

The Last Great Battle

Austin C. Smith

* * *

Commander Khorina Vosloff gently tugged on her reins, easing her horse to a stop before reaching the top of the hill. She dismounted slowly, due only in part to her age. She was deep in thought as she stepped to the ground and silently handed the reins to her escort, a proud, young member of Aquitania's elite Black Dragon Battalion. Approaching the crest of the hill, she considered the words she would exchange with her friend.

General Valeria Meenos had become a legend throughout Aquitania and Numar during the long war. The first born of a peasant farmer, she may well have lived out her life in obscurity in the quiet countryside if not for a simple act of bravery when she was coming of age. She had saved the life of the Provincial Governor's son when his royal barge capsized in some rapids on the river near her family's farm. Being of like age, he was smitten, and they quickly began a relationship which his family vehemently opposed. Finally, in a bid to stifle the growing romance, the governor secured an appointment for her to the Royal Military Academy in Aquilla. She was headstrong, independent, and wanted more out of life than marriage, even to a member of royal society, so she accepted.

With only a handful of women having preceded her, most of whom had washed out, her every move as an officer candidate was scrutinized. She eagerly faced the challenges thrown her way, excelling in all aspects of military training, particularly the strategy of large-scale battles. She possessed an uncanny ability to anticipate and counter her opponent's strategic moves. Much to the chagrin of the old guard traditionalists, she

graduated at the top of her class. Now, after years of relentless hard work and well-deserved promotions over her seething male counterparts, she was the second-highest ranking field general in Aquitania's army. While blazing a trail for other women to follow, her achievements had far eclipsed other officers, male and female. She'd become a household name, idolized by young women and girls throughout the kingdom of Aquitania.

Khorina reflected back on other times they had stood together on the morning of a great battle. Discovering how much they had in common, the two women had quickly become best friends when they entered the academy together. They were the same age, almost to the day. They both were driven by a constant need to prove themselves. They were even born and raised in the same province, living only a half-day's ride from each other without ever having met. After graduating the academy, they spent years apart in pursuit of their military careers before being drawn back together during these five years of war that had embroiled all the surrounding kingdoms. Times like this were spent confiding in each other so that only the appropriate words and actions would be witnessed by the brave soldiers who followed them.

During the war, Khorina's name, too, had become well-known. Her bravery and leadership on the battlefield were second to none. And even with her mounting years, her incredible combat skill and proficient use of battle magic could best nearly any opponent. No mages had been recorded in her bloodline, so the elders were baffled when she began exhibiting innate magical prowess as an adolescent. With tutelage, her power and control increased as she grew into adulthood, making her a prime officer candidate.

"I understand last night's patrol confirmed the news of Berylian reinforcements," she said as she neared the general.

"Yes."

Valeria continued to survey the vast, grassy meadows of the Berylian Marches. They could see in the distance the Berylian forces mustering to the southeast as the morning sun broke the horizon. In the meadow behind the two friends, who now stood shoulder-to-shoulder, were two large encampments of their own fighting forces. And beyond that, far to the west, the smoke from the encampment of the Numaran Highland's meager provincial army could be seen.

"So, what news do the final reports bring us?" Khorina asked without looking at her friend.

Valeria sighed. "Besides the thirty thousand infantry and eight thousand light cavalry in their 1st Imperial Army, the patrols now tell us that at least ten thousand heavy cavalry arrived late yesterday flying the flag of their 2nd."

Khorina's heart sank. She knew their chance of success had likely just been dashed. "And this against our spy's assurances that their 2nd IA was decimated in the battle to defend Kamaleel," she said with disgust. "I'm surprised those fools can find their way home when they journey beyond our borders . . . And what of *our* ten thousand late infantry?"

Valeria shook her head slightly. "No. Since they didn't make it across the River Numar before the main bridge was destroyed by mercenaries, they had to backtrack and find crossing elsewhere. I'm sure Commander Angkor is pushing them hard, but they're still at least four days' march behind us."

"So, they will field roughly fifty thousand troops to meet our twenty-four thousand. At least that should give them a fighting chance," she said with a smiling glance at Valeria.

The general looked at her with a pensive expression. "Need I remind you, old friend, that the Berylian's reputation for defending their homeland is well-deserved?" She looked away to the horizon and continued. "Our people have been told the word from Aquilla is 'victory or death.' The Berylians have fully committed, giving us our best chance to defeat them and bring an end to this madness. If the Numarans succeed in taking their capital while they're here engaging us, this cursed war will finally be over."

