

The First Casualty

By

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Belar gave scant heed to the carnage around him. This village was nothing to him. Even if he could kill them all, there wasn't vengeance enough in this world to replace his Vella.

Folt, Belar's second-in-command, waved smoke from his eyes as he approached afoot. "All Severn dead or fled, captain," Folt reported. His face was tinged with ash from the burning huts. A smear of blood on his forehead caused Belar to hiss in concern, but Folt wiped it away. The blood was not his own.

"And what of Vatch?" Belar asked, continuing to scan the aftermath of the battle.

"No sign of Prince Vatch," Folt reported, sheathing his sword and summoning his mount.

"Vatch threw away that title, lieutenant, when he married a Severn witch," Belar barked. "I suggest you toss it aside as well."

"Aye, captain." Folt's eyes dropped at the reprimand but lifted again as his steed approached, led by a footman. Folt mounted the powerful, shaggy beast, and Belar noted how the man swelled with the pride only a mounted Skorsman could know.

"Let's purge this place of corpses and assemble the troops, Folt. We'll move upstream a bit, away from the witch stench, before we take our rest."

"Aye, captain." Folt tugged at his steed's mane and turned it toward the tollem that stood at village center. Belar watched in grim satisfaction as footmen set fire to the pole, carved with the faces of false Severn gods.

"May we burn all such from our memories," Belar muttered to himself, and kissed his temple ring.

He prodded his steed to stalk the perimeter of the village. The Severn, typically, had not put up much of a fight. The Severn fought from a distance, with witch spells under the cover of night. They blighted Skor crops, sickened Skor herds, poisoned Skor water. But confront them with strong Skor steel, and they wilted. The Severn had no strong leader, no cohesive battle units, no real discipline.

But they had their witches. Beautiful, exotic, enticing. Young Skorsmen, heedless of training and temple lectures, were lured away by that intoxicating promise, spurred, no doubt, by Severn incantations under the full moon.

It was that mixing of the blood, Skor and Severn, that had prompted the campaign to wipe out the witches. For weeks now, Skorsmen had probed further and further into the Wald Valley, killing witches and destroying their tollems.

Belar watched as the bodies - men, women and babes - were carried to the tollem. Their witch-pole would be a pyre, a final insult because the witches preferred to bury their dead. A detail from Belar's unit would return the handful of Skor dead to Primat, to be burned in a pyre of honor.

Belar watched the flames grow, and took his steed upwind. This had been bloody work, and needful, but the Severn weren't his primary concern. He needed to find Vatch.

Belar noticed a hand clawing at the dirt nearby. One Severn woman, at least, had survived. He rode toward her, and she glanced up through hair tangled with mud and blood.

"Tell me, woman. I seek Vatch, who married Prilla. Do you know where he is?"

She shook her head slowly, and held up a hand in a plea for mercy.

"Tell me where Vatch is, and I may spare you."

"Angen, I believe. He may be in Angen," she said, pressing her face to the ground and crying. "Damn you."

Belar considered whether to kill her. His offer of mercy to a Severn witch meant nothing, and his orders were to let none live. Killing Severn in battle was one thing, but killing a defenseless woman was another. Defenseless ...

He imagined this woman gathering with her weird sisters, dancing nude in the moonlight, calling forth another plague to fester inside the walls of Primat. The last years had been nothing but torment for Belar. He could not bear the thought of another witch-born plague, like the silent thief that had stolen the life of his Vella and his unborn child last snow. The same plague had claimed Vatch's father, King Tromat, along with hundreds of others. Bile rose in Belar's throat.

He leaned forward to whisper into his steed's twitching ear. "Ch'ahala, kill." He did not watch as the great beast dropped its fanged head and snapped its jaws on the woman.

Folt returned to Belar's side. "Captain, the honor detail is set to depart."

"Good. Go with them, Folt, and take word to King Hagath. Tell him his brother may be in Angen. I go there next."

"Aye, captain." Folt smiled wearily. Belar knew the lieutenant would not mind some time away from this bloody campaign. Folt blew on his horn, and the honor detail departed.

