

Victor BK3: Ch32

Book 3: Chapter 32: Blood Will Flow

Victor smashed Lifedrinker into his target, the guard standing to the right of the oubliette door. The poor man had seemed bored, yawning and chatting with his partner as Victor crept over the grass in his blind spot. Lifedrinker's razor edge sank into the crook of his neck, cleaving arteries and a collar bone and resting six inches into his chest. The guard only managed a wet, coughing grunt before he slumped, and Victor's arms strained, holding him up with his grip on the axe haft.

At the same time, Valla streaked over the grass using some sort of Energy-based charge, grabbed the guard on the left, threw him to the ground, and jerked a wicked single-edged dagger through the flesh at his throat, letting the blood flood out over the front of him and onto the grass.

Their assault was brutal, savage even, and Victor and Valla had long argued about the need for lethal force to gain entry to ap'Horrin's sanctum, but the risk of leaving guards still breathing seemed to outweigh the benefits. Victor had clinched things when he'd said, "We aren't going in there to make friends. These are bad people, and lots of blood is going to flow. I won't kid myself."

Ap'Horrin was a minor noble, though wealthy, and Victor knew there might be repercussions for their actions that night. He'd tried to talk Valla out of accompanying him, but she wouldn't be dissuaded. She'd shown Victor a black ring that she wore on her thumb and said, "No scrying will reveal my actions. Worry not about my reputation."

Victor had contemplated Valla's ring, apparently quite a rare artifact, and then he'd shown her his talisman for shielding scryings and asked if it would protect him in the same way. Valla had shrugged and said, "Maybe." Victor knew it worked to stop people actively watching him, but he didn't know if it would hide his actions that night at ap'Horrin's estate. He'd ultimately decided he didn't give a damn.

As the two guards watered the grass with their blood, Victor stood up and tried the handle on the strange, round metal door. It was dark gray, covered in bronze carved vines, and the handle was recessed, requiring Valla and Victor to cooperate to reach into the three holes that depressed the separate levers. "I bet this was a door meant to be opened by Yovashi," Valla said, sliding two slender hands into the left and center holes. Victor barely managed to squeeze his left hand into the other one, but neither of them could get their levers to move.

"Locked," he said.

"Try your ring," she said, and Victor nodded, lifting his right hand and tapping one of his oldest treasures on the metal door—his Ring of the Guest. He was so surprised that it worked that he almost laughed. The door shuddered and loudly clicked, and then it popped ajar. He and Valla pulled it open the rest of the way, revealing the entry chamber to ap'Horrin's oubliette.

While Valla scouted inside, Victor grabbed the two dead guards and dragged them into the antechamber. The room was roughly oval, with sloping hallways leading downward to the left and right. An orange glow-lamp hung in the center of the stone room, and wooden benches along the far wall were the only other furnishings.

He held the two guards by the collars of their chainmail shirts and easily hoisted them up to the bench, leaning their two heads against each other. A twinge of guilt started to creep into his mind, but Victor shook his head—he had dirty work to do, and these people worked for a man that had tried to kill him on multiple occasions. “What’s the old saying?” he asked as he finished propping them up against each other. “Sleep with pigs, and you get dirty? Something like that.”

“It seems like a lot more traffic has been going down the left-hand tunnel,” Valla said, coming to stand by him and looking at the two blood-spattered, horribly wounded bodies. “You’re not fooling anyone with that.”

“Yeah, I know,” Victor said, turning to study the inside of the door. After he scanned it from top to bottom, he finally saw the little filigreed handle that was meant to lock it. He shifted it to the left and was pleased by the satisfying series of clicks. “Doesn’t matter. No one’s coming in after us, and anyone we run into is going to die.”

“Unless they don’t work for ap’Horrin,” Valla said.

“Yeah, ‘course.” Victor concentrated a moment, and then his ghostly white-gold spirit hounds shimmered into being, and he willed one of them to watch the lesser-used hallway. “All right, down we go,” he said, casting Inspiring Presence. Valla and his coyotes seemed to swell with the spell, standing taller and their eyes appearing more eager. Victor grinned as the shadows slipped away, and the complicated lock he’d been looking at suddenly seemed obvious.

