

“Didn’t you just say an Imperial Legion was stationed in Twilight Home? Could that be the source of the trouble we’ve had? Who commands them?” Rellia asked, turning to her daughter.

“Like all legions—a Ridonne. No one ever sees them, at least no one outside the Imperial households. They move in carriages or fly on ships, always observing and commanding from afar. Does anyone know their names? How many there are? No—it’s part of their power. The fact that one of them confronted us directly was unheard of. Is he among his troops? Is this another force altogether and not a sanctioned army? Questions we’ll struggle to find answers to out here. Perhaps Chokodo-dak could shed some light on it.”

“He and his wife are . . . indisposed.” Rellia frowned, and everyone was quiet for a moment, contemplating questions they couldn’t answer.

Victor’s mind raced, his impatience driven to new heights as he began to connect the dots and realize that most of the people he cared about were now in mortal danger. Valla’s long-winded response to her mother became background noise as he stood up and started for the door, then stopped, unsure exactly what to do but wanting to do something. He looked at Thayla, and everyone stared at him. “You need to get Deyni, Chandri, Chala—anyone else you want—and put ‘em in the wagon and get the fuck out of here.”

“We have bolt holes in the longhouses, tunnels on the lowest levels that lead to hidden caverns. We’ll evacuate.” Tellen stood up, his face losing some of its color, and began to walk toward the wooden steps that led down to the next level of his longhouse. I’ll get some scouts to spread the word.”

“We need to prepare the army. I need to inform Borrius.” Rellia stood, and everyone else followed suit.

Victor watched her, frowning, thinking about Tellen’s words—hidden tunnels and bolt holes. He shook his head, thoughts coming together, and said, “No.”

“What?” Rellia asked.

“No, Tellen. Get everyone, all of your people, and hurry to our encampment. The asshole was waiting here. He was hiding in the Blue Deep. He knew we were coming this way. He probably knows I have a connection here. He’s going to kill you all to draw us out, to make us do something stupid. Bolt holes won’t stop him.”

“He’s right,” Valla said. “We’re strong in our encampment. We can stand against an equal force there and put the burden of attack on him. If they’re on the move, we must hurry before we’re cut off.”

“Do it, Tellen,” Thayla said, locking eyes with Victor. “Let’s hurry.” She didn’t wait for a response, charging for the door and rushing outside, calling out to the hunters nearby. The next twenty minutes felt like pure madness and chaos to Victor as the clan evacuated their longhouses. The hunters were trained for this; Victor knew well that the clan had often been chased off their hunting grounds by Imperial forces or overzealous nobles with their personal armies. It was part of the reason they rotated camps throughout the year, moving on before they were noticed by too many and garnered attention.

All of that considered, it still took a while for the roladii to be brought into order, fitted with tack, and then mounted up. Everyone in the clan was either riding a mount or a wagon pulled by bigger roladii before they moved out, hurrying as quietly as possible through the darkness of the grasslands.

Darkness was an understatement. Thick black clouds had rolled in, blotting out the moons and the stars and testing the resolve of the children and craft folk of the clan. Victor wanted to summon his banner, wanted to cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, but he didn't—they were hurrying quietly through the grass, the forest some miles to the south. He didn't want to bring attention to their shadowy procession.

Instead, he rode up and down the column, softly encouraging everyone, trusting in Guapo to inspire them with his flashing eyes and sparking hooves. All the while, he hoped the tall grass sufficiently masked the Mustang's showy behavior. He used the vantage of his height to look toward the line of blackness in the distance, just a shade darker than the blackness of the sky, knowing it was the forest on the horizon. He willed himself to see the Ridonne's forces approaching them, but he couldn't. He had to trust the scouts that Tellen had sent out. Hopefully, the Shadeni, at home on these plains, could outmaneuver any Imperials sent to guard against the clan's escape.

The army encampment wasn't far, and after a tense half hour of hurrying silently through the blackness, the lights of the fortifications came into view, and Victor could feel the mood change among the fleeing clan folk. They saw those glowing Energy lamps and murmured with excitement and hope—Victor could no longer contain himself. He reached into his Core and, with a massive torrent of Energy, summoned his Banner of the Champion. Golden light blazed from the prominent sun on his standard, bathing the clan in its light, and Guapo whinnied wildly, rearing up on his hind hooves.