Khorina thought about their strategy. It had been Valeria's plan to draw the Berylians out into the open to defend their border so the Numarans could mount a surprise attack on their capital.

"Do you really think they can take Kamaleel with only five thousand troops?" she asked. "They only have, at best, a few hundred of their elite Green Guard left. The rest are mostly untrained conscripts and volunteers. They're merchants and farmers, not warriors."

Valeria studied her friend briefly. "I know," she finally replied. "You and I come

from the blood of commoners. Would our people not do the same thing to defend Aquitania?"

Khorina conceded a sheepish half-smile. "Your point is well-taken."

"Yes, I believe they will succeed," the general added. "And even if *we* fail, by the time the Berylian army can return, they will have taken the city and forced King Lorgus to capitulate."

Khorina simply nodded.

"The arrival of their reinforcements changes the plan," Valeria continued as she looked off in the distance again. "I've given this a lot of thought. The Blackveil Archers will take the front line in a staggered-V formation with our few Gunderlun Pikemen disbursed among them. That is where I need you, Khorina," she said, looking at her friend. "When the ranks close, the archers will split so the lancers can move up just in time to meet the enemy's charge. I know the archers aren't trained or equipped for melee, but with no infantry, we must let the enemy advance to us. It's the only chance we have. Berylia prides itself in the strength of its formidable cavalry, so they will charge us. And the archers will have to hold their line at all cost."

Khorina nodded. "They will use their bows as long as they can, then their swords, and then, their bare hands if need be. We won't let you down."

Valeria smiled fleetingly. "I know you won't," she said. "Half our Potishan Knights will reinforce the front line while the rest cover the flanks. Our trusted Captain Molenaar has convinced me to remain in the rear with four hundred of the best Potishans while he and his Black Dragons advance, flying my personal banner."

"I know that's not easy for you, Valeria, but you must be protected. You are the very heart of Aquitania's army."

Valeria remained silent, still scanning the horizon.

"It was you who led our forces to victory in the Zandoran Highlands two years ago, turning the tide of this war," Khorina continued. "It was you who led us into Darkmoor, driving the last of the Keshans into the sea. And it was you who led us to Shanaris to aid the badly outnumbered Numaran army against the Argonians. That act, more than any other, quelled the mistrust of the Numaran people and strengthened our alliance, making this campaign possible. That's why the citizens of Vendegar cheered for

you when we passed through their streets last month."

"Come now, Khorina, it's not all my doing. You, too, were there for all those battles, as were many others. But more importantly, the soldiers . . ." she slowly turned and looked back at their encampment. "Some of them haven't been home to see their family in years," she finally added. "They—they are the heart of Aquitania, and I would gladly die for them."

"They most surely know it, Valeria," Khorina replied with a warm smile. "That's why they're willing to die for you."

Valeria returned her smile briefly. "And what of you, my friend?"

"Oh, don't worry about me," she replied as they turned and started back down the hill to their waiting escorts. "I'm holding you to our pact, now that I've won you over. This shall be our last great battle. I know you feel it's your responsibility to stay on and rebuild our forces, but I'll share a revelation with you. You're not the only general in the army."

Valeria grinned without glancing her way.

"You deserve an end to this way of life, whatever you choose to do with your days," the commander continued. "I know the thought of a quiet retirement caring for my family's long-neglected orchard has carried me through many a siege."

"You know I will honor my promise, Khorina. You're right; it is time to go home. We began this journey together. It's only proper that we should end it the same way," the general said as they joined their escorts, taking their reins from their outstretched hands. "Good luck in battle, my friend," she added as Khorina gracefully mounted her warhorse.

"And may only blessings find you this day, General," she replied with a hint of a smile before turning away to go rally her troops.

Solemnly watching the commander and her strapping young escort ride away, Valeria wondered, as she had so many times before, if she would see her dear friend alive again. The odds this day were long, indeed.

*

By midday, the opposing forces were poised for battle. The horns sounded and the ground shook with the thunder of laden warhorses as Berylia's cavalry charged to

crush the invaders. When the enemy closed to within range, Khorina gave her captains the order, and five thousand archers expertly unleashed their death from above. Arrows blackened the sky and rained down on the charging enemy like a driving torrent. Wave after wave the archers fired, nocked, and fired again even before their previous shots had found their marks. The charging mounts began to trip and fall, only to be trampled by the horses behind them until, at last, their forward progress stalled. The few who managed to maintain their stride through the mayhem were met by companies of the two thousand Gunderlun Pikemen who anxiously waited.

