

Victor BK3: Ch29

Book 3: Chapter 29: Spells and Consequences

Victor stood in the middle of the grove and slowly turned around in a circle. He could see a wall with a gate at one edge of the tree rows, and he figured that led into Rellia's estate. A steep slope and a higher wall with wrought iron spikes along the top bordered another edge, and streets meeting in a corner formed the rest of the boundary.

As he finished his circle, his eyes came to rest on the little black coach, its pair of roladii, and the coachman sitting on the bench. Valla stood to the side, wrapped in her cloak, breath pluming out as she peered back into the gloomy orchard toward Victor. She was only about a hundred feet from him, and he suddenly wished the grove was more extensive. Traffic on the streets was very light, and when Victor considered it was only noon, he tried to think of what day of the week it was. Shaking his head, he realized he had no idea.

"Maybe it's like Sunday or something. Do they go to church in this world?" The absurdity of his lack of knowledge suddenly hit him, and he chuckled. Had he really been so busy that he didn't know about a thing like that? He remembered the pocket realm where Belikot and the Naghelli lived—there had been a kind of Ghelli church there. Did they meet on Sundays, though? Victor had no idea. "Do they even have cemeteries here?" he wondered aloud as he considered the way Shadeni and Ardeni seemed to worship their ancestors.

Stamping his feet and rubbing his hands together, he chastised himself for letting his mind wander so—was he stalling? "All right, which one first?" he asked Lifedrinker, tilting the handle on his shoulder, so her cool metal rested against his cheek. Her haft was warm where his fingers rested against it, and Victor felt immeasurably comforted knowing she was with him. He'd sort of hoped she'd have something to say, but her silence was enough of a statement—this was something he could handle.

"Fair enough, mi cielo," he said, slipping her into the loop at his belt. His use of the endearment surprised him—it was something his mom used to call him, and he hadn't thought of it in many years. It felt good to say it, though, and he took a deep, cleansing breath of the cold air, staring up at the gray sky for a minute, allowing his thoughts to drift back in time. When had she last called him that? He couldn't remember, but he could picture her standing in the kitchen, next to their little table, watching him try to do some kind of artwork. He couldn't for the life of him remember what it had been.

Victor rubbed his hands briskly, trying to get his head back into the moment, and then he closed his eyes and started building his weave for justice-attuned Energy. He felt less apprehensive about that Energy, knowing he'd weighed the inspiration against the fear and rage, knowing it was an Energy that was all about balance. When he finished the pattern, he focused his will against his Core, holding the Energy within, and cast Berserk, feeding the spell with the weave of Justice-attuned Energy.

As the spell hungrily devoured his prepared Energy, Victor released his hold on his Core and allowed the pattern to pull from his three affinities as needed to complete its creation. He felt a profound calm come over him, his sensations faded to dull background noise, and even his vision changed. At first, he didn't notice it because his eyes were aimed at the sky, at the dark gray clouds and the barren grayish-brown branches, but when he started to feel the disconnect from his other senses, he lowered his gaze and saw that the entire world was washed in grays, whites, and blacks. There was no color.

He felt dispassionate as he looked around. Though something else had changed—he didn't feel confused or lost. He didn't feel love or hate. His affections for Chandri, Thayla, Deyni, and even Lifedrinker were dull, distant things. He wanted to be alarmed but couldn't find the requisite emotions within himself—alarm was out of reach. He looked at his colorless pale hands, flexed his fingers, and felt the strength within. He was capable, and there was work to be done.

“Yes,” he growled, narrowing his eyes and looking around. He had work to do. There were those out there that required justice, and it was his job, his duty, to find them. His mind drifted to the most pressing, most recent offender, and he pictured the gray-robed mage: the Pyromancer, Boaegh. Suddenly, in the sea of gray, colorless, emotionless existence, Victor felt a heat, a pull, and he whirled toward the street that ran perpendicular to the one where Valla stood with the coach.

