

Victor watched as Borrius barked orders, doing everything he knew to prepare the temporary fortification of the legion's encampment for the assault of a much larger force. He commanded the Earth Casters to increase the width, depth, and number of trenches outside the walls, row upon row of them. Water and Fire Casters followed in their footsteps, filling the trenches with deadly traps. Archers lined the palisades, Air Casters enchanting their arrows with magic that would fade eventually but would bolster their range in the short term.

Meanwhile, one of the magical storage wagons was emptied of its cargo—thousands of tons of stone blocks, arranged in a sturdy outer ring of fortifications, meant to slow or stop any charging soldiers who made it through the trenches and pitfalls in the field. Ranged casters stood at the ready, prepared to make traversing the uneven, difficult terrain a costly affair. "Will it be enough," he asked, staring out into the blackness.

"No," Borrius sighed. "It will cost them dearly to take us, but we don't have what we need to defend against two legions properly. If we had a true keep or a mountain top, some sort of choke point . . . but we don't. We're in the plains, with no significant landmarks for leagues, and the only hope of retreat cut off."

"What if I kill the Ridonne?"

"That would certainly help. Morale is a powerful weapon."

"Mmhmm," Victor grunted, starting to regret not engaging with the two Imperials when he'd had the chance. He supposed they wouldn't have baited him if they hadn't had a plan. "So, you're saying you can't win this?" He gestured out over the battlements where the soldiers were hard at work.

Only Edeya, Rellia, and Valla were within earshot, but Borrius still looked around, frowning, before he answered, "I'm not saying that. If they are too eager or too bold, we might punish them enough in their first assault to make a clean victory impossible."

"So," Rellia cut in, "our fate may depend on the pride or foolishness of the Ridonne."

"We'll see. How long can they keep up this darkness?" Victor asked, "When's sunrise supposed to be?"

"We're an hour from dawn, but we won't see it," Borrius replied. "Not unless we turn our Wind Casters to the task. Personally, I'd rather fight in the dark, using them to aid the archers and drop lightning strikes on the enemy; if the Imperials are using their casters to bring these black clouds, it will reduce their offensive capabilities."

"Not great for morale, though," Valla sighed.

"That's what I'm for." Victor turned and started for the steps leading down from the ramparts. Valla was close on his heels.

"Where are you going?" Rellia called,

"First, I'm going to apologize to Thayla and Tellen. Then I'm going to do something to help bolster the troops." He didn't hear any response, so he kept walking down the steps. Soldiers saw him and saluted, and Victor felt a mixture of emotions—guilt warred with pride, warred with

sympathy. The soldiers were frightened. They'd heard rumors, seen the Ridonne out on the plains, and seen their leader ride away from them. The darkness was oppressive, despite the orbs of flame hovering over the palisade.

He reached into his Core and cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, powering it with more Energy than he ever had before. To him, the shadows retreated, the lights in the camp and hanging in the sky grew brighter, shed a purer light, and doubts began to flee his mind. The effect must have been similar for his troops because the dozens nearby began to cheer, dropping what they were doing to look at him. Victor stood tall—not a titan, but a giant of a man. Lifedrinker hung by his side, his fist wrapped around her haft, and he lifted her high, shouting, "They've picked the wrong army to mess with! We're going to water these fields with the blood of the Ridonne if that's what they want!"

The soldiers cheered, though some of them blanched and looked around as though the shadows out there might manifest into something physical, might punish them for even thinking ill of the Empire. Victor kept walking, spreading his inspiration as he made his way to the center of the camp, dread in his heart, but duty pushing him forward—he had to face Tellen. He had to tell him how sorry he was that some of his people died.

"I've another thought," Valla said, causing him to slow his steps and turn to regard her.

"About?"

"About this darkness and how you should respond. I didn't want to say anything in front of Borrius in case you disagreed."

"Go on." Victor fully turned to face her, glad she'd spoken up before they'd come too close to the circled wagons.

"The Empire wants to break us, to weaken our morale. They're circling us, waiting out in the darkness. They know we won't assault them for two reasons: we have fewer numbers, and we don't know how they're arranged. They sit out there, comfortable in this blackness. Perhaps you should give them a reason to fear the dark."