It was time. Khorina gave the command and the archers split their formations, allowing the lancers and knights to flow past and rush the disoriented enemy. As the mounted soldiers engaged, Berylia's infantry poured through the gaps and rushed Aquitania's archers. While those in the rear continued firing volleys into the Berylian forces, the ones on the front line were forced to abandon their weapon of choice and engage the enemy in swordplay and hand-to-hand combat. Soon, the entire battlefield became a writhing mass of confusion. The thunder of the charge subsided, replaced with the sounds of clashing steel and the deafening cries of war and death.

As was her custom, the great hero Khorina Vosloff fought like a crazed berserker. Ducking and tumbling with the deftness of a warrior half her age, she slashed, hacked, parried, and stabbed with her sword while casting spells with her free hand. Enemy soldiers were thrown to the ground with crushed bones by her *Power of the Ram* spell, or incinerated by her *Fire Wall*. Others were frozen in midstride, glassy-eyed and paralyzed by her *Grip of Terror* spell. As always, her troops were inspired and driven to fight on, certain of their invincibility with her at the lead.

Valeria surveyed the battle from within the ranks of the 1st Battalion of Potishan Knights. She sensed the anticipation in the members of her heavy cavalry unit. Even their well-trained mounts were skittish from the war cries and scent of fresh blood that filled the air. But, alas, it was not to be. This day, they must practice patience. Rules of military conduct, as well as common sense, dictated that she allow her unit to be drawn into battle only as a last resort. She issued curt orders to field riders, relocating her few available reinforcements to the most strategic locations as dispatch after dispatch arrived from the front line troop commanders.

Unlike other great battles, the fighting did not cease at dusk. The opposing armies remained engaged through the night, fighting by the light of torches and a full moon. Valeria could not help but admire the ferocity of the defending Berylians. By midnight, the dispatches from her front line commanders had ceased, and she knew that most of the pikemen, lancer, and archer troops had fallen.

Dawn broke to reveal countless dead and broken, bleeding bodies. The morning sun glistened off bloodstained armor, and the stream that meandered across the once-picturesque meadow now ran red as far as the eye could see. The fighting had been so close quartered that warriors and mounts, dead and dying, friend and foe, were heaped together in indistinguishable piles. Although it was obvious the Berylian losses were much greater, Valeria estimated two-thirds of her forces were gone. As the day wore on, the fighting slowed to sporadic skirmishes until finally the Berylians could take no more and sounded the retreat. Valeria was sure they'd lost more than three quarters of their army before they withdrew. The enormity of forty thousand brave soldiers having died in one day defending their homeland gnawed at her. True, their power-hungry king had sent them to her. But it was she and her brave troops who'd delivered them to their final judgment.

As for the invaders, Aquitania's 5th Imperial Army that Valeria had so proudly led for the last three years had been reduced to barely seven thousand soldiers. Stunned, bloodied, and disorganized, they were just thankful to be alive to see the enemy's retreat. As always, she was proud of all her brave warriors. But today, the deciding factor had been the legendary Blackveil Archers. They'd been five thousand strong when the battle began. Now, they numbered less than five hundred. And the companies of burly highland warriors that comprised the 1st and 2nd Battalions of Gunderlun Pikemen had been almost completely wiped out. They'd stood fast against the most unnerving sight on the front line of any battle, a charging cavalry. And while the knights and lancers had fared better, they'd still lost more than half their members.

"General Meenos."

A chill coursed through Valeria at the ominous tone of Captain Molenaar's voice. Her heart breaking, she turned to look directly at the approaching officer. "Yes, Captain."

"I uh, I'm afraid I must report bad news concerning our hero, Commander Vosloff. She uh . . . She—"

"Yes, Captain, I understand . . . And what of your Black Dragons?"

He checked himself and straightened to an appropriate posture for reporting to his superior officer. "We are badly damaged but still intact, as are three battalions of Potishans." The officer searched for something more to say. "This is a great day for Aquitania, General. We have finally broken the Berylian's war machine, and against such odds. This is surely our greatest battle."

"Perhaps. I uh . . ." When she knew her voice was about to crack, she raised a hand to indicate she needed a moment, and turned away, racked with grief for her lost friend. She sniffled and took a calming breath as she thought about all their achievements together. She thought about how close she'd come to keeping her promise to Khorina.