Before he knew what he was doing, Victor began stalking toward that street. He could feel the pull of injustice. He could feel the heat of his quarry and knew it was his duty to bring him to heel. Something built up in his chest, no, not his chest, his Core, and as the strange pressure mounted and began to grow uncomfortable, Victor released it, and, though he was still fifty paces from the street, his next footfall was on cobblestones. He nodded and kept marching toward the pull of the fugitive, the target of his justice.

As he continued down the road, Victor was dimly aware of the people he passed and how they looked at him and hurried out of his path. They were of no consequence, however; only his quarry mattered. He could feel the pressure building in his Core, and as it rose to a crescendo, roiling and bubbling, begging for release, he held onto it. This was his power—he was not at its mercy.

He could feel his target as he came to a narrow street that ran along the city wall and could feel the pull of it, no longer directly in front of him. The wall was in his way. He looked left and right and saw guard stations and stairs leading to battlements but no nearby gates. Victor faced the heat of his prey, stepped toward it, and released the surging, pressing Energy at his Core. His next footfall was upon grass and twigs, the wall no longer obscuring his path.

Victor dispassionately looked over his shoulder to see the city wall rising high behind him, its cold shadow falling over the cleared fields separating Persi Gables from the surrounding woods. He nodded and turned, facing the heat of his quarry, and began striding toward the forest, the roiling pressure starting to build in his gut once again.

Something stirred in the corner of his mind, and Victor allowed himself to see what it was—a thought! Should he be hunting this prey just now? Should he be delivering justice, or was it the wrong time for such action? As those thoughts infiltrated his single-minded pursuit, they were like

cracks in a dam, holding back a flood of other ideas. What about Valla? Wasn't he supposed to wait for her intelligence gatherers? What if the mage was ready for him? Shouldn't he develop a plan?

Even as the dam began to burst, Victor's gut began to roil with pent-up Energy, and he released it. One second he was stepping down onto stiff, frigid grass, and the next, he was striding among the shadows of thick, dense woods. His quarry was there, ever closer with each of his steps, the heat and wrongness of it drawing him. He was meant to extinguish that baleful presence!

"Stop." Victor looked around, wondering from whence the word had come. He took another step, and the voice came again; this time, he realized the voice was his. "Stop," Victor said again, and his body obeyed. Though his leg muscles screamed for release, urged him to keep moving toward the target of his justice, he held still.

With several deep breaths, Victor reasserted his will and saw the colors start to bleed back into his surroundings. He felt the chill in the air again, and he allowed his emotions to surge back into existence, starting with relief—he'd almost lost himself to the hunt, but he'd managed to gain control before he did anything stupid.

Before he could think of his next move, he saw that System messages were waiting for his attention, and he looked at them:

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: The Inevitable Huntsman - Improved.

The Inevitable Huntsman - Improved: Prerequisite: affinity for or ability to manifest justice-attuned Energy. When the form of the Inevitable Huntsman is assumed, the caster will gain a singular, dispassionate focus on a target. As mastery of this spell progresses, the Huntsman will gain the ability to bypass barriers and distance, drawing ever nearer to the quarry. Energy Cost: Minimum 500 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.

Victor looked around and saw that he was deep in the woods, only vaguely aware of the direction that led back to Persi Gables. "Well, that was pretty fucking wild."

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"Wait here," Valla said to the coachman and started walking along the street toward the corner. She'd felt Victor's aura surge, seen how shadows had seemed to coalesce around him, bursting forth and leaving behind a strange, smoky gray steam that seemed to limn his figure, clinging to him like a shifting, gray cloak. She'd watched him start to walk toward the other street and figured it was in his best interest, her best interest, and Rellia's best interest that she follow.

Valla kept pace with Victor, and he'd only taken a few steps when golden motes of Energy coalesced in the grove around him and surged into him. He didn't slow his steps or even seem to notice the influx of Energy, but it was a good clue that he'd created a new spell.

She had no trouble keeping up with him at first, but then the smoky gray cloak surged, and with a burst of white-gray, steaming Energy, Victor was gone. She followed the trail of steam with her eyes

and found him, now striding down the center of the cobbled road, some fifty paces further ahead. “Did he teleport or move quickly?” she breathed as she jogged to the corner and followed after him.