"Are you suggesting . . ."

"Your terror spell, the one you killed Karnice with. Victor, I've felt it. If you were set loose out there, among their troops . . . Even if they could catch you, would the Ridonne be able to kill you? Perhaps, but, well, maybe my opinion of you is inflated, but I think you'd make them regret trying."

"You think so?" Was Valla honestly asking him to unleash his Aspect of Terror? She'd either managed to block the experience from her mind, or she was a lot more worried about their situation than she let on.

"I do. I think haste is key, too. You have to get out there and sow chaos, fear, and discord before they attack. Let me pass your condolences on to Tellen and Thayla."

"Uh-uh, Valla. I'll think about your idea, but I'm not going to act impulsively. Let me speak with the hunters. I'll be quick. Then I'll run your idea past Borrius and Rellia. If they don't convince me otherwise, I'll do as you ask."

“Oh,” Valla pressed her lips together, visibly clenching her jaw, then she blew out a pent-up breath and said, “Very well. Let’s hurry, though.” She started walking, and Victor followed suit. “Rellia and Borrius don’t know what you can do. They’ll try to dissuade you. Keep in mind their ignorance before you let them convince you to hold back.”

“Rellia knows what I can do . . .”

“She knows you barely beat her in a duel. She doesn’t know that you could swat her like a fly now.”

Victor wanted to respond, to argue that Rellia had seen him in action since then, but they were walking quickly, and he saw a familiar wagon ahead. His heart lifted to see Thistle and Starlight together, tethered just outside the perimeter of the inner ring. Chandri was setting down a bucket near Thistle, and when she looked up and met his eyes, she ran to him. “Oh, man,” Victor had time to say before she crashed into him, squeezing his waist and pressing her face into his stomach, despite the hard armor between them.

“They killed Bassa. They killed *children*, Victor. We didn’t even attack them or offer them any resistance! Why would they do that?” She looked up at him, tears streaking her cheeks, and he saw from the state of her face paints that they weren’t the first.

“Because they wanted to hurt me. I’m sorry.”

“They’re the wrongdoers here, Victor,” Valla said, frowning at Chandri.

“She’s right. It’s not your fault. Tellen and Thayla are with the wounded. Should I get them?”

“Go ahead. I’m going to speak to the people.” Victor squeezed Chandri briefly, then he stepped up to his one-time wagon and grabbed the top, hoisting himself up. He stood there for a moment, contemplating, looking out over the tents and wagons clustered in the center of the encampment, crowds milling about or gathered around fires, and decided some more light might help. He reached into his pathways and built the pattern for Dauntless Radiance—some courage might do these people some good. He pushed a massive torrent of Energy into it and then unleashed the spell high overhead, in the dark sky over the milling refugees.

Like a rip appearing in the sky, a break in the evil clouds, a beam of reddish, golden light fanned downward, illuminating a hundred feet in every direction with its warm, encouraging glow. Conversations died down, and people looked up, shielding their eyes against the bright glare, and if a smile didn’t touch their lips, at least some frowns fell away, and tears dried up. For the second time in his life, Victor tried his hand at public speaking. He cleared his throat and shouted, “Proud Shadeni!”

If any of them hadn’t noticed him yet, that got their attention, and the hundreds of figures began to gravitate toward him, quieting, waiting to hear what else he’d say. As they approached, they felt the Inspiration of the Quinametzin, and their mood improved markedly. At first, Victor was glad to see it, but then he remembered the dead girl and the dozens he hadn’t witnessed dying. He frowned and bellowed, “You’ve been wronged, and it’s my fault. The scum out there sought to punish me by hurting those I care for. I’m sorry!”

Cries of “No!” or even “We love you, Victor!” came from the plains folk, and when he heard not a single outcry or word of hate-filled blame, tears began to pool in Victor’s eyes.

“I want you to know something! If the Ridonne are against us, it’s because they’re corrupt and evil. We’re on the right side of things here. That should be clear by the way they attack children and peaceful hunters. I promise you: justice will find those that ordered the attack. I will find them. If you hear screams in the blackness out there, know it is me, wreaking our vengeance.”

