

Victor BK3: Ch28

Book 3: Chapter 28: In the Harsh Light

Victor sat at Valla's table, watching as the woman carefully piled her documents and books into neat stacks and then took a seat across from him. "A lot to go over, huh?"

"Yes," she said, nodding, "Rellia's questioner had quite a time with the watcher we captured. Trayzil's mental attacks didn't work at first—the mage had a will that was nearly a match for him. Of course, that didn't matter much after the proper soporifics were applied. An alchemist able to concoct tailor-made mixtures makes such work endlessly more palatable—no fingers were removed or eyes poked out with hot irons . . ."

"What the fuck, Valla? I mean, I know the guy wasn't going to a spa, but . . . why bring that stuff up if your guy didn't even use it?"

"Oh, I'm sorry, Victor. When I think of questioning people, I'm often reminded of my time in the legion, and it heartens me to know Lady Rellia doesn't generally have to go to the lengths some of the field captains would to get answers."

"Okay," Victor said, cracking his neck. "What did you find out?" he prompted after Valla sat quietly for a minute.

"Right. Well, we learned that the Pyromancer is not from Fanwath. He's an off-world powerhouse that was hired by a wealthy, influential man by the name of ap'Gravin. He's well-known and almost universally loathed and feared in equal parts. He's seen as sort of the emperor regent for the western cities, though he'd never claim such a title—not if he wanted to keep his head."

"So that's my enemy?"

"No, not exactly," Valla said, holding up a finger.

"But the asshole that burned me works for him?"

"No, he did work for him, yes, but no longer. Yes, he was contracted, for other work, at great expense by ap'Gravin, but that work was done months and months ago. The Pyromancer, Boeagh, apparently took a liking to Persi Gables and has chosen to linger here on his own accord, though it seems he's taken up work with a lesser noble. This name might interest you: Lord ap'Horrin."

"Are you fucking serious? That's the asshole that broke my Core and sent me to the mines!" Victor's knuckles cracked as he involuntarily clenched his fists.

"Yes, I knew that from Rellia's research into your origins."

"So, how does a little creep like that afford a mage like, what was it? Boge?"

“Exactly the right question! His name is Boeagh, but you were close enough,” Valla said, waving a hand as she continued, “The mage we questioned claimed that Boeagh is working out of ap’Horrin’s estate but insisted that he calls no man master.”

“So it’s just a coincidence that the dick who almost killed me is working with the other dick who almost killed me? What about the guys who summoned me?”

Valla looked at him quizzically for a minute, opened her mouth a few times, but shook her head and said, “We think Boeagh is largely responsible for the summonings that took place in that barn. We think he’s still doing it, but he originally did it as part of his contract with ap’Gravin. There are still many questions left to answer regarding that series of events.”

“So, what’s the move? You mind pointing me toward that dude’s estate? I think it’s long past time I gave him a visit.”

“Victor,” Valla started, and Victor could see she was struggling with her choice of words. Finally, she started again, “Victor, did you learn nothing from our encounter a few days ago?”

“I . . .” Victor was stumped. She had a damn good point. When he’d rushed off into the woods, hoping to confront the cabal of wizards that had summoned him, he’d expected to waltz in, maybe go Berserk, and beat the shit outta them all. He’d had a vague plan in his mind to smash first and figure out the answers afterward.

He’d gotten some answers, but he’d also lost the main bad guy because he hadn’t done any research—hadn’t had any kind of clue that he might be able to escape the way he did. “Plus, I almost died,” he finished aloud, and Valla continued to stare at him.

“Yeah, I learned something. So, I need to do what? Spy on the estate for a while?”

“I’ve put that process in motion for you,” Valla said with a smile. “I have many connections here in Persi Gables, and I’ve sent some people for intelligence gathering. People far more capable of going unseen than you, Victor,” she said, holding out a hand placatingly as Victor took a deep breath, forestalling his objections.

“So, how long?” Victor asked, getting to the point of his concerns.