"The rest of you, mount and assemble," Belar ordered. "We ride. And may the One let no more witches gather here."

The Skorsmen heeded their captain's orders with a cheer.

The steeds stepped cautiously on the narrow trail. To Belar's right, the hills stretched above, tall grass and snatchthorn providing ample cover for ambush - if only the Severn had the balls and the military sense to take advantage of it. Throughout this campaign, Belar and the other Skor units had met nothing but token resistance. The decimated villages behind him testified to the Severn's futile defense.

But Vatch, once as fierce a Skorsman as Belar had ever seen, could prove dangerous. Belar vowed not to underestimate his enemy. Vatch had grown

up a prince, with all the advantages Primat could offer. Vatch knew the ways of saddle and sword, and he knew how to lead men. If Vatch took command, even the unruly Severn might learn to fight back.

To Belar's left, the hill dropped steeply to the Wald River below. The river's roar and the valley's echo made verbal commands almost useless, and would cover the sounds of ambushers acreep on the hill above. But Belar could see the scouthawks circling routinely far ahead, and they had seen no sign of trouble.

Behind him, a troop of twenty mounted and forty foot followed. They had feasted on pillaged stag and bread, and they were well rested despite the morning's carnage. The men were in good spirits, a product of discipline, and faith in the One. Again, Belar kissed his temple ring.

The arrows took a quarter of Belar's men before he even knew there had been an attack. A snort from his steed, and its sudden cattish crouch, alerted him to the danger. Belar drew sword and whirled his beast around, expecting attack from the hillside above. Instead, he saw arrows soaring overhead - arrows loosed from the river.

Belar shouted orders even as his yowling steed completed its spin. He grimaced as he realized the archers had chosen their targets well. Nearly all the wounded and dead had been riders. Belar wondered why he had not been hit, and only then noticed the limping gait of his steed. An arrow had pierced Ch'ahala's thigh.

It had been a brilliant ambush — the work of Vatch.

"With me, by the One!" Belar roared as he charged down the steep slope. Ch'ahala made a valiant effort despite her wound. Healthy, the beast would have landed in an easy crouch and bounded to the river's edge before any archer could have strung another arrow. But this time she landed awkwardly, whimpering madly. She fell on her side, her wound spilling blood.

Belar's heart cried to care for the beast, but that would have to wait. Climbing to his feet, he was heartened to see the remaining riders all plunging into the river, where Severn archers stood in water to their waists. Footmen spilled down the slope all around him as arrows flew. Belar joined the surviving footmen and charged into the river.

Swords flashed in the sun. Blood ran on steel. Water churned. Belar, even as he fought, wondered how the Severn archers had eluded the scouthawks. There was no time to puzzle that out, though; his Skorsmen were woefully outnumbered. Only four steeds were in the fight. The others had scattered when their riders fell. Belar cursed aloud; the animals were ignoring their training.

That was not the only surprise of this battle. These Severn fought well, without panic. They had abandoned bows, instead clutching steel and standing their ground when the Skorsmen charged. In every other battle, Severn archers had fled once they'd loosed an arrow or two.

More of Vatch's work, no doubt.

"For the One! For the One!" To Belar, his war cry sounded pitifully weak amid the din of river and the clang of steel and the cries of the dying. The waist-deep water dragged at his armored legs, and the footing was treacherous.

Further out into the river whitewater flowed, raising an unholy roar.

The Wald River carried blood downstream toward Primat, and too much of that blood was Skor.

Belar slew one man, then turned to seek a new target. A witch-man rose from below, spitting water into Belar's face. The next instant, a mace smashed his helmet. Belar spun, out of control and out of his senses, and splashed into the cool, red waters.

He tried to stand, but could not move. A foot came down on his back. Vaguely, he wondered if it were a Skorsman's boot or a witch's sandal. It did not matter, he supposed.

He blurted out a last prayer to the One and was surprised by the bubbles that erupted from his mouth and nose like a thousand bright red suns.