The Shadeni were hurt, they were down, but they were strong, proud people, and when they heard Victor’s words, his promise of retribution, they started to cheer. They stomped their feet and chanted rhythmic hunting songs, and Victor felt his heart begin to swell. Good as it felt to have their continued support, seeing them gathered like that, hearing their cries of love and gratitude, broke something in Victor. He no longer wanted to speak to Thayla and Tellen. He didn’t want to ask Borrius for permission. He had Valla’s blessing, and he wanted to do as she’d suggested.

He raised his voice, bellowing one last time, “Listen to the night! Listen and know that these Imperial bastards chose the wrong people to attack!” With that, he dropped down from the wagon and started walking toward the gates. Valla hurried to match his stride, having to jog lightly. “You need to whip the troops up. My . . . shrieks might scare them. Let them know it’s me. Let them know I’m out there among the enemy, making them regret this bullshit.”

“Victor . . .” her voice was shaky, breathy, “What if I’m wrong?”

“What?” Despite his anger, the urgency in his gut, and the guilt he felt about the Shadeni clan, he couldn’t help it—he grinned at her and said, “Are you worried?”

“I am! This was my idea! I’ll never forgive . . .” she stopped, shaking her head, almost jerking it side to side, and added, “I have to be strong. You’re the one taking the risk.”

“You’re not going to make me promise to return safely?”

“Are you . . . are you teasing me at a time like this?” Her bright eyes, different, redder, and more luminescent than usual in the weird lights cast by all the magical orbs in the sky, flashed at him beneath scowling brows.

“I’m sorry.” Victor sighed and gestured around, “I think I’m just trying to focus on anything to make this all seem less real. We’re surrounded by magical darkness with an unknown number of soldiers waiting to attack us. People I knew, people I’d spoken to, helped, and eaten meals with, were killed just a little while ago! I think the chance to flirt with you let me push some of that away.”

“Well. I hope you’ll remember me when you’re out there. I hope the thought of me praying that you’re safe and that you don’t go too far will keep you from losing yourself to the beast you become. Ancestors! Are we sure you must do this?”

“I have to do something. Borrius is spinning a lot of bullshit to try to act like we still have a chance.”

"It's true," Valla huffed, "No matter how you frame it, we're likely outnumbered two to one. We aren't alone with our abilities, our preparations." She gestured to the walls and the fiery orbs. "Our fortifications will help, but they aren't castle walls enhanced by glyphs and magic . . ."

"Yeah. I'll try to come back before I run out of juice. Tell Borrius to get hunters out in the grass to try to gauge my success. This might be the moment. If I can break them or cause enough chaos, maybe we should attack."

"He won't like that. I'll pass it on, though!" she added hastily when Victor looked back at her with a frown. "Victor, it doesn't matter. Do enough damage, and the Imperials will dread attacking. It will make a difference." She reached out to grasp his wrist. Her fingers were cold, and they made him take note of the fact that the air had chilled quite a lot with the thick layer of clouds the Ridonne's casters had called in. His breath plumed as he paused to look down at her again. He let her pull his arm back, pull his hand toward her, and she held it there, against her chest, staring into his eyes. "Promise me you'll come back."

"I will," he said, serious for once. Then he turned and shouted, "Open!" He stomped toward the gates, and Valla let his hand fall away. The soldiers moved to respond, bolstered by Victor's inspiration spell, still coursing through him. Rellia and Borrius, on the rampart above, heard him, and he saw them look over the side.

Rellia called out, "What are you doing?"

"Valla will explain," Victor said, then strode through the gates. He let his Inspiration of the Quinametzin drop, heard the responding groans from the soldiers behind him, and cast Iron Berserk.

"Victor!" Rellia called again, this time from the outward-facing edge of the parapet. He ignored her as he doubled in size and let go of his aura, sighing as the weight was taken off his mind. He took several steps away from the gates, down the shallow slope, past a pit with boiling water somehow sloshing about in its depths. The Ridonne had tasted his axe, had felt his might, but he didn't know everything about Victor. He didn't know about the fear that lived in his heart, didn't know that Victor could share it with him and his troops.