“Not long. A day or three. My people have already been working on getting agents in place for two days.”

“Hmm, and me?”

“I think you should stay in the Inn. As far as Boeagh knows, you’re disfigured, near death, or dead.” Valla drummed her fingers on the table, watching Victor’s face, then she said, “Is there some cultivating you can do? Do you need me to buy you any ingredients? I’m not sure how spirit Cores work.”

“Well,” Victor sighed and then nodded. “I’ve been putting something off for a while, and I think I need to go work on it. Give me until noon or so, then come check on me—I might have a list of things I need you to buy.” He stood up, his chair scraping noisily over the wooden floor, and then he pushed it back under the table.

“I will do so. In your room?”

“Yeah. Thanks, Valla,” Victor said, turning to let himself out of her room. He felt a little guilty, roping her into his problems the way he had, but it seemed like she was sort of enjoying it. “Not to mention, she works for Rellia—I’m sure she’s getting a bonus for staying so close to me.” He stepped into his room and locked the door behind himself.

He pushed his little table away toward the wall, clearing more space on the floor at the foot of his bed, and then he sat down, summoning the weave pattern out of his ring that Oynalla had made him copy while Spirit Walking. It was a complicated pattern—a twist of all three of his affinities, and the whorls, loops, and knots they made were hard to make sense of at first glance.

Luckily, while Victor hadn’t tried the pattern yet, he’d spent quite a few hours studying the design and committing parts of it to memory while they’d traveled. “All right, let’s do this right,” he said, then he took out a fresh sheet of parchment and three differently colored inks that he could use with his magical quill. He was determined to learn the weave perfectly, by hand, before he tried to build it in his pathways.

Hours ticked by while he worked. He drew the different lines one at a time, at first—red ink for rage, black ink for fear, and blue ink for inspiration. When he’d made the entire weave five times, he started to complete sections of it from memory without looking at his original or copies for hints.

This activity really drove home to him how much he’d changed since coming to Fanwath. He knew he was different, of course; many of the changes were impossible not to see—his height, his muscle mass, the way his face and voice had matured beyond his years, thanks to his Quinametzin bloodline, no doubt. Still, he felt like the same old Victor inside, in his heart. When he got the complicated Energy weave almost entirely right on his first try, he knew it had to do with his mental attributes.

It had taken him longer to learn to multiply by fives than it had for him to memorize this thing that looked like something da Vinci might sketch while high on mushrooms. He pulled his watch out of his ring and looked at the time—he still had an hour before noon. “Well, time to stop stalling, I guess.”

Victor set the pattern in front of himself on the floor and performed a few stretches, working the kinks out of his back and neck. Then, he assumed the lotus position and turned his mind inward, looking at his Core and the three swirling, pulsating orbs of Energy within. He felt like his dark

purple-black orb of fear was in constant battle with the white-gold of his inspiration, and yet they both seemed to shrink away from the baleful, pulsing red of his rage. “None of you guys is the boss, but if I had to pick one, I suppose it would be inspiration.”

With that thought in mind, he decided to build the foundation of his weave with inspiration, twisting the other two Energies around it. He wanted to ensure that the Energy he finished with had the right tone and connotation. He thought of it like rage—it could either be the full-throated, partially beneficial rage that he cast on himself, or it could be twisted to only create a mad lust for violence. He knew that this new Energy he was about to form in his pathways could have more than one tone, and he wanted it to have a positive base.

That done, Victor held the convoluted pattern of inspiration-attuned Energy firmly in place in his large, central pathway, and he pulled forth a thread of fear. It tried to surge and work its way loose from his grip so that it could push into the pathway and wrap tightly around the inspiration thread, but Victor clamped down with his will, grinning at his mastery over the writhing, lashing Energy. With the delicate touch of a watchmaker, Victor carefully wound the thread here and there, on the pattern, purposefully leaving large swathes of inspiration Energy free from the touch of the fear.

