

Victor BK3: Ch26

Book 3: Chapter 26: Fire

Victor rolled over his shoulder, trying to get his feet under himself before the mage could throw his second ball of fire. He was already boosting his agility, and his Inspiring Presence hadn't faded, so he moved like an acrobat, rolling and leaping to his feet as the fireball exploded into the floorboards, splashing over them in a concussive spray of sparks and embers. Victor jumped at the gray-cloaked mage, Lifedrinker over his head, bringing her down in a wicked chop.

Before the axe could hit home, though, the mage said, in a deep, resonating voice, "Stop," and for a split second, Victor . . . stopped. He froze his leg muscles mid-stride, and he jerked his axe to a halt, quivering a few inches from the mage's head. Victor growled, exerted his will, and jerked Lifedrinker back into motion, but it was too late to finish his attack—in a blur of gray shadows, the mage rushed past him, but not before he smashed a vial of acrid, caustic-smelling green fluid into Victor's armored chest.

"Gah," Victor said as the concoction filled his face with fumes, rapidly eating through his metal armor. He turned to track the mage while he tried to get off the defensive. He cast Manifest Spirit, summoning his coyotes with rage-attuned Energy. As their wispy red forms shimmered into existence and began to solidify, Victor saw the mage on the far side of the barn-like structure, his fingers bent in a strange symbol and chanting rapidly. "Kill him!" Victor barked to his pack, too frazzled to focus his intentions without the words.

Just as his pack sprang into motion, Victor felt heat and sudden sharp pain in his chest, and he realized the potion had eaten through his armor and was starting on his flesh. "Fuck!" he spat, fury starting to come unbidden into his mind, and he roared, ripping at his armor, trying to get it off without smearing more of the acidic solution on his hands and arms.

As more and more of the acid made contact with his flesh, he grew frantic in his actions. Before he knew it, he'd dropped Lifedrinker at his feet and was spastically yanking at the hauberk, pulling it over his head, only to get it caught on his bulky helmet.

"God-fucking-dammit!" he roared, ripping his helmet off and yanking the chain shirt over his head. Just as he flung it aside, red-faced and furious, his coyotes leaped at his enemy, and the mage finished his spell. A tremendous ripping, concussive explosion erupted around Victor, and the wooden floorboards he stood on burst into a million stinging, smoldering splinters, and a pit of roiling flames opened up beneath his feet.

Victor fell toward the flames, but he didn't try to save himself—he saw Lifedrinker tumbling in front of him, and he snatched hold of her warm, vibrating haft and flung her away over the edge of the newly formed pit. Booming laughter echoed above him as he tumbled, and then searing pain became his existence, and Victor screamed in agony, giving way to his instinctual desire to unleash his rage.

As his clothing ignited and his flesh began to char, Victor's hereditary memories and instincts took over. His body flared with red-Energy, overshadowing the flames in the magical pit, and his body

stretched and grew. He screamed again, and this time his voice rattled and echoed off the planks of the building above him, shattering the little window in the door. So mad was he with pain and fury that he instinctively cast Sovereign Will to boost his strength, and with blackened, cracked flesh, he leaped out of the pit like a smoldering demon of vengeance.

The gray-robed mage was doubtless surprised to see him emerge from his intended immolation, but he was quick and reacted with a spray of fiery magma darts that tore into Victor's chest and stomach as he landed, cracking and shattering more floorboards. Victor was unrecognizable as a man, so horrific was the twisted, leering madness that had overcome him. His flesh was charred, covered in soot, cracked, bleeding, and raw, but it was the madness in his glare and his savage snarl that finally put doubt into the eyes of the mage.

“What are you?”

Victor had no semblance of thought other than mad rage at the idea that this little man had the nerve to use his pitiful magic on him. Victor saw his coyotes writhing and yelping in pain as smoldering lances held them to the floor. Who was this man to put his pack to the torch? Victor stared at the mage and bellowed. This time, there was no hint of pain in his voice, only raw, terrible fury. He didn't think or contemplate the consequences; he simply unleashed his fear-attuned Core, sending forth a roiling wave of dark Energy with Project Spirit.

The wizard, already starting to cast another complex spell, suddenly blanched, and his eyes darted around, trying to take in the horrors Victor had summoned from his mind. He turned and, with shaky hands, began to cast a different spell. Victor screamed again, leaped the ten feet to the mage's back, and fell on him like an avalanche of charred flesh.