The Shadeni gasped and cried out, and Victor was sure he heard Deyni whoop from the bench of his wagon up the line. He raced his horse along the row of clan folk all the way to the front, waving to Deyni and Chandri as he passed them, then looped the front of the column and raced down the other side, trying to share his banner's positive effect with all the dozens of families. It had been a while since he'd seen the whole clan out like this, and he'd almost forgotten how big a group it was—more than a thousand people, many of them children. What would he do if they were killed because of his need to try to convince Thayla to join him?

That thought driving his words, he began to exhort them to hurry, to urge them to run. "Go! Go, hurry to the palisade! Get inside the camp!" Tellen and the other high-ranking hunters in the clan took up his cry, urging their mounts to gallop, racing along the column with him, trying to get the wagons to move faster. At first, Victor didn't know if he was being smart or foolish; what if one of the wagons broke down or someone fell off? Some of the roladii were overburdened, with several children sharing a seat. His doubts were soon banished when horns began to blow from the direction of the forest, and fiery bolts by the hundreds filled the sky, screaming through the black toward the fleeing clan.

"Run!" Victor screamed, no longer worried about keeping order. What good would it be if they were calm while riddled with flaming arrows? The Shadeni responded to his bellow, whipping their roladii into a gallop. The wagons bounced and jostled their occupants, but the plains were largely smooth, the slope leading up to the camp gentle. He saw Tellen yelling and gesturing to his scouts, saw Rellia charging ahead on her white vidanii, yelling for the sentries to open the

gate, and when he turned, he found Valla and Polo rushing toward him as the first arrows began to fall, whistling through the air, stinking of pitch and magical sulfur.

“Get down!” Polo bellowed, stepping in where Victor had frozen, his eyes wide, tracking the falling, fiery arcs of the missiles and watching as they *thunked* into wagons or punctured thick roladii hides, dropping them or pulling forth agonized screams—a sound Victor had never heard from the throat of one of the funny, feathered, docile mounts. It wasn’t the falling or screaming roladii that had stalled him, though—he’d seen a little girl, probably younger than Deyni, fall from a wagon, a flaming arrow igniting her with its magical flames.

There was no helping it after that; his rage Core began to flow, and he cast Iron Berserk. He vaguely heard Valla and Polo speaking, yelling, and gesturing, but he didn’t listen. He did spare them a glance and grunted, “Go to Borrius. Defend the camp.” Then he urged his, suddenly much larger, Mustang to charge the distant row of archers just as they launched another volley of flaming arrows at the panicking, surging column of refugees. The only peace in the back of his roiling, rage-filled mind came from the sight of his magical wagon, pulled by the sturdy, quick vidanii, Starlight, slipping through the gap in the camp’s fortifications.

With his banner high over his massive shoulders, and his fiery hooved steed ripping through the grass, Victor raced through the darkness, galloping straight through fires that had begun to spread, the grass ignited by the magical flames of the Imperial archers. So fast was the Mustang that he sucked the wind in behind him, and fires died as Victor charged through. He was among the archers in only a few heartbeats, and Lifedrinker began to reap a bloody harvest as he trampled through them, swinging the axe left and right.

He cut through flimsy gold and black helmets and armor, shattered bows like kindling, and doused the tall grass with the red blood of the Imperials. Perhaps they hadn’t anticipated him charging. Perhaps they’d rushed ahead to get some volleys off, surprised by the sudden flight of the clan. Whatever the cause, the archers were exposed with no heavy soldiers to guard them and no Ridonne to challenge Victor. He couldn’t have counted them, and it didn’t matter to him if there were ten or a million of the bastards—Victor was determined to kill every last one of them. Every time his rage began to cool, he remembered that little girl, ignited by a random arrow fired by one of the men or women he was currently butchering.

The archers weren’t straw dummies; they tried to flee, to fire upon him, to hide. It didn’t matter. Victor’s banner was brilliant, and he rode through the grass like death incarnate, trampling and slashing them. If Victor had been cognizant, if he hadn’t allowed his rage to overtake him, he might have realized he’d killed dozens, maybe hundreds of the archers and that he was slowly being drawn further away from the army encampment. The archers, perpetrators in his mind, had become bait, and he gobbled it up, a lone light in the blackness of a magical night, blazing as he raced from one fleeing Imperial to another.