“I love that spell,” Valla said, nodding. Suddenly her heavy, blue broadsword was in her hands, and she nodded. “You take the lead.”

“Yep,” Victor said, hoisting Lifedrinker and heading down the left-hand tunnel. His coyotes were quiet, only letting out the occasional yip, and he urged one of them to prowl ahead. After it had rounded a corner, Victor started forward, his other three coyotes and Valla keeping pace as they worked their way down the sloping, curving tunnel. Nothing seemed familiar to Victor, though he’d been pretty out of it when ap’Horrin had brought him here to break his Core.

Every dozen feet or so, another orange, Energy-powered glow-lamp lit up the shadows, and with his spell active, Victor could see through the gloom like it was daylight. They’d traversed a hundred or so feet when he felt something from his scouting coyote—danger ahead. He held up his hand, whispered a warning to Valla, and the group continued to creep around the bend.

The passage leveled off and straightened out, and Victor saw his coyote ahead, lurking near a doorway on the left. The main tunnel continued deep into shadows, with a notable absence of glow-lamps. Trusting Valla to see what he saw, Victor hunched low and crept toward the doorway. With a flick of his will, he urged his other companions to hang back and called his scout to join them.

When he got to the opening, he peered around the corner, just inching his head past the doorframe enough for one eye to see what lay beyond. It was an alcove with a square table and four chairs. Two men and a woman, similarly garbed to the ones he and Valla had already killed, sat at the table. One of them whittled a piece of wood with a tiny knife. Another seemed to be cultivating or meditating, and, to Victor's surprise, the third was reading a book.

Victor pulled his head back, turned to Valla, who lurked behind him, and held up three fingers. He thought about it for a couple of seconds, then leaned closer to her and whispered, barely allowing air to slip past his lips, "I'll frighten them. Be ready." Her eyes widened, but she set her lips into a grim line, and she nodded.

Victor steadied his grip on Lifedrinker, visualizing his next move several times before he did it, just like he used to do before a match—or a pit fight. He pictured how he would step, how he'd cast his spell, and where he'd send Lifedrinker's edge. Taking a breath, he moved around the corner, cast Project Spirit, sending a wave of purple-black fear-attuned Energy into the small room, and then, as the guards' eyes widened in horror and they started to scramble, he cleaved the book reader's head from his shoulders.

The two remaining guards began to jibber and groan inarticulate, terrified sounds and Victor leaped upon the one in the middle—the cultivator—smashing him back with his heavy boot, so he tumbled out of his chair. He charged after him, kicking the table aside, and followed up with several brutal hacks. When he lifted Lifedrinker's bloody edge and turned to the third guard, he saw Valla standing over her corpse, wiping her sword on the fallen woman's cape.

Valla nodded grimly to him and held a finger to her lips. She cocked her ear, presumably listening for reinforcements, but Victor knew no one was coming—he could sense it from his coyotes. "Nothing's coming right now," he whispered, gesturing to one of his coyotes visible from the doorway. She nodded, and the two continued their descent into the depths.

"No worries from the beast you left up top?" Valla whispered.

"Nothing," Victor grunted. Before long, Victor saw a four-way junction ahead, brightly lit by three glow-lamps. The passage they were in continued through it to a set of wooden, double doors, and there weren't any signs of more guards in the open space.

He looked at one of his coyotes and willed it to scout out the junction. The shimmering, white-gold creature padded silently into the bright intersection, leading with its snout. Victor wondered if all of its senses worked—could it smell as well as see and hear?

No feelings of alert came from the scout, so Victor led Valla to the junction, and that's when he heard a low, vibrating chanting sound coming from the double doors ahead. To the left and right, he saw that the passage seemed to continue straight but sloped into darkness in both directions. Valla pointed to the doors and made an exaggerated shrugging motion.