“You dare challenge the Quinametzin?” He roared into the pinned mage's ear. The mage's face was red from the strain of breathing as Victor pressed his massive knee into his spine. “Worm!” he roared, grabbed the mage by the neck, and rolled, flinging his arm out and hurling him through the air to smash into one of the rune-carved posts. A shattering sound and wet crunches accompanied the impact, and suddenly the fires blazing in the hall faded to embers.

Victor sat among the floorboards he'd shattered when he'd landed, eyes glowering and brooding, wondering what else he could kill. Where were the little man's friends? Why did his body sting all over? He reached for the worst of his pains, feeling the hard, hot stone shards sticking out of his chest. Grunting, he began to pluck them out, each about four inches in length. His fury cooled as pain took its place, and no further challengers showed themselves.

Very slowly, Victor returned to himself, and when he blearily looked up from his pain-shrouded stupor, he saw that Valla stood in the shattered doorway of the structure, looking at Victor through narrowed eyes, her blue sword held ready. After a moment, her eyes sparked with recognition, and she darted forward, “Victor?”

“Ungh,” he said. He held out a hand to her, and when he saw it, blackened, cracked, raw, he could only think that it was a mistake. Who's hand was that?

“Ancestors! What happened to you? I heard the most horrible sounds! I tried to get in, Victor, I really did, but flames encircled the building!”

“Why . . .” Victor started, but then he coughed and winced, and tears filled his eyes at the terrible pain. When the fit passed, he tried again, “Why didn’t I get any Energy? I killed him . . .” He looked toward where he vaguely remembered his Quinametzin alter ego throwing the mage.

“Drink this,” Valla said, tilting a small glimmering red vial toward his lips.

“Ungh,” Victor managed again as he opened his mouth. The liquid was cold, tasted like copper, and seemed to soak through the flesh of his mouth like water into a sponge. Suddenly his mind cleared as much of his pain vanished. As his rationality began to return, he cast Sovereign Will again, this time boosting his vitality. He could feel the potion, cold as ice, scouring through his pathways, stimulating his flesh’s naturally high healing rate, and he watched as the horribly burned and cracked flesh on his forearms and hands started to mend.

“Your chest needs stronger healing than my potion, Victor. Ancestors! How did you keep fighting through that?”

“I heal when berserk. I must have been worse . . .” Victor winced and coughed as he struggled to his feet, blood flecking the saliva that splattered on the smoking floorboards. Valla tried to help him, but he shrugged her off and hobbled toward the still-smoldering pit of fire the mage had created. He saw Lifedrinker lying next to a nearby wall and stooped to pick her up. She seemed fine—any burns she might have suffered were already healed by the powerful self-repairing nature of the living wood haft.

“There’s not a body here,” Valla said, and Victor looked up from Lifedrinker. He hadn’t realized he’d spaced out. He tried to slip the axe into the loop on his belt, but it was gone. He looked down at himself and saw that his belt was still there but badly charred. His boots were black with soot, and most of his pants were simply gone, only shredded, charred rags hanging down from his belt. His torso was completely bare, black with soot, and red with swollen scars. A dozen puckered round wounds covered his abdomen, and Victor winced as he gingerly touched them.

“Chingado! That guy fucking messed me up.”

“You should see your hair,” Valla said, motioning at her head and wincing.

“Oh, fuck no!” Victor said, feeling his scalp gingerly. Scars and smooth flesh met his fingers. Spitting out more bloody saliva, he walked over to where Valla stood, and he saw the gray robe and shattered pieces of glass or crystal, but no body. “He fucking got out? I smashed him against that pole hard enough to kill anyone!”

“He was powerful, Victor. He might have had a relic or something that preserved him,” Valla said, kneeling to collect the shattered object and folding it within the robe's fabric. “I'll have Rellia's people examine this.” She looked up at Victor and winced again. “You need to recover before we go further into this.”

“What do you mean he might have had a relic to preserve him?” Victor felt his rage Core begin to stir—the idea that he'd been mangled by that guy, that he'd beat him and smashed him like a cockroach, and he still survived was enough to nearly trigger his bloodline, almost enough to make him Berserk.

“I've heard of such things. Rellia has an uncle who's rumored to have one—a powerful artificed device that will spirit him away to a place of safety if he's near death. You can imagine what powerful, wealthy people would pay for such a thing.”

“So I can't kill this fucker?”

“No! I'm not saying that,” Valla said, turning to look him in his bloodshot eyes. “Those things are rare! If you made him use it, he'll have lost a great treasure today. There are also ways to lock down an opponent, so they can't flee so easily, even with magic. I have a skill that might work, and you might gain something as you level or explore new uses for your Energy.”