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“What’s the mad fool doing?” Borrius asked, standing atop the legion’s fortifications, watching the blazing standard of their leader as it raced back and forth in the distant darkness. Everywhere was blackness, from the sky to the grasslands, to the distant horizon where he knew the enemy lurked in their numbers—the Blue Deep.

“He saw the arrows come down, saw some of the clan folk fall. He’s mad with rage,” Valla replied. “I should go to him.”

She, Rellia, and Lam stood nearby. Everyone else had gone to command their cohorts, readying for a direct attack. Borrius felt good about their chances against an Imperial Legion. Their legion was strong, stronger than the last he'd commanded, and, more than that, they had the advantage of fortification. "He should come back. Look how distant he is. They could have a trap prepared for him; what if that Ridonne is out there? What if he's devised a warded cage or worse?"

Rellia removed the looking glass from her eye and said, "He's slaughtering them. I think he's killed half the archers. Don't go out there, Valla; his mount is far faster than Uvu."

"And if this is a trap?" Valla hissed, tugging the hilt of her sword to expose several inches of cobalt metal.

"If it is, it won't be just for him," Borrius said, his mind made up. "They'll want to draw us out, to get us to rush to our leader's aid. The attack on the hunters was likely meant to do just that. Ancestors be praised that you had a chance to evacuate them."

"So, we should just let him die?" Lam asked, her luminous wings twitching with impatience.

"He's not easy to kill," Valla said, and Borrius nodded to her, grateful that, though she was close to the gigantic Legate, she had a good head on her shoulders.

"We must prepare. Gather the strongest fire casters among us. Let's get some orbs in the sky. No point sitting in the darkness like this."

"Sending the word," Edeya said, scribbling in the command book. Not half a minute later, all around the palisade, orbs of fiery light surged into the air, bathing the grasslands around them in their warm, yellow-red glow.

"Why fire?" Rellia asked, "Why not pure Energy? The light is brighter."

"Come, you must remember from your studies. Why would we use fire orbs for light?" If Borrius enjoyed anything as much as commanding an army, it was teaching.

"Because they can be made into weapons," Valla replied, her eyes still trained on the distant blazing standard.

"Why this darkness? Is he hiding his numbers?" Lam asked, turning in a slow circle.

"Likely, or concealing his approach. We could be surrounded. Rellia, I'd like you to send the airships up and get eyes on the ravine we crossed yesterday. If we're wrong about his numbers, we might be wise to stage a fighting retreat to the canyon, cross and utilize the choke point."

"In this blackness?"

"Do they not fly in storms? In the night?"

"Fine," she nodded to Edeya, and the lieutenant began to scribble out orders.

“We’ll lose many lives if we have to retreat. Too many non-combat personnel. Too many wagons.” Valla sounded grim, and once again, Borrius found himself reassessing her. “Damn it, Victor, get back here.” Almost as though she’d summoned them into being with her words, two blazing orbs of light erupted in the darkness beyond their Legate Primus, one red and one yellow, illuminating enormous golden-armored figures on nightmarish steeds.

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After a time, when he struggled to find more archers to cut down, Victor’s anger began to cool, and he started to consider his actions. It felt good to mete out justice, punishing the callous fools who’d launched deadly missiles into the fleeing Shadeni hunters, heedless of the repercussions of those actions, uncaring that children and peaceful crafts folk were being killed. Regardless of the pleasure his vengeance gave him, Victor knew he was being foolish. He was never truly without autonomy anymore; his rage and Berserk made it easy to let go, easy to excuse brash behavior, but part of him knew, the whole time, that he was making himself vulnerable.

The problem with that knowledge was that Victor didn’t care. He hoped that Ridonne would come out and try to take him. He hoped he brought a friend or two. Why shouldn’t he try to settle things himself out here on the plains while Tellen, Thayla, Deyni, and all the others, Valla and Rellia included, were safe behind the palisade? So it was with no great surprise, and certainly, very little fear, when he saw the two Ridonne show themselves. They illuminated the darkness around them, one with a golden yellow orb—Victor recognized the spine-covered bastard he’d already fought—and another with a fat, baleful red light.