Victor slowed the flow of rage from his Core, cutting it to just the minimum he'd need to maintain his Iron Berserk, and then he let his fear-attuned Energy course into his pathways, summoning the pattern for Aspect of Terror. With a savage cry of fury and frustration, he let the dark power roll through his body, working its magic on his flesh.

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"What's the fool doing?" Borrius asked, leaning next to Rellia to see better what the giant Legate was doing. He'd cried out a horrible sound, and then he'd hunkered down. Now a cloud of shadows surrounded him, and a terrible weight had fallen on Borrius and all the people nearby. Was the madman going to attack them?

"I've never seen this magic from him . . ." Rellia's voice was a whisper, and no small amount of fear tinged her words.

"He's going to break their morale," Valla said, breathless from her run up the steps as she joined them.

Borrius whirled on her, "You're in on this? What is it? You should have spoken to us about any plan you two dreamed up!"

"I take full responsibility. This was my idea. I also told Victor not to speak to you. I knew you both would try to dissuade him because you don't know what he's capable of. You know nothing of," she gestured to the man, wholly wreathed in shadows outside the ramparts, "this."

"What is it?" Rellia asked, her face pale, and Borrius couldn't blame her; the weight on his spirit was almost unbearable. Was that the madman's aura? His spell? Some combination of the two?

"He has more types of Energy than rage and inspiration. You saw his banner, the glory. Well, his strongest affinity is darker; it scares him; he's worried it will consume him, so he uses it very infrequently." Valla's voice was hushed, her eyes wide, something in them that Borrius didn't recognize. As he and Rellia continued to stare at her, she said, "Fear."

Borrius started to scoff, started to ask her to explain herself, but then a shriek broke the night. It was a sound so awful, so primally terrifying, that Borrius fell to his knees, hunkering behind the parapet. "What the devil?"

"It's him," Rellia said, staring with Valla over the rampart, looking out into the night. "It's Victor. Oh, Ancestors, Valla, he's looking at us."

"Stand still. Damn it, tell the guards to lower their weapons!" Valla spoke in a hushed voice, staring past Borrius, and Rellia didn't respond, certainly didn't carry out her request.

He almost straightened, almost turned to look out at what had transfixed them so, but then he worried that he'd be similarly affected. Instead, Borrius cleared his throat and screamed, "Stand down! Lower your weapons. Do not antagonize him!" He glared at the guards on the rampart and saw them lower their bows, faces wan, eyes wide. "What in the world is going on out there?" he grumbled, turning and laboriously pulling himself to his feet.

As soon as his eyes cleared the rampart, he wished he'd stayed down. A creature stood out there, not two dozen strides from the gates. It was enormous, easily the size of Victor in his giant form. Was that him? Borrius couldn't believe it. The creature was hulking, more wolf than man, but, Ancestors, were those black feathers? Was that a hooked beak at the end of its snout? Were those shadows part of it? They seemed to cling to the creature, moving with it as it paced and sniffed at the night sky. "What the rotting grandfathers . . ."

The monster whirled at the sound of his voice. He stomped toward him, and Borrius felt a terror ignite in his chest like he'd never experienced. He felt his bowels loosen, felt adrenaline explode into frozen muscles, and, unable to put together a coherent thought, he stood there and trembled, transfixed by the baleful orange lantern-like eyes of the monster as it lifted its gleaming black beak and sniffed. Borrius would have fainted if he could have. He would have fallen off the wall to escape that glare, especially when the fur and feather-covered snout peeled back to reveal a maw full of razor-edged, needle-sharp teeth.

The only thought he managed to form was a babbling, hardly coherent question about how the creature could have a beak, teeth, fur, and feathers. Then, moving calmly and purposefully, Valla stepped between him and the monster. As Borrius took cover behind her, and his gaze was interrupted, he found himself able to think again, able to act. He drew a deep breath, ready

to call the soldiers to the attack, but then Valla spoke. "Go. Go, Victor. Punish those that threaten us. Break them!"

Borrius heard gravel scraping and loud footfalls fading away down the gentle slope past the trenches and pitfalls his men had dug. Then another wild, terrible shriek split the night, and his bladder joined his bowels in their dereliction of duty.