

Victor sat atop his horse, looking out over the long column of marching soldiers. He patted the Mustang's shoulder and turned to where Rellia, Valla, and Lam had stopped, their mounts unable to reach the crest of the scree-covered slope. They also observed the army, Rellia pointing and saying something, her voice lost in the wind. They'd been on the march for nearly two weeks, making steady progress eastward. They couldn't have asked for better weather or easier ground; the grasslands had fallen away beneath their feet, and now, after they crossed this ravine, they'd be only a day or two at the most from Tellen's clan.

Borrius traveled in Rellia's scout airship, keeping an eye on things from above, and he and the other hired airship had confirmed that no Imperial army lay in ambush, at least not for a hundred miles in any direction. The evening before approaching this ravine, they'd met to pore over maps, ensuring that there was no way they could be ambushed during the crossing. It was a likely spot—a narrow bridge, only wide enough for a single wagon to pass at once, would slow them, forcing the army to split. Borrius felt sure that if an ambush were imminent, it would happen here.

Victor nudged the Mustang, willing it to descend to the others, and it nimbly hopped down, hardly disturbing a loose rock. Something about the mount's spirit nature allowed it to traverse nearly any terrain, barely affected by the ground, be it grass, scree, or mud. "They reached the bridge," he said, coming to a rest next to Rellia's Vidanii—a lovely white creature, smaller but far prettier than Thistle.

Valla scratched at Uvu's ear, eliciting a chuffing groan from the big cat, and said, "Let's hope Borrius was right. If I were going to attack us, I'd wait until half the army had crossed. Are you sure you shouldn't be over there, Victor?"

"Nah. If the Ridonne attacks, I'll Berserk and jump that ravine."

"Roots!" Lam scoffed, shaking her head.

"Is that considered a bad word among the Ghelli?"

"No. Not really a 'bad' word, but certainly an exclamation."

"I don't know what you're exclaiming about. You could just fly over that ravine." Victor shrugged, winking at Lam as they bantered.

"Enough, enough," Rellia sighed. "If Borrius isn't right, then this was a foolish choice, using this route. We could have traveled northward to skirt this ravine."

"Which would have brought us further into the Empire and added weeks to our journey," Valla replied, holding up a finger for each point.

"Yeah. We've been over it. What's the point of airships if we don't trust their scouting? Besides, your Imperial contacts in Persi Gables insist the Empire didn't attack us. If they'd lie about that, I think it's probably wise to avoid other cities." Victor had just finished speaking when Lam's mount, a large bull roladii, snorted and hopped, suddenly skittish of Uvu, even though the cat had hardly moved, simply lifting a paw to lick at it.

"Rotten roots!" Lam jerked the animal's reins, pulling it away and closer to Victor; none of the other animals seemed to mind his Mustang.

“Now, that was a curse, right?”

“Yes, Victor.” Lam chuckled.

“Nothing to do but watch and wait at this point,” Rellia said, ignoring the interruption.

“Yep,” Victor said. Watching the foot soldiers progress over the plains was easily his least favorite part of the whole affair. He often found himself daydreaming about what the army would be like if he could summon thousands of Mustangs. He figured they’d already be assaulting the Untamed Marches if that were possible. The best part of the journey had to be the evenings after the legion set camp. He and Polo would spar, and afterward, he’d host the expedition’s leaders for dinner. He wasn’t the only one with a travel home, but even Rellia acknowledged that his was the nicest.

He wasn’t an expert cook and often enlisted one of the real cooks that had joined the legion in that capacity, and though he enjoyed watching and eating what they prepared, he’d decided that he probably wasn’t the type to spend time trying to improve the skill beyond basic. Even so, it was a nice routine. They’d sip drinks and study the map in his little library, making plans and contingencies, then sit around at his big dining table, eating and becoming more than just co-leaders of an army; they were fast becoming friends.

Despite her fear of rumors, Valla had taken up residence in one of the spare bedrooms in his home. He wished something was going on that might be worthy of rumors; after their little stroll through Persi Gables, there’d been little in the way of affection between them. He’d hoped her words had largely been bluster, her espoused desire not to be a “consolation” for him. The truth was, Victor didn’t know how to respond to that. Should he have said his feelings for Tes were just a crush, that they didn’t matter and weren’t real? He felt like she would have read the lie in those words.