“Ungh.” This time, Victor grunted on purpose. He didn't have anything to say; he felt like death warmed over, and he wanted to get someplace where he could lie down and let the world fade away for a while.

“Can you make it back to town? I'll handle the prisoner.” Victor suddenly remembered the watcher they'd captured. “I tied him to a tree.”

“Yeah. Go get him, and I'll put a shirt on.” Valla nodded and hurried out the door. Victor pulled a soft linen shirt and a pair of comfortable pants out of his ring and slipped them on, then he stepped outside, still holding his axe. He was feeling better—his vitality was slowly mending the deeper wounds he'd suffered, but he knew he looked like hell, and his body wasn't moving easily—the scars he'd suffered from the horrible burns were making his joints stiff, and his hands felt sort of numb.

He knew more of him would feel numb if he explored his skin with his fingertips, and he dreaded seeing himself in the mirror. He supposed he was lucky to be alive—he'd suffered plenty of terrible wounds but never had his whole body torched before. “Goddamn it. That guy was good—not just that his spells were strong, he was fucking fast with them. You could tell he'd fought a lot of battles.”

“Well, it sounds like he had an elemental affinity and was clearly high-tier. Considering the people we're looking for, he might not even be from this world. I

know you've fought a lot," Valla said, leading the way with the blindfolded, bound watcher trailing behind, still gagged. Victor followed along as she kept speaking, "but there are people who've been dueling for centuries. Longer in some of the older worlds. I suppose it's lucky you're as strong as you are. If you made him use a relic to survive, he'll be furious, so that's a win."

"God, he fucked me up, though," Victor grumbled, rubbing at the rough flesh of his forearm with his free hand.

"I can ask Rellia to pay for a racial enhancement treasure. That will help with the scarring," Valla said, looking back at him over her shoulder.

"No, I'm not running to Rellia just cause I got messed up. I'm the one who wanted to avoid her and Lam, right? I got myself into this; I'll get out of it. How much would a fruit or something cost?"

"Well, if you're still in the base-tier, we can get some pretty cheap advancement fruits—a few hundred beads each."

"Nah, I'm at improved," Victor grunted.

"Well, more like a thousand or two, then. I can help you out if you need . . ."

"No, I've got it. Maybe you can do some shopping for me, though? I need to lay down—I haven't felt this bad since . . . God, I can't remember. I've never felt this bad." Victor wasn't exaggerating; he limped with each step, half his body was numb, and the other half was burning. He kept catching himself panicking, his heart racing, as fragmented memories of the hell he'd experienced in the firepit flickered through his mind.

"I will do so. We should speak strategy when you feel better. If there had been another mage present . . ."

"Yeah, I get it."

When they made it back to the main road, the sun was coming up, and there were already farmers waiting to get into town when they reached the gate. Valla drew her sword and, holding it in one hand and the rope to her prisoner in the other, she hollered for people to clear the way. Victor, dazed and foggy, was happy to let her handle things as she threatened her way through the gate.

He heard her mention "Lady Rellia" and imperial business, and then they were through, and she flagged down one of the dozen coaches parked nearby, still waiting for their first business of the day. Victor groaned and gingerly climbed into the coach, and he dozed off briefly on their way back to the inn.

His mind wandered to pretty much anything other than the fight he'd just had. Victor didn't want to think of the fire, of the mage's laughs. He didn't want to remember the pain. He found himself

imagining Deyni riding around on Starlight's back, laughing as the vidanii pranced around, and he smiled, his lips stiff and unresponsive.

"We're here, Victor. Can you manage, or do you need a hand? I'd like to take this one to Rellia's interrogator." Victor opened his eyes in time to see Valla point at her prisoner with a thumb.

"Yeah, I can manage. Here," he said, then Victor dug around in his ring and pulled out one of his large bags of beads. "There are around five thousand beads in here. Please get me something to advance my race, um, some new armor . . . fuck! My helmet!"

"I got it, Victor," Valla said, producing his helmet and handing it to him.

"Shit, thank you, Valla," Victor said, pleased that he hadn't lost Polo Vosh's gift.

"Oh, I imagine we might meet that dickhead again, so maybe something to help me resist fire. Is there such a thing?"

"Yes. I'll do my best, Victor. Just to be clear, you don't want me to mention your injuries to Rellia?"

