

Pazra-dak grasped the Energy crystal at the edge of the spell pattern surrounding his brother, ready to feed him more of their blood-attuned Energy. He wasn't sure he'd have to, but Senena seemed to think it was likely. "How would she know," he growled, frowning at the woman who sat, exhausted on the far side of the tent, watching him, watching his brother, through the dark hollows of her eyes.

"I begin," Rosh wheezed, his throat, like the rest of him, raw from the torments the ancestors-damned, monstrous giant-devil had visited upon him.

"You will teach that fool what happens to those who threaten the Ridonne!" Pazra's words oozed with pride, and as his brother began to mutter his incantation, he looked over his shoulder and called sharply, "Venis!"

The tent flap fluttered as his new Legate hurried to his side. "Yes, Lord?"

"It is time. Are the soldiers prepared?"

"Aye, lord. We've held a thousand of our best to guard your tent. The others are set, ready to charge. Of course, we'll begin with siege weapons to soften them."

"Any more of their absurd festivities? Wouldn't it be wonderful if the fools drank themselves into a stupor? Did we figure out what they were shouting about? They think they've won something, killing the most fearful of our troops?"

"No, Lord, we speculate they were simply trying to bolster their troops; it can't be good for their morale to see our great force surrounding them. There have been no more celebrations this evening, Lord. The camp grew quiet, and they've encircled themselves with fog, likely to obscure their traps. We'll easily shred their preparations. Shall I move to the field command?"

"Yes. Begin. You know the order of attack. See that you overwhelm that camp, and we'll deal with their little champion. Hurry now, before the Energies in this circle drag your soul from your bones!" Pazra gestured to the platform where Senena had drawn the ritual circle, and Venis blanched when his eyes followed the gesture and took in the sight of Rosh, covered in bloody tattoos, seeping a dense, red fog of bloody Energy as he feverishly muttered the words of the rite. Venis turned on his heel and rushed from the command tent, and Pazra chuckled, pleased to see an appropriate response to the workings of the Ridonne.

"Ready yourself," Senena said, startling him; somehow, the witch had crept up on him, walking around the circle. "Already his Core runs low—I feared as much considering the mental battle we fought just hours ago."

"Truly? So soon?" Pazra frowned, narrowing his eyes, wondering how the witch could see into Rosh's Core.

"Yes. Grasp the crystal, ready yourself, fill your pathways with Energy, and when the time comes, when I tell you, push your blood-attuned Energy into it, and *only* that Energy! The circle will carry it to your brother."

"Must I bleed myself dry?"

Senena, with a mocking, utterly disrespectful note in her voice, replied, “Do you want to summon a weakling from the Vizashath or a great terror of a Ridonne?”

“Witch, watch that insolence. You know what I want.”

“Indeed, Lord. Here.” She produced a dark red vial and handed it to him. “This will restore you should the spell threaten to drain you. I’d give it to Lord Rosh-dak, but he’ll be in the throws of the rite and won’t be able to think of quaffing it.”

Pazra gripped the warm potion, nodding. He should have had some of those, himself, but he’d never imagined being tested in this manner. He’d thought to handily crush the upstart’s rebellious forces with his brother’s aid. Rosh’s muttered incantation took on a frenzied note, and his voice rose, cracking with the effort. Pazra gripped the crystal, his palm beginning to sweat, and reached into his Core, pulling forth a thick tendril of the hot red Energy within. He primed it into his pathway, filling it to bursting, ready to send it into the crystal when the moment was right.

His Energy wasn’t as pure as Rosh’s, but it was potent, nonetheless. It would work. He felt like he was trying to reassure himself, felt something gnawing at the corners of his mind, and he fumed inwardly about it. That damned bastard had given him something he’d never had before—doubt. He’d never doubted the might of the Ridonne, never doubted *his* might. So supremely did they dominate this world that he’d begun to take it for granted. Hadn’t his uncle warned him? Hadn’t he told both he and Rosh that greater challenges awaited on other worlds? His warnings of complacency rang truer than ever after their encounter with the bastard nightmare-making giant.