When he’d worked through all the parts of the main pattern and still had a long, dangling strand of fear-attuned energy waiting for his direction, Victor clamped it in place and pulled forth his third strand, a burning, scorching, baleful ribbon of rage. He froze his other two threads in place, smashing them into submission with his will so that he could concentrate on the rage. He worked it in and around the other two threads, keeping a light touch where it came to the inspiration Energy, but a heavier, balancing double-weave around parts of the fear-infused section of the tapestry.

He knew, from his conversations with Oynalla, that she had an idea of what kind of Energy he might be weaving. She’d hoped he’d find justice with only fear and rage but had seen the mistake in that—justice was an Energy with many facets, and a large part of it was positive. Her initial plan had lacked the crucial component of inspiration. With a base of inspiration, pulling forth the positive aspects of fear and rage, Victor thought—and felt—like something was going right.

He could feel how the rage was being focused into a righteous fury, and he could sense how the fear was being twisted into guilt and a dread of repercussions. The overall tone of the pattern, though, was one of virtue, of wrongs made right. When he finished up his weaving of the rage thread and twisted it off with the remainder of the fear strand, he looped them both back to the thick, heavy trunk of inspiration that he’d woven at the start.

The entire construct pulsed in his pathways, the three colors of Energy melding together into a dark, smoky black, and then the shadows fell from it, and nothing but a solid, blazing white fire remained, bright and harsh. Victor could feel its righteous desire to burn the guilty, and he surprised himself by flinching back from his own Energy. He gritted his teeth, though, and while he had the power primed in his pathways, he chose a spell to cast: Globe of Insight.

He formed the spell pattern in his pathway, instantly pushing the weave of justice-attuned Energy into it. Suddenly his room was bathed with a sourceless white, glaring light, and not a single shadow could survive its presence—every crack in the plaster, every gap in the floorboards, every mite, every mote of dust—all were exposed in its glare. Deep in his soul, Victor knew that if

someone he deemed guilty, someone he felt deserved to feel the weight of justice, were in that room, they'd feel that glare in a most uncomfortable way.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Harsh Light of Justice - Improved.

***Harsh Light of Justice - Improved: You create an area around your person illuminated by the light of justice-attuned Energy. This light will reflect the morality of the caster, damning or blessing those within the light based on that perception. Those deemed unworthy will suffer a constant leeching effect on their Energy and find their movements slow and cumbersome. Those receiving a blessing will instead find themselves invigorated, encouraged, and driven to deliver swift judgment to their enemies. Energy cost variable based on the intended area of effect: minimum 150
Cooldown: minimal.***

As Victor read the System message, a slow grin spread on his face, and he stood up to whoop and punch his fist into his hand. He was getting ready to go find Valla, excited to share his news, when golden motes of Energy gathered in his room and streamed into him. "Fuck yes!" he howled, feeling the surge of power and well-being that always accompanied such things. He didn't gain a level, but he felt like he might be getting close—it was similar to the sensation he got when his Core was getting ready to bump up a rank, almost like a sense of fullness.

"Awesome! Gorz, why do you think I just learned a spell at the improved rank?"

"You did, Victor? Congratulations! It could be that you managed to make the pattern in a way that automatically elevated the spell. You began at a point far beyond basic because of that."

"Hell, yes! I knew that weave was feeling good," Victor said, and then spent a few minutes describing what he'd done. Gorz, unable to truly show emotion, did his best to act impressed.

When the euphoria of his success began to pass, and he could concentrate again, Victor contemplated something he'd been avoiding—he'd never cast Berserk with fear-attuned Energy to find out what it did. He only forced himself to think about it now because he was tempted to try it with his justice-attuned weave of Energy. When he'd made his courage weave, he'd been excited to test it, to see what kind of spell it would make, and he'd come away with a potent spell—Heroic Heart.