Then she thought of the course her own life had taken since she'd left home as a young woman. She thought of Frederick, the Provincial Governor's son she'd saved from drowning that day so long ago when they were both young. Dear Frederick had fallen deeply in love with her, and she had loved him, too. But she knew her destiny awaited her elsewhere. She wanted more out of life than her loving, hardworking parents had been able to achieve with their small parcel of land and herd of livestock. And she wanted to accomplish it herself. So, she'd broken his heart and left to pursue her own path in life.

In time, he recovered and married, eventually assuming his father's role as Provincial Governor. She took lovers, but never loved. She was married to the army. Over the years, she and Fredrick carefully avoided each other, and she eventually heard through a mutual acquaintance that his wife had suddenly taken ill and died. Then, about a year ago, they met at a diplomatic function in Aquilla. It only lasted a few hours, and was awkward and bittersweet. She offered her condolences and, as always, he was gracious. They remained formal, yet she left the palace that evening unable to deny that she still had feelings for him, and her intuition told her he felt the same. The next day, she rejoined her troops and the life she'd chosen so long ago, and they were off on another campaign. She slowly shook her head. *My life that could have been*, she thought briefly before chiding herself. *Please forgive me, Khorina, for thinking of myself at a time like this . . . Oh, I will miss you, my dear friend.*

Captain Molenaar had gestured to the soldiers nearby to move off in respect for their general while he remained, standing at ease, patiently waiting through the uncomfortable silence.

Finally, after discretely wiping away tears, Valeria turned and addressed him again. "Have a burial detail bring Khorina and meet me on the hill where we last stood together," she said, extending her hand to point, only to retract it when she felt a tremble. "There we will bury my friend, overlooking the site of her last great achievement, and a monument will be built for all the brave warriors lost in this battle, both Aquitanian and Berylian."

"Yes, General," he replied compassionately.

"Now, let us talk of *your* future, Commander Molenaar," she said, turning to face him once again.

The surprised officer gave a brief hint of a smile before checking himself and coming to attention. He was elated by the unexpected field promotion, but present circumstances forbade celebration. "Thank you, General."

Valeria gave him a fleeting smile. "No need; you earned it . . . Besides, you and I know better than anyone the size of the boots you must fill."

He nodded. "Yes, General, indeed. Commander Vosloff will be sorely missed."

She pursed her lips and nodded. "Yes . . . Now then, for the matters at hand. First, you will form a detachment of a dozen scouts—our swiftest riders. Give each of them full provisions and a spare mount. I want them to leave immediately. We must know if the Numarans have succeeded in taking Kamaleel. If they've failed, our work here is not yet finished. And sending twelve should ensure that at least one can return to give me a report. That is paramount."

"I will see to it, General."

"We need to prepare a delegation to deliver terms to the Berylian's camp," she continued. "Unless they plan to meet us on the field again tomorrow, they will disarm, with my guarantee of no harm or retaliation, of course. Then, if our scouts bring good news from the Numarans, you will take your Dragons and two battalions of Potishans and escort the Berylians back to their capital. I will remain here with the rest until our

infantry arrives, probably in four or five days. You should be able to deliver the Berylians and return here by that time."

"Of course, General. And?"

"After that, you will assume command of the 5th Imperial Army. Use your discretion and cut enough troops to form a temporary provincial army. Once you're satisfied this region is secure until diplomats can achieve terms of a treaty, you and your troops may return to Aquilla for reassignment."

"Understood, General."

"The Black Dragons will escort me back to Aquilla so I can give the Adjutant a full report," she added. "Do you have someone in mind to assume your role as Commander of the Dragons?"

He looked away, pensively. "I will miss leading them."

"As did I when I moved on to bigger things," she replied curtly. "But it is for the best, for Aquitania and for you."

He looked at her. "Yes, of course . . . Captain Nordivik, he is ready."

She nodded. "I would agree . . . Very well then."

"Forgive my curiosity, General, but is it true? Are you leaving us?"

"Yes, Commander, I'm going home. I made a promise to a friend that must be honored. Assuming the Numarans have succeeded, this was my . . ." she paused and glanced toward the repulsive scene of the battlefield where Khorina had died. Then she cleared her throat to keep from choking up and returned her gaze to him. "This was *our* last great battle."

Before the commander's face blurred from the tears welling up, she quickly turned and mounted, reining her horse away toward the top of the hill.

* * *