As the others kept talking about the road ahead, commenting on the army’s progress as it slowly snaked over the bridge, Victor stole sideways looks at Valla, wishing he were smarter when it came to women. Was he doomed to be alone until he someday proved worthy of Tes’s attention? He shook his head and almost called himself a dummy out loud. Only Valla knew about Tes. Only Valla would know she was being compared to the dragon-woman. He could meet someone else. Spend time with someone else. He sighed and rubbed at his head—he didn’t want someone else. He wanted Valla, but she was right; he wanted Tes too.

“Something wrong?” Lam asked him, looking up from the back of her stocky roladii.

Valla and Rellia were talking about cavalry drills they wanted to implement when they finished crossing and pitched camp, so Victor spoke to Lam in a low voice, “Nah, just thinking about all the stuff I don’t know.”

“No matter how much you learn, you’ll always find more you don’t know.”

Victor looked more closely at Lam, recognizing the experience behind her words. Her glittering wings were folded behind her, and she sat with her hands, one atop the other, on her saddle horn. Her eyes were distant, and he asked, “Remembering something in particular?”

“Mistakes made, Victor. Many, many mistakes. For what it’s worth, I think you’re doing a good job so far. You’re listening to the advice of more experienced people, you’re present and attentive to the captains, and you’ve been building camaraderie among the commanders. The soldiers have heard of your victory over the Ridonne, and while many quake in fear that the Empire is against us, most of them are buoyed by your strength. It’s good that you spar with Polo on the practice green each night—your bouts are the premier entertainment for the troops; they barter for free shifts so they can observe.”

“Hah! Thanks, Lam. Yeah, I noticed our audience seems to grow a bit each day. It’s fun.” While Lam was speaking, Rellia and Valla had moved further along the hillside. Judging by their gestures, they were looking at and discussing something about the sixth cohort, one of the two fully mounted ones. Victor looked back at Lam, considered whether he should open his mouth about the subject on his mind, and finally said, “Hey, can I ask you something? Just between us.”

“Of course, Victor.” Lam matched his conspiratorial tone, shifting her roladii a little closer.

“Well, I want to joke right now and ask if you can tell me the secret to understanding women, but seriously . . . oh, shit, it’s too complicated. Forget I said anything.” Victor sighed, desperately resisting the urge to look at Valla lest Lam figure out what he was thinking.

“You’re closer to Valla than she lets on?” Lam asked, glancing toward the mother and daughter, ensuring they weren’t listening.

“No. She’s very honest about how close we are.”

“You want to be closer?”

“Yeah, I do, but she has a very damn valid reason for not wanting that.”

“And it’s too complicated to explain?” Lam frowned, one of her emerald eyes narrowing as she said, “Ah, let me guess, there’s another woman.”

“*Chingado*,” Victor hissed. “Not exactly, Lam, but yeah, pretty close. It’s just,” Victor struggled to pick the right words and finally just blurted, “Well, she was a hell of a lot higher level than us—a hell of a lot older. We met in Coloss, and let’s just say she’s not in our league. I probably won’t see her for a very, very long time. Nothing happened, but Valla’s not blind—she saw I fell for her; I mean the other woman. Is that a good reason not to be with me?”

“I don’t know. I’m not Valla, but I can relate. I’d hate to think the one I gave my heart to was holding something back, waiting, hoping for something more. If you really think it’s unlikely you’ll meet this other woman again soon, perhaps the feeling will fade. For both of you, I mean. Perhaps you’ll come to realize that the woman you’re so enchanted by is different in here,” she tapped her forehead, “than out here.” She gestured around, indicating the world. “Maybe Valla will come to realize you’re serious about her. Maybe she’ll realize you’d do just about anything for her and decide that’s enough.” Lam shrugged. “You’ve got time.”

“Thanks, Lam.” Victor offered her a rather pathetic smile, and she chuckled. They sat in silence for a long while, watching the army progress, and, despite Rellia’s concerns, they were soon watching the last of the cohorts cross the bridge, with only the wagons, non-combat personnel, and the rear guard left on this side.

“That went well,” Rellia said as she and Valla rode close again.

“Yep.” Victor offered her and Valla a thumbs-up and felt like an idiot.

Rellia, to his surprise, mimicked the gesture and then asked, “Your friend’s clan is a day’s march from here, yes?”

“Right. I think so. Valla showed you on the map, right?”

“Correct. I was just confirming. So, have you had any word? Do you think they’ll join our cause? We could use another couple hundred skilled scouts.”

“No. Thayla won’t be in the spirit realm for a couple more weeks. We’ll have to wait and see.”