Still, he was hesitant. Berserk was no joke of a spell, and, yeah, it might be harmless to test with ostensibly benign Energies like inspiration or courage, but fear was negative and dangerous. What if it affected him in a way similar to rage? He might hurt someone. Even justice gave him pause—twisted into that pattern of righteousness were threads of fury and guilt—what if he went mad, delivering "justice" to anyone he thought wasn't perfect?

He was still struggling with the decision when a knock sounded at his door, and he sighed with relief, welcoming the distraction. He found Valla standing in the hallway, and she raised an eyebrow and said, "You found a new spell? The Energy is thick in the air. It has a different feel."

"Yes, I've been working on weaving some of my attunements into a new affinity." Victor shrugged, and Valla opened her eyes wider.

“Perhaps you can give me some pointers. I’ve yet to create a meta-element with my affinities.”

“Well, you know it requires an effort of will, and . . . yeah, I can’t teach that.”

“Still. I’d be curious to see your weaves.” Valla started to move forward, and Victor realized he was blocking the door. He backed up and motioned her through.

“There,” he said, pointing, “on the floor. The weave I just made.” He leaned a shoulder against the doorframe, watching her and trying to think of his next move. Valla stepped over to his pattern and picked up the page, densely packed with three different colors of ink.

“This is . . . complex.” She shook her head and turned the page sideways and then upside down. “How long did you work on this?”

“Remember that last time I went for a Spirit Walk?” She nodded, and he continued, “I met with Oynalla, and we made that pattern together—she’d already had a good chunk of it done. I started studying it after that, an hour here and there.”

“Truly? And you could form this in your pathway? All these bends and curls? These twists of different Energy?”

“Yeah, I’m telling you—it’s all about the will.”

“May I ask your will attribute’s level?” she asked, very uncharacteristically. He could tell she was feeling frustrated, maybe even angry.

“Well, between you and me, it’s up to two-eighty-seven.”

“Nearly three hundred?” She stared at him with open shock. “I’m sorry I asked,” she huffed and slapped his spell weave down on the table, yanking a chair back to sit down and glowering toward a blank spot on the wall a bit left of Victor’s shoulder.

“Hey,” Victor said, moving over to the table and pulling out a chair. He sat down in front of her and said, “Don’t kill the messenger, all right? I lucked out, I guess—my Classes up to now have had automatic will gains, and I’ve also had free points to distribute, and I’ve dumped a lot into the stat. On another note, you can kick my ass with a sword, and you’re faster than I am!”

That got a small smile out of her, and she sighed, “I’m just frustrated. Rellia paid an Elementalist at the academy a lot of money for a weave of air and iron. He divulged a ‘secret’ to her; I’ll never be able to weave the two because they cancel each other out. Iron is a type of earth affinity, and

apparently, it's anathema to air. I have to either gain another affinity, somehow, that I can use to mix with the other two, or I'll be limited to what I can do with these two affinities separately."

"One, that mage might be full of shit, and two, there's gotta be a way to gain new affinities, right?"

"Oh, there are ways. Impossibly expensive treasures can be found at exclusive auctions. Awards from the System can be found on the older worlds or in high-tier dungeons that might offer a solution," she paused and looked at Victor narrowing her eyes, "Alternatively, I could be born with an absurdly powerful Core that seems able to split into new affinities at a whim."

She laughed and shook her head when she saw him open his mouth, then close it again, struggling with how to respond. "I know, I know. Nothing you do is easy. Anyway, it's a problem for another day, I suppose." She sighed heavily and visibly forced a smile. "Did you think of a shopping list for me?"

"No. I have another problem that I need your help with."

"Another one?"

"Hey!" Victor laughed, "Okay, I deserve that. This one's a good problem, though. I need to try out a couple of new spells that might be very dangerous for the people around me. Can we go somewhere . . . safe for that?"

"Well, I'd hoped we could avoid people seeing you out and about. Let me get a cloak from Hine—something to hide your face and . . . coloring. We can go to Rellia's estate," she held up a hand and added, "Just her grounds—we won't go inside. She has a lovely grove of plum trees that should be perfect; no one's working them this time of year."

