

## Victor BK3: Ch33

### Book 3: Chapter 33: Into the Fire

Victor ran his eyes over the insect-man's chains and saw a pulley leading to a winch on a nearby stone post. He hurried over to it and pulled out the pin, and the man started to drop through the air toward the ground as the wheel began to spin. Victor quickly reached out and grabbed the spinning wheel, saving his intended rescuee from smashing onto the stone floor by mere inches. "Shit, sorry 'bout that," he said as the chains jerked to a halt.

"It's fine—you saved me from much worse," the man said, grunting as he found his feet. He gestured to the chains and said, "I think that one, the one you cleaved through the spine, has the key." He gestured to ap'Horrin's corpse, and Victor ran over to it. Not seeing any belt pouches, he quickly pulled off the four rings he found on ap'Horrin's cold, gray-blue fingers.

As Victor walked back to the chained-up praying-mantis-looking guy, he trickled some Energy into one of the rings randomly and was pleased to find it was a dimensional container. "First try," he said, searching through the many contents with his mind. He smiled at the trove of goods and knew he'd need to spend a lot more time going through the valuables, but for now, he produced the only three keys he found within.

Only one key was a match for the silver padlocks, and Victor quickly unlocked them. As he was doing so, he gave the insect-man a closer look—he had no clothes or jewelry, and his bright green chitin was cracked in many places, oozing yellowish fluid. "Are you okay? Did you have some clothes or anything?" Victor hesitated to ask, not wanting to waste time when Valla might need some help, but he couldn't help putting himself in the guy's shoes.

"I had a belt and rapier, but they took them from me long ago. My name is Ksajik, and I owe you my life. Follow me, and I'll show you where the worm, Boaegh, has fled. Hopefully, he hasn't led your companion into a trap." With that, he started striding, with a pronounced limp, toward the doorway, and Victor followed, tucking ap'Horrin's four rings into a pouch on his belt. Ksajik had an interesting way of speaking with halting words and occasional clicks. His voice was clear, though, and Victor absently wondered if the System Language Integration skill was working overtime for him.

"What world are you guys from?" Victor asked in a hushed voice, pacing beside Ksajik, Lifedrinker held ready. The tunnel was sloping downward at a fairly steep angle, but it was straight, and he could see there wasn't anything lurking in the near distance.

"Zaafor," Ksajik said, green fluid spraying from his mandibles as he drew out the "zaa" sound.

“Never heard of it,” Victor said and almost laughed at himself—how many worlds did he know the names of? He felt like he’d heard other names before, but at the moment, he could only think of Fanwath and Earth.

“It’s distant from this one. The System has existed there for millennia, but it’s a harsh place.” He paused and leaned against the smooth stone wall for a moment, then said, “My apologies, I cannot speak and walk at the same time. That bastard took much of my Core. My recovery will take decades! We need to hurry before your companion is slain!”

“All right, shit!” Victor said, then stooped down in front of the insect-man and said, “Get on my back, dude.”

“Er,” Ksajik said, clicking his mandibles uncertainly, then he reached up his three-fingered, green hands to Victor’s shoulders and mounted his back. “Yes, you’re a sturdy fellow. This isn’t shameful.” Victor stood up, hardly feeling the man’s weight, and started trotting down the tunnel.

“Not at all, man. No shame at all! Sounds like you’ve been through hell.” Victor had a thought and then, despite the awkwardness of it, decided to ask, “You are a dude, right? I’d hate to be calling you ‘man’ or whatever, if not. God, sorry, that sounds terrible . . .”

“Heavens, but your mind is leaping to strange topics while we chase my mortal enemy! Yes, I’m a male—all of my cast are male. Now, when you come to the intersection, turn right.” Ksajik’s words were clipped and halting but firmly stated.

Victor grunted, taking the guy’s point to heart—he should be more concerned about Valla. As he ran, Victor felt his Core, saw that his Energy reserves were good, especially his inspiration, and cast Inspiring Presence. He also tried to cast Manifest Spirit to summon his coyotes, but the spell wasn’t quite off cooldown. He almost fell as he came to the intersection Ksajik had mentioned, and he slid on the dusty stone, trying to turn right at a near-full-tilt run.

Ksajik clung to his shoulders with a vise-like grip, holding on while Victor regained his balance and started running down the new tunnel, occasional glow-lamps showing him that it was long, descending, and very slightly curving to the left. He passed doorways, but Ksajik urged him to keep going each time, saying they were just storage or empty rooms. Victor had no reason to doubt the guy, so he charged ahead.

They came to a round, well-lit room with a circular stone stairwell at its center, and Ksajik said, “Down there. At the bottom of the stair, you’ll find his portal room. Gods, but I hope he hasn’t opened it yet. Is your companion a formidable fighter?”