"That's right. Thank you, Valla," Victor said as he started to clamber out of the coach. When he stepped into the bright morning light and saw all the people walking by in front of Hine's inn, he suddenly wished he had a good hat or a cloak he could pull down over his face. He figured he could get out another shirt or one of the jackets Tellen's people had gifted him but decided it would be lame to wrap something around his head just because he'd gotten messed up in battle.

"Take care, Victor. I'll be back soon. I'm sorry I wasn't with you when . . ."

"Not your fault. I'm glad you didn't get the same treatment I did," Victor said, gesturing toward his face. "See you soon." He turned and walked up the steps to the inn, then through the open doors. He started toward the stairs on the far side of the common room and had almost made it, thinking he might be able to avoid explaining his injuries to anyone, but then Hine's voice boomed out.

"Victor? Is that you, lad?"

"Uh, yeah," Victor said, turning to see the sergeant drop his rag on the bar and hurriedly walk around the end so he could approach Victor.

"Ancestor's balls, man. You look like you had a rough go of it!"

"Yeah, met a mage that wasn't playing around. Um . . ." he glanced up and down at himself from his feet, then out at his outstretched hand—the one not holding Lifedrinker. "Lots of fire and shit."

“Anything I can do?” Hine asked, wincing as he looked at Victor’s face.

“Yeah, make sure no one bugs me. Except for Valla, that is. Don’t stop Valla.” He looked at Hine’s face and the sadness and pity in his eyes and said, “I’ll be alright, Hine. I’m good at healing, and, you know, racial advancements tend to help clear up scarring.”

Hine glanced around the common room, eyes lingering on the few patrons sitting at the tables, but none seemed to be listening. He said in a low tone, “You can afford it?”

“Yeah, I’ve made some money recently. I mean, I’m going to run out at this rate, but I’m good for now.”

“Good for you, lad, good for you. Not many of us make it past the first few ranks. Those of us willing to fight and risk our lives, I mean. Well, I suppose if you’re born into one of the wealthy clans, it’s a different story, but plenty of people in this city would kill for a rank or two, if you know what I mean. Seems you’ve got your hands full with the trouble already on your plate—might be best not to go inviting more. You get what I’m saying?” He winked and nodded toward the streets and, Victor guessed, the people out there.

“Yeah, I get it—quit running my mouth about things I can get that other people can’t.” He nodded and winked, and Hine winced, making Victor wonder what the action had looked like with his scars. “I’m hurting, man. Going to my room. Later.” Victor turned to the stairs and started climbing.

“I’ll make sure you’re not bothered,” Hine said, following behind him. “Don’t mind the new guard in the hallway—he’s there to be sure no more surprises await my guests in their rooms!”

“Good,” Victor replied, steadily climbing away from the older man. When he reached the landing, he saw that there was, indeed, a new guard posted at the top of the stairs. He sat on a stool and scrutinized Victor through faintly glowing brass and crystal glasses. Victor nodded to him, and the bulky Shadeni nodded back, his palms resting on the two short swords he wore at his belt.

“No activity the last few hours,” the man said.

“Good,” Victor said, chuckling at his repetition, then shuffled down the hall to his doorway.

Victor entered his room, and as he closed the door and turned toward his bed, he vacillated between going into the bathroom, studying himself in the mirror, or just climbing into bed. He shook his head and started toward the bed, but then he stopped himself. Why was he avoiding looking at himself? “Am I afraid?”

He looked within himself and realized that he was terrified. He'd never really thought of himself as vain, but he'd sure never had anyone tell him he was ugly. Would he be able to cope if Valla couldn't find what he needed or if he advanced his race and it wasn't enough? Maybe he wouldn't be able to heal those scars until he'd made it all the way to advanced race—he didn't think he had the treasure to buy ten ranks.

“Quit being chicken shit,” he said and stalked toward the bathroom. He started to undress with stiff, sore limbs, piling his things on the counter. He had a momentary flashback to when the thief had taken advantage of him doing just that, and he quickly jerked around, looking intently into the shadowy corners of his room. He didn't see anything, but he closed the bathroom door anyway.

Undressed, he moved to stand in front of the big mirror that hung above the sink, and he looked at the destruction the mage's magical fire had wrought on his body. “Jesus,” he hissed. He was still covered in soot, and he was rather happy for it—the parts of his body that weren't blackened by char looked like melted wax. Thick scars covered most of him, including his face. His head was bereft of hair and discolored pink flesh mixed with the scars that had formed over his dead, burned skin.