"Plums? I'm so happy to hear another word I recognize! They must be a lot like the ones on my world, or the System wouldn't have used my word. I mean, that's how it worked with pork, I think."

"Sure," Valla shrugged. Then, she stood up, and the two of them walked down to the common room, where Valla asked Hine to call them a coach and pestered him for a cloak. The sergeant ended up giving Victor an old legion rain cloak. It was dark brown leather and oiled very heavily. It covered most of Victor's torso, being large enough to fit over a legionnaire's pack, and he could pull the hood far enough forward to obscure his face in shadow.

Thus concealed, he and Valla stepped outside to get into the coach, and twenty minutes later, they were riding onto the smooth cobbled stones of the noble district of Persi Gables. Large manors lined the boulevard with high stone walls and extensive gardens. The enormous estates within the city walls really drove home to Victor just how large the city-state was. "Quite a lot different from the other districts," Victor said, looking around at the clean sidewalks, the smooth cobbles, and the light foot traffic.

“Oh yes. The difference between old, consolidated power and wealth and the rest of the people in the world. When there’re ten or even a hundred natural treasures discovered every year, who do you think gets them? The upstart adventurers or one of the houses filled with old monsters?”

“You talking about things like I used a few days ago? The smoke and the cake?”

“Well, the smoke was a natural treasure, yes. The cake was crafted, but I’m sure the ingredients included rare natural resources. I was talking more about things found in this world, though. Even if someone from a lower family found a hunk of amber ore or an advancement fruit, do you think they’d use it, making them a stronger force for their family, or do you think they’d sell it, using the money to feed and house their family for years?”

“I guess it depends,” Victor shrugged.

“Yes. I suppose so.” Valla didn’t smile or frown, and Victor thought maybe she thought he didn’t get what she was talking about.

“I know what you mean, okay? It’s like that on Earth too. I mean my home world. Families born with money tend to keep it and make more of it. Some of us feel like we’re doing okay because they like us to think that. We can watch vids and VR, get plenty to eat, and even get to earn an education that’s supposed to help us better our station. I guess it does for some people, but for most of us, we just keep walking in the same rut.”

Valla nodded, and Victor frowned and said, “Life’s not fair, I guess. I don’t know what I would have made of myself back on my home world, but I didn’t have an easy shake at things here, either. I’ve been caged, chained, beaten, burned, lost, chopped up, fucking thrown into pits and deep bottomless trenches. I’ve had ghouls bite the shit out of me, wrestled with deep hulks, and I’ve been betrayed, robbed, and lied to more times than I can count. I know I have a strong Core, but I didn’t come into this world any tougher than that little kid out there.” Victor pointed to a boy holding a string that trailed a colorful, long-tailed kite.

“So, your argument for all the people who don’t get a fair shot at things is to . . . what? Try harder?” Valla snorted.

“Heh,” Victor couldn’t help laughing at her simplification of his outburst. “Maybe. No. Fuck, I don’t know. Pretty much the only thing I do know is that I don’t know how to fix things, but I want to. Hell, I’m just a dumb berserker, anyway, right?” He winked at her, and she barked a short laugh as the coach came to a halt.

“We’re at the Lady’s grove, ma’am,” the coachman called back, and Victor popped the door open for Valla, then followed her outside.

The air was brisk, and the trees that stretched out in neat rows away from the street were bare and leafless. Thick layers of leaves covered the ground, and Victor’s breath plumed forth while he rubbed his hands together briskly. He looked into the grove, saw that it encompassed nearly an acre,

and nodded. "This'll do. You'll wait with the coach? If something terrible happens, have him take off."

"You think something terrible might happen?"

"Well, I didn't make you bring me out here for nothing. I'm about to employ some rather scary affinities in my most powerful spell. Here's hoping I'm just being paranoid." Victor shrugged and started trudging through the damp, thick leaves, hooded like an executioner, his long, bearded axe clutched in one hand, resting on his shoulder.