“Well, let’s go and oversee the fortifications,” Lam said, urging her roladii down the hill toward the line of big wagons waiting to cross the bridge. By the time they caught up to the tail-end of the train, almost all of the wagons had crossed, and it was only a matter of minutes until it was their turn. As they rode over the wooden bridge with its great spans of lumber, clearly crafted with prodigious use of Energy, some Ghelli scouts fluttered up from underneath, their job done. Borrius had insisted on Ghelli being stationed under the bridge during the crossing to guard against sabotage.

“All’s clear?” Valla called to the lead scout, a sergeant named Feya.

“All clear, Primus.”

Once over the bridge, they rode down from the hillside, rejoining the enormous expanse of tall, blue-green grass. Victor knew the plains would extend all the way to the Starfall Mountains, through which the army would have to pass, and, after that, they’d follow roads through foothills, forests, and, if all went well, in a couple more weeks, they’d pass through the Granite Gates and descend into the Untamed Marches. He and the other commanders stopped at the bottom of the slope and watched the sergeants break their cohorts into squads and begin fortifying their evening camp.

The legion was immensely efficient at the procedure of making camp. Every squad knew their role, and they all had the advantage of magic, dimensional containers and stamina beyond anything a base human could match. Latrines were dug, and solid outhouses summoned from dimensional wagons to place overtop the holes. Trenches were scooped from the earth by squads with members adept in the use of their earth affinity. Walls were thrown up in great sections, once again, pulled from magical wagons that circled the camp in opposite directions. Tents were erected, leaving a central area for the commanders to call forth their own dwellings. Finally, the wagons were circled, and a mess hall of sorts was set up between them.

After the main camp was done, the mounted cohorts built a corral for their animals, and squads broke up into their shift work—drilling, cleaning, assisting the cooks, standing watch in a staggered perimeter, and, if they were lucky—or unlucky depending on whom you asked—resting, eating, and leisure time for a later shift. Victor rode through the gates before the soldiers closed them, then made his way to the center of the camp, where he took his usual position to set down his travel home and activate it.

He and Polo typically drilled a couple of hours after the camp was made, and he liked to use this time to hang out in the library with Valla; they'd been slowly working on copying the books Tes had given her, and Victor was finding a new, strange enjoyment in reading through the spellcrafting tomes. Reading through was probably a poor description; he was only about a fourth of the way through the first book in the series. That evening, Valla hadn't ridden with him to the center of camp, so when he went into the jade house, he sat by himself in the library, thumbing through the sections of the book he'd already read.

The minutes ticked by, becoming an hour, and he lost himself studying spell patterns meant to improve the variability of a spell, allowing for multiple contingencies in the target's status that would change the outcome of the casting. He was so deeply engrossed that Valla startled him when she cleared her throat, leaning an elbow on the map table. "Hey," he said, looking up from the chair in the corner where he liked to sit.

"I was meeting with the livestock master. He's concerned about Thistle."

"What? Why?"

"He says he's not eating as much. When was the last time you visited him?"

"Yesterday!"

"Okay, okay. Don't get upset," Valla said, making a placating gesture with her hand. "He's probably tired of being tethered with a bunch of stupid roladii."

"Yeah, well, tomorrow he'll be rejoining his sister, so that should help a lot."

"Yes, that's good. Are you nervous?"

"About?"

"To see Thayla and Tellen. To hear their decision about joining us."

"Well, I wasn't," Victor closed his book and sat up straighter. "Now I'm feeling like I should be."

"Don't!" Valla laughed. "I wasn't trying to hint at anything. Either way, it's fine, Victor. If they don't join us for the campaign, you can try to get them to relocate closer to the Marches after we've won some land."

"Yeah." Victor nodded. He stretched his neck, frowned, then said, "What time is it? I should probably find Polo."

"Oh, he asked me to let you know he can't spar tonight. He lost a bet with Captain Gaks; his cohort is standing two watches."

"What? No, that's bullshit." Victor scooted to the edge of his seat. "I'm missing out on training, and we're going to have tired soldiers on watch. I'm not cool with it."

"I told him you wouldn't like it." Valla eyed him coolly, perhaps waiting to see how he'd solve the problem.

“What were they betting on?”

“Polo thought we’d get ambushed at the bridge, and Gak said there was no way you’d walk us into a trap so obvious.”

“What the fuck? Polo was against me?”

“Not against you, Victor! He simply thought it was too perfect an ambush site. He thought the Ridonne had something up their sleeves.”

“Shit. Now I want him to have extra guard duty. At least he’s going out with the men. Captains don’t usually do that, right?”

“Correct.” Valla was smiling, watching him work through the situation.

“You think it’s all right?”