The sound of those rising bubbles, carrying away his life, echoed in Belar's mind. In darkness he listened to them, gurgling, and thought they were asking him questions he could not answer. He struggled to understand them, and slowly came to realize they were not interrogating him.

They were telling him he was alive.

Belar was on his back, on a soft bed. He opened his eyes slowly. He saw a dark-haired woman, stirring a cauldron in a hearth nearby. That, not his blood, was the source of the gurgling. Her back was to him, and Belar reminded himself to keep silent.

He was in a dwelling of some sort. An earthen dwelling, a cave perhaps. Drying roots and herbs hung all around, spilling an odd array of scents into the room.

Belar tried to gauge the distance to the woman, but found he couldn't. He realized his left eye was covered.

He tried to rise, but could not. His arms were bound to rails on both sides of the bed. His ankles were similarly bound.

His chest hurt, and his head pounded. He rustled in his bed, testing the restraints, and was surprised to feel the tickle of the shaggy hide that covered him. His clothes were gone.

"So, you wake." The woman stood over him, although Belar had not heard her move. Her dark eyes burned with anger, and a grainbird's claw dangled from a strip of leather around her neck.

A witch, Belar realized. He silently asked the One to forgive his failure at the Wald.

He blinked, and the witch was gone. He shook as violently as he could, trying to free at least an arm, but the effort caused him great pain. Spent, he exhaled loudly and relaxed his muscles. His nerves remained at full tension.

"A Skor commander," a male voice said. "Taken by witches. Surprising turn of events for you, I suppose?"

Belar looked toward the entrance. A tall, fair man dressed in hides strolled toward him. "Vatch," Belar said.

"Indeed. And you are Belar, if I recall. Of the Pride."

Belar said nothing.

Vatch pulled a stool by the bed, and sat down near Belar's head. "You are lucky to have lived."

"Lucky to be a witch's prisoner? I'd rather have died," Belar said.

Vatch grinned, and shook his head. "How they make men like you ..." He sighed. "Two of your footmen fished you out of the water. They carried you almost to the bank before my men fell on them and cut them down."

"How many ..." Belar almost was afraid to ask.

"Survivors? A handful of Skor escaped, I believe. Most of the pride-beasts will return to Primat on their own, I suppose. But you alone were brought here."

"Alone ... among witches."

The woman brought a wooden ladle to Vatch, who took it and bowed his head in thanks. She bent to kiss him, her breasts dangling obscenely within her loose tunic. Vatch kissed her voraciously. When he was done, she cooed at him like a bird. Vatch smiled.

Once she stood erect again, Vatch lowered the ladle to Belar's mouth. "Drink this."

The fluid within was warm and smelled like soup. Belar turned his head to refuse it, but Vatch did not remove the ladle. "It's lichee-root. It will keep you alive."

"Lichee! Witch-root! An evil brew!" Belar held his breath to avoid the aroma.

Vatch laughed. "Your head wound is soaked with the stuff, has been for days. And for all the crowing of your priests, they, too, have been seen collecting lichee-root in the valley. Your priests would do well to share their knowledge with the people, instead of doling out only what they see fit."

Belar screamed. "Release me!"

Vatch turned to the woman and gave her the ladle. "He'll be hungry soon enough. Keep it hot." He returned his gaze to Belar. "You'll stay here."

"A prisoner ..." Belar groaned.

"You could be a corpse."

Belar breathed deep. "Why didn't you kill me?"

Vatch sighed. "Call my mercy an attempt, probably in vain, to save lives."

"You butcher my unit, then talk of saving lives?"

Vatch stood, anger reddening his face. "You are a warrior, Belar. Men die in war. On both sides. Both sides!"

"Which makes me wonder all the more why I am still alive. I know it's not so you can arrange a hostage exchange."

Vatch glared. "You've taken no hostages." He closed his eyes tight, took a deep breath, and smiled warily. "Ever the warrior, aren't you Belar? Even strapped like a calf for sacrifice, you bait me with words, trying to draw me out, trying to make me show a weakness."