Victor nodded and crept toward them, hugging the wall on his left. He felt Valla behind him and knew his coyotes were hanging back at the intersection, keeping watch. As he neared the door, Victor became aware of a heavy, thick Energy in the air. He wasn't familiar with its particular brand, but it didn't feel like pure Energy—it had a feeling of vibrance, a tang of copper, and he wondered if it was blood-attuned Energy. He looked at Valla, and she nodded—she felt it too.

The chanting was louder, but the words were still indistinct, perhaps a language he didn't know, a language untranslated by the System's Language Integration skill. Was that a thing? Victor wanted to ask Valla but knew better than to start up a conversation while creeping outside a door that opened into a possible cult's summoning hall.

Valla's scouts had assured her that the Pyromancer no longer used the barn where Victor had nearly been immolated, and she felt sure they'd probably run into the coven of summoners in the oubliette—it was where Boaegh had been lurking, after all. Victor tried the door handle to see if it would move, and the little brass lever depressed at his touch. He gently tugged and pushed on it, hoping to open the door a bare sliver, but it wouldn't budge, seemingly barred from the other side.

Victor motioned for Valla to follow him back to the intersection, and then he leaned very close to her ear and whispered, "I think the cult is in there. Maybe Boaegh and ap'Horrin too. I'm going to smash that door apart and go in swinging."

Valla frowned and tugged Victor's collar so he leaned closer and whispered into his ear, "We could search these side passages—try to find another entrance."

"I don't know. I feel a sense of urgency, like they're doing something I want to stop. Maybe it's all in my head, but . . ." he trailed off with a shrug.

"I did smell blood magic," Valla hissed. She shrugged in turn.

Victor looked at his coyotes and smiled at them, whispering, "Good work, pack. Time for me to call your big brother, though. Go get some rest." Victor dismissed the spell that held his pack on the Physical Plane and then looked at his Core; he'd already recovered all of the Energy he'd spent earlier.

Once again, he leaned close to Valla and whispered, "I'll Berserk if there are more than a couple of them. My bear will also be enraged, so watch out for yourself." He shrugged and added, "I have good control of my Berserking, don't worry too much."

"Your bear?" Valla breathed, her eyes growing wide. Victor grinned and nodded. They were standing near the wall, just around the corner from the double doors. He was getting himself geared up to make the attack when Valla touched his arm, and he saw that she'd put away her sword. She held a thick book in her hands instead.

"Victor," she whispered, "This encounter could result in one or both of our deaths. Will you allow me to send a message to Rellia so that she knows where we are? So she knows that I'm probably dead if she doesn't hear from me soon?"

"Seriously?" Victor was flabbergasted for two reasons—he'd assumed Valla had already snitched to Rellia about their movements, finding it hard to believe that she'd so literally honor his request to keep his actions between the two of them. Secondly, he found it hard to imagine she was pulling this now, right before he

charged into a—potentially massive—battle. “If you’re that worried, hang back! Guard my back and keep watch in case someone runs away from me.”

He saw emotions warring on her face; he knew she wanted to go with him and didn’t want to appear afraid. He wondered if her experience with fear in the woods played a role in her thought process—did she feel she needed to insist on fighting to prove something to him? He was about to remind her of her duty to Rellia when she finally scowled and nodded, replacing the book with her sword. She opened her mouth, but Victor beat her to it, whispering, “If shit looks really bad, just run for it. You have my permission to contact Rellia with the bad news if I bite it.”

Valla nodded, and Victor grinned. He turned back to the double doors and walked toward them, then reached into his Core and pulled out a thick ribbon of rage-attuned Energy, getting it ready. At the same time, Victor cast Manifest Spirit again, this time calling for the fragment of his soul represented by the bear totem.

Red mist started to coalesce on the tunnel floor, luminescent and brimming with furious Energy. Victor felt it, felt the part of him that wanted to smash and destroy begin to manifest, gathering in a red, glowing cloud that rapidly resolved into an enormous bear. He tried to will it to be quiet, but the creature would have none of it, lifting its gigantic head toward the tunnel ceiling and roaring loud enough to bring dust and shards of stone showering down. The doors before the bear shook with the burst of sound, and Victor couldn’t help it—he laughed.