“Yes. His men will get four hours of sleep, even standing two watches. They’re Energy users, Victor; they’ll be fine. As you said, Polo will be out with them.”

“Right, well, screw it. I can use a break from the axe. I’m so fucking close to hitting epic! I can taste it! It’s driving me crazy. I wish I had that Ridonne around to spar with.”

“Gah!” Valla almost choked as she twisted her fingers in a weird gesture. “Don’t say things like that!”

“Hah!” Victor leaned forward, his eyes gleaming with amusement. “I’ve never seen you make that sign. Are you feeling superstitious?”

“I’m hopeful that the Ridonne you chased away was just testing us, feeling us out, and that he wasn’t acting with the blessing of the Empire.”

Victor stood up and moved over to the map table to lean against it, standing beside Valla. “Why don’t we know yet? Why don’t we know that *pendejo*’s name? What’s going on with the prisoners?”

“Rellia’s Mind Caster has done everything he knows how to do, but he can’t crack the geas that clouds their minds. He’s killed several of the Imperials trying.”

“Damn it, Valla. I didn’t want to know that.” Victor rubbed at his chin, then said, “Well, I can’t hide from that kind of stuff, I guess. Is he still trying?”

“Yes.”

“All right, well, wanna help me do some cooking? Since Polo screwed me over, I might as well have some fun in the kitchen. I’m going to try my hand at recreating one of my favorites from home—*tamales*.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah, come on, let’s see if I can remember what I saw my *abuela* mixing up. I’m sure I need something like corn flour. Shit, do you guys have corn?”

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Pazra-dak leaned against the tree bole, looking up at the canopy of massive branches far over his head. He rubbed his shoulder spine, or, more accurately, at the spot on his shoulder where the giant had cut him. He growled at the memory, growled at the feeling of rough, knobby skin where he’d scarred. The first mark a lesser being had ever made upon his flesh. He banished the thought, savoring the night air. It was cool there in the Blue Deep, cool, dim, and quiet. It had better be quiet; he’d ordered his Legion to be silent. No sense in letting the fool hunters on the plains have a clue that they lurked nearby.

He folded his arms over his chest, carefully avoiding the spines at his elbows. It had taken him a decade to get used to the things, frustrated by how they complicated his life, from clothing to furniture to lovers. He saw them as the blessing they were now, however. He’d come to understand that the spines were a mark of his greatness, his strength, his durability, and his right to rule. Not all Ridonne gained them, but those who did were regarded as powerful, the brutes of the Imperial bloodline, not to be trifled with.

He let his golden-tinted vision fall upon his camp and saw his soldiers about their tasks, moving slowly and carefully, never uttering a word as they sharpened weapons, ate cold rations, or maintained the camp. Six thousand soldiers, minus the hundred he’d lost on the plains. Would they be a match for the legion that upstart, ap’Yensha, had gathered? If not for the giant, he would say yes. It didn’t matter, in any case—his brother, Rono-dak, and his Legion would soon be there. With twelve thousand men, they’d crush the fools between them.

He motioned for his aide, Senena, to approach. She straightened up, unfolding from the shadow of a nearby tree, and hurried to him, her skin more black and gold with tattooed glyphs than the red of their people. She’d come close to joining the ranks of the Ridonne, but her father had insisted she embrace the Wanact bloodline. As a result, her spirit was adrift, constantly glimpsing more than the here and now. “Tell me, witch. Will my brother arrive in time?”

“I see him,” she said, her voice a husky whisper. “He dives between trees and leaps brambles. I see great trees with mighty trunks, bigger than these. Hope lives in his heart, not despair.”

“Good. He runs to us from Twilight Home. If he carries hope, he’ll make it. And the giant?”

“I’ve told you, Lord. I cannot look at him. He burns my eye.”

“Then burn your eye! Tell me where he is!”

“I see only white fire when my gaze drifts his way. His spirit is stronger than mine, Lord.”

“Begone. We’ll speak later.” As she slunk away, Pazra turned to where his scout captain lurked, hunkered down on a stone, chewing the meat from a bird carcass he’d roasted. Ancestors only knew when. “Come here, Gildyn.”

“Aye, Lord?” the scout replied, leaping up, allowing his meal to fall to the leafy loam.

“What word from your scouts?”

“The giant and his army are close. They crossed the ravine this day.”

“So, as we'd suspected, they'll be with the hunters tomorrow.” Pazra waved the man away, then pressed his fist against the tree behind him, grinding it into the bark until his knuckles cracked.

“Come, brother. Hurry. We've a feast before us.”