Victor seemed oblivious to the people around him. Roladii warbled and pulled at their reins to get out of his way, and people scurried left and right as he strode steadily down the road. Valla kept to the sidewalk a dozen paces behind him, having to stutter step into a short jog now and then so she didn’t lose ground. His gait seemed unhurried, but it was steady, and his legs were long, and nothing seemed to give him pause.

She was happy to see his axe still hooked to his belt—he didn’t seem to be doing anything violent or destructive, and she hoped this strange march through town had a purpose in his mind. She contemplated calling out to him, asking him what he was doing, offering her help. She decided to just watch for now and followed him past two more turns until the city wall loomed ahead of them.

Valla wondered if this had been his goal. Was he going to follow the wall to one of the gates? Where was he going? For the first time, Victor slowed his pace as he came to the wall road, and he peered left, then right, then back at the wall. Valla opened her mouth, and before she could stop herself, she called out, “Victor, what are you doing?”

In answer, he took a step toward the wall, and then the gray, shifting, smoky aura burst into white steam again, and he was gone. The white trail dissipated quickly, but Valla saw it lead directly into the stone of the massive wall. She rushed forward to look around—he was gone. “Ancestors Bones!” she hissed and turned to sprint toward the nearest gate, some two miles distant.

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Before he could do anything he might regret, Victor sat down on a frost-rimed log and took stock of himself. He was down nearly two thousand Energy, and when he looked at his Core, he saw that all of his Energies were depleted, but his inspiration-attuned orb was almost dark. He supposed it made sense—his weave of justice-attuned Energy called for nearly two parts of inspiration for each of his other attunements.

He had a vague recollection of his time under the influence of the new spell. He could remember a blurry passage through town, moving ever closer to his target. Suddenly, his heart raced as he jerked his head in the direction where he’d last felt the heat of the “quarry” for his spell. He’d still been quite a ways from Boaegh, though, and he was pretty sure miles of dense woods still separated them. Sighing, he looked around again.

The woods were thick, and he hadn’t been following any sort of trail. He sat amongst tall trees of all types. Though the undergrowth in the woods around Persi Gables wasn’t as heavy as in a wilder forest, there were still quite a few bushes and shrubs, trees, big and small, and visibility was limited, especially in the overcast, gray winter light. “At least I’ve got a little more space out here,” he muttered, still determined to try out his fear-attuned Energy with his Berserk spell.

He stood and looked at the ground and the nearby underbrush, and when he saw the broken branches of a leafless sapling, he felt reasonably confident he knew what direction he’d come from. With that in mind, he turned and started hiking perpendicularly to his earlier passage; he wanted more distance between himself and others before he tried his fear affinity with Berserk.

He knew Valla was probably freaking out, probably circling the city looking for him, but she was smart, and she'd figure out to wait for him at the inn eventually. He felt like it was better this way, better that he be truly alone when he tried out this spell. While he hiked, letting his Energy accumulate, he contemplated The Inevitable Huntsman.

He could see how it would be useful, tracking down someone. He didn't remember having much of a thought process when he'd chosen his "quarry," though. It seemed like he might be at the mercy of whatever his subconscious deemed was his most pressing potential target. He wished it would work for tracking down anyone—friend or neutral party included. Still, it was good to be able to hunt an enemy when needed. The spell was costly, though, and he felt like a big part was the teleportation aspect. If he used it whenever it was ready, he'd be drained pretty rapidly.

"Wonder what happens when I catch up to them, too," Victor muttered as he stopped to stretch, his Energy much recovered. Once more, he looked around the woods, listening carefully to the sounds of distant trees popping and creaking, birds squawking and rustling in the brush here and there. Nothing seemed to be coming toward him, and he didn't think there were any people nearby.

Victor dreaded using his fear affinity with his most powerful spell. He kept thinking back to when he'd been new at casting Berserk and how his rage would take him over. What if he became engrossed in his fear? What if it left him catatonic or caused him to do terrible things? He wished he had someone powerful there to help him, to watch over him. "Someone like Oynalla." As he thought of the Old Mother, Victor pictured meeting with her on the Spirit Plane, and that brought to mind his coyotes, who often accompanied him in that realm.