The puckered puncture wounds in his chest and stomach were mostly healed, thanks to his colossal vitality, but they still hurt when he poked at them. Briefly, he wondered if some of the mage's magical molten shards had broken off inside his torso. “Fuck me,” he hissed again, then shaking his head and feeling like weeping, he took a deep breath and walked over to the shower. “Might as well get clean,” he said, for some reason, finding the sound of his voice comforting.

As he stood under the shower, Victor let out a long, shuddering sob and confronted the fact that he missed his abuela, missed his mom. “God, I miss you, mom. Why'd you fucking die?” he said, for the first time in many years, voicing the source of much of his anger.

He knew his anger at his mom was irrational, but he knew it was there all the same. Facing it like that, when he was down at his lowest for a long while, Victor wondered if he was changing—if something in his mind had turned a corner and now he was willing to look at his irrational anger and the fears he held so deeply, so closely, that he had trouble voicing them even to himself. He stood there, shuddering with emotion for many minutes, letting the water of the shower wash over him, and when he dried off and crawled into his bed, he slept almost instantly.

Victor's body, his mind, and his spirit were exhausted, and he didn't stir, hardly moved other than his chest's slow rise and fall as he faded into a deep, dreamless sleep. When he cracked his eyes open, he saw sunlight coming through his window, and he couldn't have guessed if he'd only slept a few minutes or for a week. He stretched, instantly annoyed at how stiff his joints were and how his skin felt thick and taut over his bones.

“Awake?” Valla asked, startling him. He jerked his head toward the sound and saw her standing near a small wooden chair, perhaps having just stood when she saw him move.

“Yeah, uh, how long?”

“You slept a day. I had some luck, Victor.” She approached his bed, and Victor, never really self-conscious before, quickly pulled his sheets up to his chin. For some reason, he felt embarrassed by his scars—like they were his fault. Valla smiled as though to reassure him, and he felt further embarrassed that he’d suddenly earned her pity.

“Luck?” he asked, trying to bury the bullshit emotions that were making him feel crazy.

“Yes. I told Rellia I was seeking to buy some racial enhancement treasures,” she paused and looked Victor in the eye, “I did not mention your troubles.” He nodded, and she continued, “Rellia told me that house ap’Torux was having money troubles—they’d been auctioning some of their art and a few relics recently. I approached their estate and let them know what I wished to purchase, and they sold me two treasures they’d been saving for one of the family scions—a young man who’d recently proved to be something of a disappointment to the matriarch.”

Valla produced an ornate little box that looked like it was made from ivory and set it on the bed next to Victor. Then a dark, smoky jar appeared in her hand. It glittered like crystal in the light, but the contents seemed to swallow any light that penetrated the container. “The box has a cake made by a master artisan from a distant world—according to the ap’Torux treasurer I spoke to, he was a tier-seven craftsman and made this cake to help unlock bloodline secrets and advance racial ranks for the person that eats it.”

“Uh, cool,” Victor said, picking up the box, surprised by its heft.

“Don’t open it yet! Light and air will reduce the cake’s potency.”

“Oh, okay.” Victor left the box on his chest and let his hands fall back to the mattress. “And the other thing?”

“This is smoke from the lungs of a firedrake—a close relative to dragons.”

“What does it do?”

“It’s rumored that if you inhale it, wounds caused by fire will mend. The treasurer even told me that sometimes people develop resistance to flames from it.”

“So dragons are a thing?” Victor asked. He wanted to be excited, wanted to take the jar, and inhale its contents right away, but he didn’t want to make himself vulnerable to a hope that sounded very much like horseshit to him.

“Yes, they’re one of the elder races—present on their world and many others long before the System came along. They aren’t on Fanwath, though, at least not anywhere where people have found them. This smoke would be very hard to acquire, Victor—drakes don’t live on this world, either.”

“Really? This sounds like a fairy tale to me, but fuck, I guess I’ve seen plenty of weirder shit since I’ve been here. You think this smoke will help me?”

“Yes!”

“Well, was the money I gave you enough?”

Valla’s face took on a funny expression, and Victor couldn’t figure out why at first, but then he realized she was debating whether to tell him the truth or not. “Well . . .”

“Come on, Valla.”

“You owe me three thousand beads, and I’ve yet to buy you new armor.”

“Fuck. Just a sec,” Victor looked into his storage ring at the various stashes of beads he’d gathered from adventuring, selling loot, and Thayla’s gambling. His impression was that he was down to his last ten thousand or so. He took out a bag that held roughly another five thousand and handed it to Valla.

“Some extra for the armor. Money well spent, Valla. Which one do you think I should use first?” He gestured to the box and bottle and raised a smooth, hairless eyebrow.