“Now!” Senena hissed, interrupting his internal dialogue. Pazra pushed, driving his Energy into the crystal. At first, it resisted him, but as a critical mass of his Energy accumulated in the magical stone, he felt the resistance break. Then it *pulled*, drawing his Energy out of his pathways, emptying them, and then it reached directly into his Core. Pazra gasped at the sensation, groaning as he felt the lethargy of low Energy, and he peeled his eyes open, unsure when he’d even closed them.

The crystal was ablaze with orange-red light, and the same bright Energy traced the pattern carved into the platform on which his brother sat. His brother . . . his brother was transfixed, floating above the circle, limbs spread wide, mouth agape, eyes wide, blazing with Energy, unseeing, as far as Pazra could tell.

“Drink it!” Senena hissed. Pazra jerked his eyes away from his brother and quaffed the coppery potion, sighing with relief as the dense Energy in the liquid surged into his Core, replenishing him. However, the crystal was still hungry, and it pulled at his new Energy, drawing it out, flaring brightly as it sent it on through the pattern to his brother. “Old bones,” Senena cried, her voice quavering. “He’s reached through! One of them has hold—a hungry one!”

Pazra grunted in acknowledgment, looking at his brother, watching as his flesh split, deep orange-red lines marring his body, radiating heat. A bit of motion from the corner of his eye, a sense that someone had moved, made him look over his shoulder just in time to see Senena’s back as she fled the tent. “Worm,” he growled or tried to growl—it came out more as a wheeze. The spell was pulling too hard, taking too much. With a tremendous effort, he unpeeled his fingers one by one, straining to free his hand from the crystal. He couldn’t.

“Ah!” Rosh-dak cried, his voice rising in a weird ululation. Pazra looked at him, panic making his movements jerky as he strained against the crystal’s pull, the hunger of the being reaching through the pattern. Rosh was stretching, his flesh continuing to split as his bones elongated. The weird, magma glow between his split skin intensified, and his eyes began to blaze with it, literal beams scorching the top of the tent as the man, the once-great, handsome son of the Ridonne, wailed and arched his back.

For his part, Pazra, too, cried out, though his voice was a hoarse whisper as darkness began to creep in around the edges of his vision. He felt the Energy in his Core dwindle to nothing again, and still, the rite didn’t leave him be, didn’t drop him; it began to pull at his very essence, snatching the blood from his veins, igniting it, taking out the Energy he’d earned through many, many years of cultivation, battle, and triumph. It ripped away the fruits of the many treasures he’d consumed to enhance himself. Though he couldn’t scream, couldn’t thrash, so weak had he become, Pazra wept. Tears of hot blood ran down his cheeks as he wilted.

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Victor and his men watched as the Imperial forces launched their many ranged attacks at the encampment. They waited as the defenses held, and the elemental casters in his army dismantled fireballs, tamped down and calmed sudden earthquakes, and shielded the encamped army from icy squalls with great gusts of winds high in the air. All the while, they maintained the layer of fog near the fortifications, and Victor had to admire their skill and tenacity. Surely the Imperials had more casters, but they couldn’t break those on the ramparts behind him. Victor vowed to award some medals to those tough *cabróns* if he and they survived the night.

After a long while, Victor heard the clarion, staccato horn Borrius had told him to listen for; it meant the charge had begun. “Get ready!” he roared, casting Iron Berserk. As he surged in size, so too did Guapo, and soon his head was up near the top of the fog bank. He couldn’t quite see over it, though that didn’t stop his troops from cheering when those nearby saw him expand in size. Victor unslung Lifedrinker and held her ready in his right hand. “Good boy,” he said, slapping his spirit steed’s shoulder. The nightmare Mustang whinnied, a fierce, bone-chilling sound that sent a plume of black shadows from his nostrils.

“It’s time,” Victor said, speaking to himself, trying to bolster his nerves. He hated the spell he was about to cast. Something about the detachment he felt when he wore the guise of the Inevitable Huntsman made him uncomfortable. Victor was an emotional man, and he liked it. He liked how he loved and hated, lusted and feared—when the world went gray, and all he could think about was finding his quarry, it was like he wasn’t himself, even more so than when he was wearing his Aspect of Terror.