Suddenly a spark of an idea flared in his mind, and Victor concentrated on his Core, building his pattern for courage-attuned Energy. What better way to balance his fear than with some brave companions? With his other Energies locked down, Victor cast Manifest Spirit and fed the courage-attuned Energy into the spell. As always, his five companions began to shimmer into existence, like mist rising from the forest floor.

This time, rather than red, purplish-black, or brilliant gold, the coyotes shone with a deep red-gold luminescence that filled Victor's heart to bursting with pride and admiration. "Qué guapo!" Victor hissed, squatting down and holding out his hands as one of the golden canines, a big male, walked toward him, neck arched, nose down, tail wagging, like he was proud of himself. Victor ran his hands along the coyote's neck and back, marveling at how the fur felt real and charged with Energy.

"Okay, watch over me. Don't let me do anything terrible, mis compañeros."

With his pack surrounding him, Victor reached into his Core and pressed hard against his rage Energy, holding it firm, then cast Berserk, and when the spell pattern flared to life, he fed it with fear-attuned Energy. Victor screamed. He felt black, caustic Energy pour through his pathways into his body, and he felt it ripping him apart. He arched his back, lifted his face to the gray sky, and screamed, and it sounded like a thousand people were being put to the torch. His voice rose and rang out among the trees, building on itself, echoing off itself, and sending the animals nearby fleeing in abject terror.

Victor held out his arms, glanced from left to right at them, saw his flesh turn black, saw it peeling from his body in shadowy wisps, saw it hug his white bones, and saw his limbs lengthen, his fingers extend into claws. As the horror of what he witnessed registered in his mind, he screamed again, but this time it sounded more like a roar, more like a howl. He looked down at his legs and saw the same thing happening—his flesh becoming purple-black smoke that sheathed his bones in thick shadow.

His back arched and jerked again, and this time Victor fell forward, but he caught himself on his hands. He felt his legs lengthen and twist, felt his bones reshaping themselves to better run on all fours, and as the pain of his transformation faded and the terror of his presence sank in, Victor had one thought in mind—find something to kill, find something to share the terror of his existence. His vision had grown dim—everything was gray, but nothing was obscured by shadow. More importantly, he could see living things like orange torches amid the bleak environment.

He dove through a thicket of leafless berry bushes, shattering the hard, thorny branches with his presence, exploding like a massive shadow-clad, skeletal hound into the woods, grunting and roaring and occasionally howling. His shrieks echoed through the woods, and he could hear things fleeing, which only sent him into more of a frenzy. He was the stuff of nightmares, and there were beings nearby that needed to experience the true horror he could deliver.

The first creature he encountered was a giant forest animal, deerlike in shape, with enormous red antlers and dark blue fur. When he burst into the clearing where it munched at the blue needles of a tree, the creature's eyes rolled back, exposing the whites, and honked a frenzied, warbling panic sound, turning to flee. It crashed through trees and brush, much the way Victor had done.

Something ignited in Victor's chest as he saw the flaming outline of his quarry leap away between the gray trees. He gave chase, and as the waves of fear and terror rolled off his intended victim, he howled and panted, reveling in the thrill of the rich Energy source, absorbing it and feeding his Core, perpetuating his nightmare visage. He knew he could catch the animal, pluck its hamstrings with his claws, and pick it apart bit by bit, ever-increasing the horror it felt until its heart inevitably stopped beating.

"I will!" Victor roared, sounding like a hell-hound shrieking. He leaped, claws raised, and when he reached the apex of his arcing flight, something caught his attention—in the gray world of his existence, a sea of flames flickered a short way beyond the trees. His quarry forgotten, he landed on all fours and started stalking toward the mass of Energy. If he could get to that sea of bright Energy and turn himself loose amid it, he could harvest terror and fear until he burst, until he became something truly awesome, something that could terrorize the world!