They sat atop mounts that looked straight out of a prehistoric movie back on Earth—some kind of raptors with black, leathery skin painted with wild red and yellow patterns and stripes. They were roughly a football field away from Victor, one slightly to his left and the other off to the right, just outside his banner’s bright circle of illumination. “A football field,” he chuckled; he hadn’t thought about football in a long time. As much as he wanted to fight them, as much as he wanted to charge forward and rip them limb from limb, he had to consider the possibility that they might kill him. What would happen to his friends then?

He might be angry, might be willing to fight to the death, but was he willing to let his friends die? No, he decided, staring at those two Ridonne; he shouldn’t play their game. He’d let them stew for a while. In response to his desire, his will, the Mustang reared up and whinnied loudly, then leaped into movement, ripping over the grass in a wide arc as it turned back toward the camp. Victor heard the stomping feet of the Ridonnes’ raptor mounts. He heard the creatures, much larger than roladii, shrieking and gnashing their teeth, but they didn’t stand a chance in a race with Guapo. The horse literally streaked over the plains, and when Victor looked over his shoulder, tears ripping out of his eyes in the stiff wind of his passage, he saw that they’d pulled off, unwilling to pursue him into the lights around the fortifications.

In seconds, he was sliding to a halt before the gates, having arrived faster than the men could pull them open. The only regret Victor had about his actions was that it probably looked like he’d run away. How would that affect the troops’ morale? He needn’t have worried much—they cheered him and howled at the bloody state of his armor and axe, pleased to have some vengeance for the Shadeni who’d been shot down as they raced for the safety of the camp.

The clan wasn’t near the gate; Victor figured Rellia would have ordered them escorted to the center of the encampment with the other wagons and non-combat personnel. He wanted to go to them, to hug Thayla and Deyni, to grasp Tellen’s shoulder, and apologize for the people he’d

lost. He couldn't, though; Rellia and Borrius were standing on the palisade nearby, and she'd met his eye as he rode through, clearly wanting a word with him. Victor hopped down from Guapo, sending him away to frolic on the spirit plane until he needed him again, and then stomped up the sturdy steps to the wooden rampart where the other commanders stood.

Victor was still gigantic, still channeling his Iron Berserk, and when he felt the rampart shudder with his steps, he let the spell drop. Borrius was speaking when he arrived, and Victor caught the tail end, ". . . foolish, but at least he didn't accept their further baiting."

"Yes, yes," Victor grumbled, striding forward, "I'm foolish. I'm impulsive. I'm all that shit. What have you got for me? There are two Ridonne out there, and I killed something like fifty or a hundred archers. How many of Tellen's people did we lose?"

"Twenty-six," Valla said. "Mostly children and non-combat personnel. The arrows hit some hunters, but they proved more resilient; our healers are seeing to them."

"We have scouts and the airships out. When we know more, we can make a better plan," Borrius said, unconcerned that Victor had overheard him.

"What can I do? Should I try to bait the leaders closer? I can't imagine their army will be as effective if we kill those two." Victor leaned against the thick wooden rampart, willing his eyes to see further into the darkness, wishing he knew exactly what to do.

"They won't take such bait," Borrius chuckled. "Those men are sly; they'll have something . . ."

"Legate," Edeya said suddenly, interrupting the older man. "I'm sorry, but I have just received a message from *Balestar*." Victor knew the name; it was Rellia's personal airship.

"Well? Out with it." Borrius didn't wait for one of the two people there with the "Legate" title to acknowledge her.

"The bridge is gone, sir," she gulped, looking around the group, "Sirs. The bridge is gone, and they're under fire. *The Petal* attacked them."

"Treachery!" Rellia cried. Victor couldn't blame her; *The Petal* was the name of the airship she'd hired to supplement *Balestar's* scouting.

Victor's mind raced with the implications as Borrius swore, and Valla reflexively jerked her sword loose from her sheath. Rellia frowned, her eyes going very dark, even in the light of Victor's banner. "Ancestors, damn them. Despite the bad news, it means he's split his legion. Should we sally forth? Charge the fools near the forest or perhaps the ones back toward the ravine?"

"No." Borrius sighed and looked back over the field where, minutes ago, Victor had been fighting. "I fear things are worse than that. Two Ridonne. They wouldn't be so foolish as to split their army if we matched them evenly. If I'm not wrong, there are two armies out there in the black. Two legions. We may be in trouble."