Belar tried to hide his alarm at the word "sacrifice." Apparently, he failed, for Vatch's smile widened.

"You think we are going to string you up, dance naked around your body and blood you like a calf?" He laughed. "My, your priests have filled your head with pretty tales!" Vatch paced and rubbed his eyes. "I've told you, I'm trying to

save lives. The gods know I started too late.”

“Do not speak of your false gods to me,” Belar warned.

Vatch turned and stared at him, as though he were a puzzle. “I don’t know how to do this. You won’t believe anything I need to tell you.”

“A lie is a witch’s tool,” Belar said.

“And a priest’s. And a king’s. You pushed further up the valley than any other unit. You came specifically for me, true?”

It was Belar’s turn to smile. “You know I’ll tell you nothing about my mission.”

“You need not. My brother ascended to the throne, and he fears I will dispute his claim. That’s the reason for your purge.”

“I see you’ve begun shaping an army,” Belar retorted. “That river ambush, no Severn tactic, that.”

Vatch sighed. “I should have begun forming an army as soon as word reached me that father had died. So many deaths, because I did not want to believe Hagath would turn butcher ...”

“He had to,” Belar said accusingly. “People, cattle dying with fever, spitting blood. Witch spells killing innocents.”

“Witch spells turned on Primat? You believe that?”

“People in Primat die, cattle die, crops wilt. But Severn people thrive, Severn cattle thrive, Severn crops thrive. Explain that, witch-husband!”

Vatch sat. “The Severn survive the same way your priests survive. We take the lichen-root. We feed it to our cattle. We cultivate it. It’s very strong medicine. Ask your priests. They know the truth, even if they won’t speak it.”

Belar stared. “Why would the priests lie ...”

“Why not? Skor children are indoctrinated at birth to never question authority, to do what they are told. The priests decide who fights, who shovels dung, who raises children. Their tools are your ignorance, and your fear. Fear of the Severn.”

Belar shook his head. “You haven’t an ounce of true Skor blood left in you. You’ve tossed all, for this witch wench of yours.”

Vatch leaned close and whispered. “She’s worth all that I have, and more. Belar, I’ve trained fighters only to defend this valley from the likes of you. I have a long way to go, and I don’t know if I can build a defense faster than you can destroy us. I don’t want a war, and I don’t want Hagath’s throne.”

“Don’t tell me that; I know better. To rule Primat ...”

“I left Primat three years ago, for reasons of my own. I love Prilla. I have come to love these people, this life.”

“You prefer a smelly cave to the throne of Primat?”

Vatch laughed. “Difficult for a man like you to grasp, I know. But it is true. I learned too much during my training at the hands of priests to ever love Primat.”

“And so you worship false gods?”

Vatch sighed. “The Severn see a god in every tree, every stream. I can’t recall half the names. And, when I’m frightened, I still call on the One. Out of habit. I don’t really expect the One is listening. Or that it matters that much.”

Belar wished he could cover his ears. “You blaspheme ...”

"I've been doing it a lot," Vatch shrugged. "Yet never a lightning bolt."

"Blasphemy!"

"Belar, I've seen men pray to your god and die, I've seen men here pray to hundreds of gods and die. And I've seen blasphemers prosper, or die. It makes no difference, as far as I can tell.

"But the Severn live real lives, Belar. If they want to farm, they farm. Hunters hunt. Artisans train those who want to learn, not those told to learn. They are more suspicious than a soldier who musters out tomorrow, yet they know joy. Who in Primat knows joy?"

Belar seethed. "Joy? When witch plagues kill hundreds?"

Vatch stood again. "Think, Belar. If we could command plagues, would we let you burn village after village? Would we hide beneath the river waters, breathing through reeds, waiting with bow and steel to fight you man to man? Why didn't we just burn some roots, chant some spells and turn you all into pond-jumpers?"

"You deny the magic?"