He prowled through the trees, his shadowy throat rumbling, saliva dripping from his fang-filled, skeletal snout. Victor knew the flames, the spirits, were behind a barrier. He needed to find a way through, so he circled, scanning the pale gray existence for more spots of color, closer than what he'd seen. He was still eager for fear, eager for terror, but he was hunting now, stalking, and he ceased his screaming roars.

His silence paid off—a bright spirit wandered in his direction, wending between trees, cautiously stepping through thorny brambles. Smaller but much brighter than the deer-creature, Victor saw his opportunity to gain strength, to slake his thirst for terror. “Yes,” he hissed, “you’ll feed me enough to reach the others.” Anyone who bore witness to his words wouldn’t have heard them, though, only a low, rumbling growl that would have sent cold shivers down their spines.

“Victor!” the flaming spirit called, hands cupped to its face. Victor recognized the word at some level, but it seemed meaningless. He was close now, lurking between two tree trunks behind a perennial shrub covered with white winter blooms. The torch-like being was so close he could feel the heat of it. Only one thing mattered, sharing his terror and feeding off what he created.

Victor exploded through the shrub in a shower of torn leaves and white petals. As he descended through the air toward his quarry, a flickering bright line of metal crashed into his side, shearing away his shadowy flesh and notching his bony torso. It didn’t hurt, but the force of the blow thwarted his perfect leap, and he rolled to the side with a thunderous howling shriek.

“Ancestors!” the blazing spirit said, holding its bright metal before it as it backpedaled from Victor. He stood, his hunger rumbling from his throat, and lifted his head to shriek about it, to tell the world that he hungered for fear, for terror. His terrible cry rose above the forest, bounced off the trees, and people near and distant twisted their fingers, warding against evil, seeking warmth and the company of others.

The bright spirit in front of him started to radiate dark wispy bands of fear, and Victor howled again, drawing them in. “Yes!” he cried, though no word was coherent in the sound he made. He crept toward his quarry and saw how it backed away, seeking something to stand against so he couldn’t circle it. It held its bright metal before it as its back came against a thick tree. “Victor!” the spirit cried, though it wasn’t speaking to him, it was screaming into the woods. Seeking salvation? Was there something more coming to challenge him?

“No,” he growled, laughing. The sound that emerged from his throat was like the ripping of flesh and cries of children. He inched forward, haunches high, snout low, forelimbs outstretched, testing the spirit, waiting to see if it would break—crumble to its fear. It lashed out with its bright metal, and Victor pulled his taloned hand back, narrowly escaping the touch.

Again, the spirit cried, “Victor!” He heard the word echo through the woods around them. This time, however, the spirit’s call didn’t fall on deaf ears. Five brilliant loping spirits bound into the clearing, leaping over brambles and tearing through the brush. They streaked forward, little red-gold comets that hurt Victor’s eyes, and they stood in a semi-circle in front of his prey.

The new spirits made troubled yipping sounds, some growled and snapped at Victor, and he saw the tendrils of fear start to fade away from the spirit he’d been hunting. It stood straighter against the tree, and its bright steel stopped wavering and shaking as it held it toward Victor. This enraged Victor—what were these bright little spirits to stand before him? Why was their brightness

anathema to his fear? They felt familiar. They felt hated! Victor felt the terrible force of his fear rise up in his throat, felt his hunger assert its will, and he screamed with everything he had.

The five smaller, bright spirits shrank back from his cry, shifting their little forms out of the central cone of his scream, leaving his prey to suffer the brunt. Victor could see them trying, struggling to move in front of the spirit, but his power was greater—together, they were a lantern against his dark typhoon, and separate, they were simply candles. Still, the spirit lunged through their ranks and tried to strike him with its bright, cold steel.

In response, Victor pounced; faster than thought, he clasped its frail arm in his massive clawed hand and yanked, smashing the spirit to the ground and sending the bright metal bouncing away from it. Sobs erupted from the spirit's bright, flaming face, and the purple-black smoke of terror began to radiate from it in earnest. The bright, golden spirits started to growl and lunge, snapping at Victor's dark flesh, grabbing hold and pulling, but he muscled through their attempts.