Growling at himself, at his hesitation, Victor built the pattern and, as the spell pulled his various Energies to form justice-attuned Energy and it shared his pathways with his rage, the world inside the fog grew even grayer. He felt the change come over him, and he tried to focus on the images of Pazra-dak and the other Ridonne, the one he’d clashed with while on his nightmare tirade. As other things fell away, love, hate, fear, hope, one thing remained—his need to punish those who’d done wrong, his need to deliver justice. The world grew more and more dim, the people around him more and more meaningless, and then he felt it—a hot pulse ahead and to his left. There. There were those who needed to taste the justice of his hand.

Without a word, Victor and Guapo started forward, and he felt a deep need to hurry, to bring justice to his quarry, to punish them. He began to urge his steed forward, a great beast, a powerful beast, an animal fit to convey the inevitability of justice. Dimly, in the back of his mind, he was aware of others running with him, spurring their own animals to carry them on his heels. This was fine, he decided, fitting, even. Should not the archon of justice have followers? Should others not want to join his crusade?

Still, his nightmare, shadow-cloaked mount was far faster than they, and he felt them falling behind. He heard some of them crying out. Were they cheering? Lamenting? Did it matter? At first, his answer was no, but then, a tiny voice in his head said, "Slow down," and he pondered that for a heartbeat. Should he? "Do it!" the voice snarled, and suddenly the gray began to fade as some color slipped in. "Time to wake up, *hermano*," the voice growled, louder now, stronger. "We know where they are. Time to snap out of it!" With the abruptness of a light being turned on, the spell broke, the gray faded from his vision, and Victor laughed, back behind the wheel, so to speak.

Victor urged Guapo to slow. He could see the front line of the Ridonne army ahead of him, maybe half a mile distant, and, looking back, he saw he'd surged a hundred yards or more ahead of his troops. While he cantered forward, waiting for his allies to gain on him, Victor summoned his standard, and suddenly the darkness was ablaze with sparkling golden glory. His soldiers, the brave men, and women who urged their mounts to catch him, cheered, and Victor lifted his head, roaring his encouragement. He felt them as they drew near, and he willed Guapo forward, setting a breakneck pace, pushing the limits of the roladii most of his troops rode.

When he was close enough to see the individual Imperials, Victor laughed to see none were mounted. They were foot soldiers and only five ranks deep; he briefly wondered at the wisdom of trying to attack the encampment from every direction. He continued to charge them, saw them waver in the light of his banner, and then he screamed, "Let's go!" He dug into his Core, pulled out a massive torrent of fear-attuned Energy, and cast Project Spirit, sending forth an enormous cone of dark, twisted tendrils of shadowy Energy that struck the line of spear, sword, and axe wielders ahead of him.

They faltered, eyes going wide, and many of them fled. Some dropped their weapons as they turned. Others fell to their knees, their bodies abandoning them in sheer terror. Victor smashed through them. The great fear-born Mustang trampled them like so many children under his hooves. With a great crash, the front of his troop's wedge struck the faltering Imperials behind him, and then he was through, continuing straight toward where he'd felt the Ridonne.

He wanted to look back, to witness the glory of his men smashing through the Imperial line, but he had to focus and watch for traps and the soldiers no doubt meant to protect the Ridonne. He'd led the charge, broken through, given his soldiers the bolstering light of his banner, and crushed his enemies' will; it was time to give Guapo his head. Victor leaned forward, and the Mustang knew what he wanted. The great steed exploded with speed, driving him over the ground, leaping a long series of trenches, hardly jostling Victor in his passage.

Victor threw a huge Globe of Insight into the air, leaving behind a brilliant floodlight, exposing the pitfalls for his soldiers as they followed in his wake. Soon, he saw them, a row of soldiers, and his mind, quickened by his many enhancements, calculated their numbers. He could see their front line was maybe a hundred strong, but they were only three rows deep; there were fewer than he'd expected, even if you considered there were probably more around the perimeter of the Ridonne's camp. Victor laughed, and as he sped toward them, he reached out

and summoned a great rage-fueled bear totem, setting it loose in the ranks of soldiers ahead of him.