He pointed to the door and urged his bear to attack, and then all hell broke loose. The massive bear, nearly too large to fit in the tunnel, bound forward and shredded the door like it was made of toothpicks. Splinters, planks, nails, and brackets burst forth as Victor’s bear totem charged into the open space beyond, roaring again like thunder somehow bottled and released underground. Victor rushed forward, already reaching for his rage-attuned Energy again, readying his Berserk spell.

He almost stumbled, almost lost track of what he was doing, when he saw the madness beyond the splintered door. The room was large and square with stone walls that reached twenty feet to the ceiling. At the center of the room, which was probably a hundred feet on a side, nine figures in baggy brown robes were scattering from his gigantic bear’s furious charge. Hanging upside down from silver chains at the center of the ceiling was a humanoid with bright green chitin where a human might have skin.

The insectoid person’s arms and legs were held spread-eagled by the chains, and directly beneath him, an Ardeni man sat on a throne-like seat, tethered to the prisoner by a thick band of blood-red Energy—it was evident that the Energy was flowing from the bound insectoid to the man in the chair.

While his bear roared and pounced upon one of the brown-robed individuals, Victor had eyes only for the man on the throne—ap’Horrin. He narrowed his eyes and finished his spell, letting loose a roar of his own, not to be outdone by his bear. As the rage rushed through him, stretching his pathways to bursting and flooding his body with power, Victor screamed in a fury, remembering what this man had done to him.

He remembered lying on a stone slab while a tentacled monstrosity reached into his guts and broke up his Core. He remembered riding in a wagon, feverish and weak, near death from the disgusting

wound he'd been left with. He remembered all the torment he endured fighting free of the Greatbone Mines. He remembered feeling lost and ruined because he'd executed the man this "lord" had sent to kill Victor in Persi Gables. Finally, he thought of the guards he'd massacred this night, and he roared again, and this time, it truly was as loud as his bear, for Victor had taken the form of his ancestors—he was a Quinametzin warrior bound for vengeance.

A brown-robed man stood between him and ap'Horrin, and he launched a series of rapid firebolts toward Victor. They streaked through the air like little missiles, flickering with intense white heat, and Victor laughed, charging right into them, head down, axe held high in one hand like a massive hatchet. The fiery arrows exploded off Victor's chest and helmet, and though the flames washed over him like liquid napalm, he laughed, shrugging it off. "Flames?" he roared, swinging Lifedrinker like a cleaver at the little man. "I've bathed in worse!"

Lifedrinker screamed through the air, and though the mage created a shimmering maroon shield of force, she burst it apart. Victor roared, and the mage screamed, and Lifedrinker took him in the chest, buried to the haft. Victor lifted him up, flopping limply on Lifedrinker's edge, and shook the little mage in the air, showering blood down on his shoulders, helmet, and face. Victor's gaze had never left ap'Horrin, and though the man seemed to be finishing his feast of blood-Energy, his eyes were wide with horror.

The room reverberated with the roars of his bear and Victor's own challenges. Victor didn't spare a glance for his companion, though—let the great bear fight his fight. He had to deal with ap'Horrin before he found a way to flee. Victor whipped his axe to the side, sending the mage's corpse flopping over the ground, then he bent his mighty knees and leaped the last twenty feet to come crashing toward ap'Horrin, his axe falling like a meteor toward the man's head.

As Victor descended, ap'Horrin either finished or broke off his feast of blood-red Energy. He made a sudden, perhaps panicked, gesture, and in a cloud of red mist, he streaked away from the throne, reappearing in the flesh, some twenty feet distant, stumbling toward the exit. Victor tracked his movement as he fell, and though the throne was empty, he still smashed it to bits with Lifedrinker. He bounded after ap'Horrin again, this time keeping his feet on the ground.