Vatch laughed. "Oh, no. We ensorceled your scouthawks, I admit. And scattered your pride-beasts. Beasts are easy to spell. And Severn women swear by their ointments, and their love philtres. Our crops are good, and for all I know the ceremonies and dances help. But commanding plagues, and killing innocents, it goes against all these people hold dear."

"What they hold dear is the land at river-mouth, where Primat holds sway over trade. They covet our riches, our ..."

"Covet?" Vatch stood wide-jawed. "They pity you! They feel sorry for you, being told what to believe, when to eat, when to mate. They covet nothing you have. Belar, it was all I could do to persuade these people to train for their own defense. Warfare, organization, laws ... it's all nothing to them. Every village has its own customs. There must be a hundred different spells for simply making a mutt come home. And there have been, I don't know, hundreds of moondances aimed at halting your armies. None of those worked." Vatch stared at Belar, hard. "So I brought you here."

Belar spoke through clenched teeth. "To what end?"

Vatch pulled a knife from his pocket. Belar saw the sharp blade, recognized it as good Skor steel.

"To what end?" he asked. "Why, to release you." He cut the leather strap that held Belar's left hand.

"Release?"

"Yes." Vatch cut the strap on Belar's left leg. "I've healed you. You'll even have use of that eye again. I'll give you some lichen-root, if you'll take it. Just chew it raw. Or make a brew of it. It will help. You may remain here until you feel more able. Or you may go, I don't care. You'll be treated well throughout this village, and no one will harm you here."

He moved to the other side of the bed, and cut the bonds there. "When you wish to return to Primat, tell me. I'll escort you through the valley myself. You will go home again, Belar."

Belar gasped. "I do not understand."

“You’ll probably never understand.” Vatch returned the knife to his pocket. “But I’ll take you home. We’ll have to ride forries, we Severn have no pride-beasts.”

Belar rose slowly. His back hurt. “We’re bound to run into Skorsmen. They’ll kill you on sight.”

Vatch held his breath for a few seconds. “Will my death stop the campaign against the Severn?”

Belar shook his head. “No.”

Vatch sighed. “Then I hope you’ll grant me safe passage among your men, as I do for you among the Severn.”

Belar climbed out of the bed, slowly, wondering if some trap were about to spring. “Why free me?”

Vatch grew irritated. “Go home, Belar. Tell people what happened to you. That we had you in our witchy clutches and let you go unharmed. That I don’t want the throne of Primat. I’ve too much to live for here.”

Belar walked toward the outcast prince. “I want to leave now.”

“Fine. You should eat the lichee.”

“No.”

They walked out of the room side by side. At the end of a long hall, they emerged in a sunlit clearing. The Wald River, wider and calmer this far upstream, flowed quietly. Between Belar and the river, dozens of huts stood. Children skipped around the tollem, chanting.

A bit downstream, Belar saw the white markers of the buried dead. Three stood at the heads of fresh mounds. Small mounds, he thought. He looked at Vatch.

“Children,” Vatch said, “killed by the same fever that haunts Primat. Most of us seem to be safe, but the lichee does not work for all.”

Belar’s good eye searched the town. “This is the biggest Severn village I’ve seen.”

“There are hundreds of villages like this further up the valley,” Vatch said. “Severn breed like rabbits. You’d be surprised how quickly a people can grow when the breeding is left to nature and desire, not to a priest’s timetables and orders.”

He stared at Belar, and his face grew deadly serious. “We outnumber you by degrees you can’t imagine, Belar. Your priests know it, and that’s why they fear us. They fear the mixing of our peoples, the loss of their hold on authority. If I have to organize an army and drive Primat into the sea, that’s what I’ll do. But I’ve no wish to do that. Tell my brother that, once I’ve gotten you back to Primat.”

Belar gawked as a young woman brought his clothes, and his weapons. She knelt politely and held the bundle while he removed his britches from the pile. Her face put him in mind of someone ... Vella. Not a true likeness, but the smile was like Vella’s. And the hair spun like hers, though darker.

“What is your name, girl,” Belar asked as he donned the britches.

