“Victor, be careful. Deyni is hoping to spend some time with you soon. Don’t let her down.” Thayla stepped forward and grasped his wrist with her two hands, holding on until he met her eyes. “Promise me.”

“Chingado, Thayla! I can’t promise! I promise I’ll do everything I can to win and come back, okay?”

“No. Promise me you’ll kill those bastards!” She squeezed his wrist, her nails digging into his skin, and Victor saw that she was raw with emotion, feelings she’d been holding down with the force of her will.”

“I will fucking kill those bastards,” he growled.

“That’s more like it.” She let him go, and Victor nodded, then turned, hurrying toward the encampment gate. Troops were already starting to gather; some were milling lazily toward the gate—soldiers on their free shift. Most, though, were being driven in perfect marching formation by their sergeants. Their discipline faltered whenever Victor walked by, and many called out greetings or cheered. A few howled, mimicking the horrible cry of his Aspect of Terror, and Victor couldn’t help smiling at their boldness. He unslung Lifedrinker and lifted her high, meeting the soldiers’ eyes and nodding as he strode past.

When he got to the gate, the other commanders were already standing on the parapet above it, and Victor broke into a jog, heading for some nearby stairs so he could join them. He stomped onto the reinforced wooden walkway, pleased by how sturdy it was—the engineers had been hard at work

bolstering things with materials and Energy. When he stood at the center of the gate, looking back into the encampment, the troops were still gathering, and Rellia asked, “Were they receptive?”

“Yeah, we’ll have our mounts, and their people will join our troops on the walls.”

“That’s excellent, Victor.” Borrius pushed closer and nudged past Rellia. “Did they have any concrete numbers for you?”

“No, but it will be plenty. More than the five hundred you guessed. Most of the hunters are good with a bow.”

“Excellent, excellent.” Borrius nodded, pulling back, oblivious to the scowl Rellia had directed at him.

Valla, standing with Lam on Victor’s left, asked, “Do you want us to speak?”

“Nah, I know what I’m going to say.” He glanced around the platform, then, nodding, said, “You all should back up a pace or two. They hurried to comply, and Victor chuckled, then he cast Titanic Aspect, taking a deep, steadying breath as his perspective changed and the ground grew further away. He heard a lot more muttering and even some scattered cheers from the troops, and he looked out over them, watching as the last few units marched into position. Nodding, he loosened his hauberk and reached in to pull out the voice amplifier Lam had given him.

After he activated it, he squared his shoulders and yelled, “Troops! Listen up.” His voice boomed out and echoed over the encampment, and in its wake, silence reigned, silence so complete a cough to clear a throat stood out like a squalling child in a quiet room. “Thank you,” Victor said, speaking normally, trusting the magic to carry his voice far enough. “We made it through the long, dark night! Congratulations on your victory, troops!”

Cheers and shouts answered that proclamation and Victor couldn’t help smiling, couldn’t help holding Lifedrinker high again, shaking her to more and more cheers. “They can hear you!” he roared. “They can hear you cheering, and they know fear! Trust me—they know fear!” When the double meaning of his words registered, the troops’ cheering and stomping grew to thunderous levels, and Victor pumped Lifedrinker up and down, loving every minute of it. When he started to glow with a sparkling, golden aura, he realized he’d let glory-attuned Energy seep out of his Core, filling his pathways, and he laughed, shaking his head ruefully; he was a hound for glory. There wasn’t any denying it.

“Listen now!” he roared, and the cheering and stomping almost instantly stopped. “Our expert on the Imperial Legion, Tribune Borrius,” Victor pointed to the older man who stood up straight and visibly began to perspire, “is quite certain the Imperials will attack us with everything they have tonight or early in the morning. They will try to overwhelm us because they know damn well that we’ll win in a drawn-out conflict.” He paused for a moment to see his words

register on the troops. He waited just long enough for them to start muttering, then he continued.

“We have a plan to break them, however. I’m going to ride forth with the greatest swordswoman in this army, my Tribune Primus, Valla.” Victor reached down his mighty fist and snatched Valla’s wrist between his thumb and forefinger, lifting her arm high. The soldiers began to cheer, but Victor held up a gigantic arm silencing them, then continued, “Not just us, though. We’ll also ride with the mighty Tribune Lam,” something came over him, steeped in glory as he was, and he roared, “Lam the Empire Breaker! Valla Ridonne Bane!” He stepped to the side, almost stomping on Rellia and Borrius as they scurried back, and held his hands out, showcasing the two women.

His words had the desired effect; the troops went wild with cheers, breaking their formations, howling, waving weapons, and firing spells into the air to burst in every color and element. Valla glared at Victor but knew she couldn’t rebuke him. She drew Midnight and held her high, and Lam spread her magnificent wings, lifting herself into the air, spreading her arms wide, apparently enjoying the glory. Victor watched them for a few moments, then, with a huge smile, he turned on the troops and roared, “That’s not all!”

It took a moment for everyone to quiet down, but by the time Lam settled beside Victor, most of the muttering had dissipated. “We three will be riding out to kill the Ridonne who lead that army,” Victor threw his great arm in a wide circle, indicating the distant troops. Again, the soldiers started to cheer, but he kept speaking, his voice booming over them, “We’ll need some soldiers to ride with us, brave soldiers willing to pit themselves against a much larger force. We want volunteers because there’s a good chance they’ll die out there. I’ll be busy fighting the Ridonne, and I need courageous, strong soldiers to keep the bastard Imperials off my back.” As his words died down, the troops were quiet, but they didn’t look crestfallen; they looked like they were holding their breath, eager to hear his next words.

“Do I have any volunteers?”

As the troops erupted with shouts and frenzied hand waving, and nearly every soldier and many of the non-combat personnel pushed forward, trying to be noticed by Victor, Borrius muttered, perhaps only for Rellia’s ears, though Victor heard him, “They’re going to kill each other fighting to join him. We’ll have to have a lottery—an ancestors-damned lottery to form a suicide unit.”