He felt his prey gathering Energy, felt it attack him somehow, but he shrugged it off. He reached out with his other talon, grabbed the hand that had tried to damage his shadowy flesh, and pinned it to the ground. Then he held his snarling, shifting, fanged face close to the spirit's head, putting his shadow-wreathed eye close, a mere inch away, wanting to see through the bright aura, wanting to see the terror in the flesh.

Beyond the shadows that wreathed him, behind the brightness of the spirit's aura and the wisps of fear and terror that bled from it, he caught a glimpse of color—a distinct shade of green. Victor jerked back from the spirit like it had burned him. As he released his prey, he felt the smaller spirits leaping upon him, growling and thrashing as they burrowed into his dark, shadowy flesh, sinking into his body, driving some of the fear from his pathways, the dark Energy melting before their golden essence.

Victor shook his head and blinked his eyes, aware that the shadows had begun to fall away from his frame. Suddenly cognizant of who he was and what he'd done, he looked at Valla struggling to inch away from him, pushing with her feet as she slid through the dead, cold leaves. Victor cried out in dismay and loped away through the trees like he'd been burned, like he'd caught fire and the only water in the world was far away—far from the spirit he'd almost killed, almost harvested.

As the shame and anger woke up within him, they continued pushing away the fear, terror, and hunger for more. They banished his desire to share those torturous feelings. His pace slowed, and he became fully aware of himself, and as that sense of self resurfaced, as he remembered he was Victor, he lashed out with fury and drove the fear-attuned Energy from his pathways, yanking it back into his Core. He felt the shadows cloaking his body solidify back into flesh, felt the terrible grinding snaps of bones taking their usual shape, and then he was lying flat on his face.

Panic and guilt spurred him to action, despite the horror of feeling his bones move the way they had. He sat up and saw that he was still clothed and still had Lifedrinker at his belt. "How the fuck?" he hissed. "Was it real?" Almost like it wanted to answer him, Victor saw the blinking notifications of more System messages. Standing up, he read through them as he started retracing his obvious passage through the forest:

Congratulations! You have learned the spell: Aspect of Terror - Basic.

***Aspect of Terror - Basic: Prerequisite: Affinity - Fear or related affinity. You change your appearance to represent something terrifying. While you wear this illusion, you will passively

harvest and cultivate fear-attuned Energy emanating from those who perceive you and cannot resist your will. Energy Cost: Minimum 100 - scalable. Cooldown: Long.***

Congratulations! You have achieved level 34 Spirit Carver, gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 8 attribute points to allocate.

“What the fuck,” Victor said, feeling much worse than he ever had for gaining a level. He could only remember snatches of what he’d done while wearing his terror aspect, and none of it felt good. He started to run, jogging through the forest, smashing through brambles and shrubs, dodging around trees. He called out, “Valla!” when he started to get back to the area where he’d encountered her.

He saw the tree where he’d cornered her, saw her sword lying in the damp, dead leaves, and he hurried over to pick it up. The hilt was wet and smeared with mud, and the blade was heavy—far heavier than he’d imagined. He heard movement off to his left, branches breaking and the stomp of a running step, and he hurried after it. The noises got louder as he gained ground, and he shouted again, “Valla! Wait!”

Two dozen more steps, and he broke through the treeline. The cleared fields between the city walls and the forest were before him, and he saw Valla, thirty yards distant, stumble-running toward the road that led out of the city. He ran after her and called again, “Valla!”

She kept running but slowed to look over her shoulder, her eyes wide and her cheek smeared with dirt, and she screamed, “Get away from me!”

“Valla, wait,” Victor tried again, more softly, as he gained on her. “Your sword . . .” he said when she refused to turn. That seemed to get her attention, and she whirled on him. They were still in the field, still halfway between the trees and the wall, still fifty yards from the road. No one was around other than a distant crowd outside the city gate.

“Break it! Throw it away! Stay away from me!” she hissed, and Victor could see she wasn’t herself, wasn’t anything like the Valla he’d come to know. Her hands trembled, her voice was shaky and shrill, and she had a crazed look behind her eyes. He opened his mouth to reply but, as usual, struggled for the right thing to say.