The Imperials swarmed around each other, trying to bolster up those suddenly caught amid the rampages of a massive spirit bear. It swiped left and right, sending the soldiers flying, and, in that chaos, that disarray, Victor and Guapo crashed into them at great speed. The Mustang smashed and stomped through them. He was enormous, his hooves the size of five-gallon buckets made of black, diamond-hard keratin, and he spread shadows of fear all around him, clearing his flanks—none of the soldiers could stand before him or summon the will to try to strike at him as he rode past. In three heartbeats, Victor was through and charging for the tents ahead.

“Good,” Victor laughed, taking a moment to realize he’d managed to summon his bear while still riding his mount; had he done that before? He continued to laugh, admiring the beauty of his revised totem spell. Then he was trampling through tents, noting that the camp was empty; had the Ridonne sent the non-combat personnel away? Were they off supporting the attacking lines? It didn’t matter; Victor saw an enormous round tent atop a nearby rise near the center of the camp. More, it was glowing with orange-red light, a beacon to pull at Victor’s urge for combat.

He slowed, and as Guapo’s thunderous hooves settled and the wind ceased its whistling in his ears, Victor heard the crash as his soldiers slammed into the line of defenders. He listened to his bear roaring and the screams of soldiers dying. A grim smile spread his lips, baring white, clenched teeth. The poor bastards who’d thought they’d drawn an easy duty staying back, protecting their leaders, would have a rough night. Girded for battle, wearing his wyrm-scale vest, his Kethian Juggernaut helm, his dragonsteel belt, and wielding the greatest axe on the planet, Victor urged Guapo forward. “Time to come out of your tent, assholes.”

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“You were right,” Rellia said, her eyes wide as she took in the size of the force coming at them from the northwest. The Imperials were like a tide, flowing over the grasslands, thousands of them mounted, riding behind the foot soldiers. Energy globes hung in the air—smoldering orange fire, cool, pale-blue ice, crackling balls of lightning and plasma, and hundreds of bright, yellow, pure Energy orbs. It was like dawn had come early as the Ridonne soldiers arrayed themselves outside the fortifications, inspecting them, perhaps, before they charged.

“Yes, though I was more right than I’d hoped. I’d hoped they’d spread out more, truly try to test all our fortifications. It seems they’re going to concentrate most of their efforts here. Honestly,” he said, voice low, “I’m not sure we’ll hold for long.”

“We have to,” Rellia said, leaning forward on the parapet. “Should we not order more soldiers to this wall?”

“Indeed. Lieutenant,” Borrius turned to Edeya, “alert the captains. We need another full cohort on this wall. Take two hundred soldiers from each of the others.”

“Yes, sir!” Edeya said, scribbling in her command book.

“This is going to be a true test,” Borrius said. “We may die here tonight, ladies. If we do, it’s been a pleasure.”

“Sir, if I may speak?” Edeya’s voice was shaky.

“Out with it; the time for chatter fades,” he replied curtly.

“Victor will win. He has to. When he does, he’ll come back, and the soldiers out there; they’re going to break. We just have to hold them for a while.”

“Well, that’s the trick, Lieutenant—holding them.” He’d just finished speaking when something shook the night, a sound that cut the air like a nail through a board, a scream that echoed over the grasslands from the southeast. It was a sound both foreign and familiar, bringing back memories of the long night when Victor had been out terrorizing the Imperials. “Ancestors! Was that him?”

Rellia shook her head, eyes wide with a mixture of confusion and despair. “I don’t think so. It sounded different. Wasn’t it louder? Deeper?”

“Look!” Edeya said, standing at the platform’s edge, pointing toward the southeast where Victor had charged, toward the origin of the weird, terrible shriek. Rellia followed her finger, and there, in the distance—a mile or two—she saw an eerie red light, like a rip in the night. It blazed, putting spots in her vision when she blinked for a few seconds, and then it began to shrink and, in just a few moments, was gone.

“What in the shit . . .” Borrius started to say but collected himself in time to shake his head and change his words, “It’s not our problem. Not yet. We have more immediate things to worry about.” At his words, Rellia turned, and sure enough, more horns started to sound, and the Imperials began their charge.