“Brennal. My name is Brennal.” It was clear that she feared him, and she gulped when he took the sword instead of the tunic. Weapon in hand, Belar felt the old courage rising.

"I could slay you now," Belar said to Vatch.

"Yes, you could," Vatch said. "It would be a mistake. With one stroke you can kill thousands of people. Many of them yours."

"Without you to lead them ..."

"They'd be lost," Vatch said. "That's why I haven't considered turning myself over to Hagath. But I've taught enough of them to do you some genuine damage, even if I'm gone, and enough of them know what's at stake to keep up the fight. No more easy prey."

Belar held the sword at ready for four heartbeats. Then he rammed its point into the ground. "I'll not kill you."

Vatch sighed. "That is well-thought."

"I'll not kill you ... today," Belar added, reaching for his tunic. He stared at Vatch. "You've thought of surrender?"

"If I thought it would save my family, I might ... but, I'm selfish, too. I've much to live for."

Two lads had brought the saddled, shaggy forries by the time Belar had finished dressing.

"I've ordered lichee packed, just in case your wisdom grows, Belar." Vatch pointed to a small sack tied to the saddle.

Belar stared at Vatch. "I don't know if you are a fool, or a sage. Or if you've bespelled me."

"Probably a fool," Vatch said. "Shall we ride?"

Belar looked over the disgusting mounts. "Just the two of us?"

"Yes. I go with you. I'll not send my men any closer to Primat than I must. Unless I someday have to send all of them."

Belar sighed, and climbed aboard the forrie. "I don't trust you, Vatch. But you have remembered at least a bit of your Skor honor, and treated me well. I will convey your message to Hagath. It will not stop the assaults ..."

Belar paused to look around him. He was surrounded by Severn faces. He saw fear. He saw anger. He saw curiosity. He saw a baby spitting up.

"Stay with your people, Vatch. I'll ride alone. There are more of my men downstream than yours. I'll be safe enough." He spurred the forrie into a slow trot. No one spoke as he departed.

The shaggy mount seemed to know its task, and Belar's mind was able to wander. He could not separate truth from lies, witchcraft from experience. Truth, to Belar, had always been what the priests said it was. Perhaps that still was true. Perhaps not. Whether sorcery had clouded his mind or whether Vatch had lifted a veil of lies, Belar found himself wandering in doubt. And in pain.

His head pounded. He glanced at the sack tied at his saddle horn. But he would not reach into that sack.

He followed the river until he neared the ambush site. The dead were everywhere. He asked the One to welcome their souls.

A hiss of breath caught his attention. A footman, young, crawled out of the water and tried to stand. His ripped tunic revealed a nasty gash across his chest. Mud filled the wound. The young soldier fell onto his face, and Belar was beside him in an instant.

“What is your name, son?” Belar got no answer as he rolled the footman onto his back. Belar’s fingers scraped mud from the wound, and fear filled him as his fingers revealed the depth of the injury. “The One has shown you mercy, lad, to keep you alive thus until help came.”

He said it, even though he knew there was precious little he could do. This soldier would die, like the others. Still, Belar ran to the forrie and took a flask of clean water from the saddle bag.

His eye fell again on the bag of litchet-root, and he realized he no longer knew what to believe. He’d been raised to believe the priests of Primat and until this moment had done so without question. Vatch had tried to throw doubt into all Belar knew, but could Vatch be trusted? Vatch was a prince, raised on intrigue and a master of it.

Belar, confronted now with a dying soldier, realized he knew nothing for certain. The discovery shook him. He heard the young soldier moan, and sighed himself. He removed the litchet-root from the saddle horn. Kneeling beside the footman, Belar soaked the wound with clean water. Then he poured a handful of the musty root into his hand.

Belar took a deep breath. He was a soldier; this new uncertainty was merely another wall to breach. He would learn truth himself, with no more help from priests or renegade princes. The liars, whoever they proved to be, would pay.

“May the One forgive me,” he said, rubbing the litchet-root into the footman’s wound.