Ap'Horrin saw him coming, tried to pick up speed, realized it was fruitless, and turned toward Victor, holding out both hands. Red motes of Energy began to coalesce in the air between the two of them, and though Victor charged on, he felt it snaring him up, catching on his armor, on his skin, on his axe, pulling at him like quicksand. As the red mist grew thicker, ap'Horrin turned to run, shaky on his feet but slowly making ground on Victor.

A brown-robed mage came to Victor's attention because she'd started launching razor-sharp ice crystals at him. Victor held up an arm to protect his eyes as he strained and pulled against the blood mist, and most of the ice shards broke on his armored sleeve, his chest, or his helmet. A few found purchase in his flesh, but he ignored them—what were some puny stabs to him? Who was this tiny mageling throwing pathetic darts his way? He had a man to kill, and she was in the way.

Victor screamed, squatted down, bunched his enormous muscles, and charged through the rest of the mist, ripping it to shreds with his furious strength. Ap'Horrin cried out and nearly collapsed as Victor demolished his spell, and then he was free. He bisected the ice mage as he ran past, and as he caught up to his quarry, Victor gripped the back of his neck, lifted him off the ground, and smashed him into the stone at his feet.

Lifedrinker flashed with red Energy, humming in a high-pitched, war maiden's cry, and Victor planted her firmly in ap'Horrin's spine. Ap'Horrin shuddered and shook, and Lifedrinker took his Energy, dark, thick rivulets pouring into her. Victor looked around the room with a furious gaze, saw the corpses of half a dozen mages, and saw his bear roaring and struggling against the magic of the three remaining casters.

One held out his hands, creating bands of yellow-rimed ice that constricted the great creature, while another mage whipped at it with a putrid, sickly vine of foul Energy. The final member of the trio repeatedly launched bolts of yellow-white fire at the brave totem's flank, singing its ruddy fur and blackening its flesh. Victor felt his red gaze darken to murderous crimson and left Lifedrinker to do her work, charging to his companion's aid, screaming like the mad titan he was.

He smashed into the mage creating the yellowed, sickly ice cage, sending him sprawling like he'd been hit by a motor vehicle. The caster bounced and skipped over the stone floor to crunch into the wall, and he lay unmoving, fluids leaking from too many orifices for there to be much hope for his recovery. With the cage gone, Victor and his bear made short work of the last two mages, and as they stood, heaving and growling, covered in gore, Victor surveyed the room.

Nothing stirred. Broken corpses lay in pieces and heaps, and Lifedrinker hummed in her high, trilling note, but, with his enemies slaughtered, Victor let his rage cool, let it fade from his pathways, and soon he was standing there, still bloody, still drenched in viscera, but back to his normal state of mind. His bear had faded with his rage, and he wondered if he'd subconsciously sent it away or if it had gone of its own accord.

He walked over to Lifedrinker, and as he pulled her from ap'Horrin's back, he saw the Energy motes of his Victory begin to gather over the corpses. He watched the golden Energy coalesce and saw that much of it was tinged with purple, though not as much as he'd hoped—none of the mages had been as strong as Boaegh. Ap'Horrin had surprised him with his abilities, but they hadn't been anything exceptional—the motes from his corpse were all purely golden.

The Energy surged into him, lifting him off his feet a few inches, but he felt that was more a reflection of the number of his vanquished foes than their power. Still, the flood of Energy was a strong one, and he felt the euphoria lift his mind fully clear of his battle-fevered thoughts, and he thought to look at the ruined doorway for Valla. Victor had expected her to be walking toward him by now, but she wasn't there.

As the Energy surge faded, he called out, "Valla!"

She didn't reply, but a weak cough above him caught his attention, and Victor jerked his head up toward the bound, green-chitined humanoid. Ap'Horrin had chained it upside down, and its mandibled face stared toward Victor and the doorway. "Are you alive, then?" Victor called up to the insect person.

"Yes!" it coughed, sounding like a man to Victor. "And I saw your companion—she pursued Boaegh as the coward fled," he coughed again, and yellow-green ichor dripped from his mandible to the stone floor.

"Fuck!" Victor turned and started to run, but the man called out weakly.

“I know where he’s going! Help me down—I’m from the same world as that bastard!”