“Valla’s tough as hell,” Victor said, starting down the broad stone stairwell, careful not to rely on the ancient-looking wrought-iron balustrade. He believed what he’d said but also knew Valla wasn’t him—she couldn’t shrug off the kind of damage that he could, and he’d hate to find her fried corpse waiting at the

bottom of the stairs. That on his mind, he began to hop down the steps, three at a time, and felt Ksajik cling more tightly to his back, grunting in strained wheezes with each of Victor's bounds.

After a couple of dozen hops, Victor finally landed at the base of the stairs and saw that he stood in a circular room, easily three times as wide as the stairway it housed. Smooth stone walls rose up in every direction except one, where a set of massive, bronze double doors stood.

"That's it. He's in there, I'm sure," Ksajik said, carefully letting go of Victor's shoulders and sliding off his back.

"Dammit!" Victor hissed, running up to the doors. They were near twice his height, and he could tell by how they seamlessly met in the middle that they were well-made. He grabbed one enormous metal handle and gave it a tug and a push, not surprised when it didn't budge. "Looks like I might have to Berserk again," he said, glancing back to check on Ksajik and maybe warn him to go up the stairs a few steps.

He was startled to see not only Ksajik standing by the stairwell but another shadowy figure emerging from behind it—an enormous, spiderlike individual with a very familiar, smooth, featureless face with saucer-like, depthless black eyes. "You ugly motherfucker! I'm glad to see you!" Victor growled, his rage flaring to life without his urging.

Ksajik whirled to see the object of Victor's ire, and when his eyes fell on the Yovashi, he scurried up the steps. It didn't matter because the spiderlike monstrosity had eyes only for Victor. He strode forward, huge legs spread out and long, gray tentacles extending from the bottom of his torso, where Victor saw something like an octopus beak and gleaming red eyes. "You shouldn't have returned, System slave."

"The fuck did you call me, you ugly asshole? Which one of your faces do I talk to? The one with the beak or the stupid one up top?"

By way of answer, the Yovashi lunged forward a step, and his hidden beak coughed a horrible barking sound and snapped with a resounding clack. "I'll eat you with that one," the top mouth said.

"I don't have time to dick around with you," Victor growled, and then he cast Project Spirit, sending a wave of fear at the monstrosity. The Yovashi balked for just a moment, his enormous spider legs flexing and starting to scramble backward. Victor saw him begin to recover, start to bend his legs in the other direction, but it was too late—Lifedrinker ripped through one of those six gigantic legs, sending it flopping and twitching over the stone floor in a spray of black ichor.

"Fool!" the Yovashi screamed, stumbling back. Victor felt a massive burst of foul, filthy Energy pour out of the monstrous man, and a wave of nausea hit him like a ton of bricks. He almost threw up, feeling his guts roil like he'd swallowed a bucket of worms. Stumbling backward, Victor dug deep into his Core and

flooded his pathways with hot, rage-attuned Energy, but he didn't Berserk, he just channeled the Energy into his body and Lifedrinker, and then he growled.

"You bastard! You think I don't remember the taste of your Energy? The way you dug around in my guts? I was a weakling back then, but you've fucked up, buddy. You should've hidden in a closet until I left." Victor wanted to Berserk, wanted to go absolutely nuts on this guy, but he also wanted to have his wits about him—wanted to savor the feeling of thrashing this pinche mother fucker.

"Stop!" the Yovashi hissed, and Victor felt the power behind the words, felt them creep into his mind, worming their way into his brain, sending signals to his muscles to lock up and cease moving. He laughed, flooding the weird mental Energy out of his brain with a surge of rage, and, with eyes blazing, he strode forward and hacked off another of the creature's legs.

"Your will isn't strong enough to try that shit on me," Victor growled as the monstrous man pitched back, crying out, black ichor oozing all over the floor, making it slippery as Victor continued to advance, driving him back toward the curving, smooth, stone wall.

"Listen to the voice of Tkelvíc and obey! Drop your axe!" the Yovashi hissed through pain-clenched jaws. Victor felt a wave of that same slippery Energy, much heavier, denser than before, rush into his mind, digging at his brain but finding no purchase. Victor grinned and advanced, Lifedrinker held high.

"You dumb asshole, Tkelvíc. Do you think I came back here to shut you guys down without improving myself? Are you strong for a Yovashi?" Victor asked, striding forward, slapping away a thrashing, chitin-covered spider leg, "'Cause I'm not impressed."

Tkelvíc uttered a guttural snarl and drove with his remaining four walking legs, and Victor saw the huge, red-eyed beak darting toward him from the nest of tentacles. He stepped to his left and brought Lifedrinker around in a baseball-bat swing, and he knew, if he'd been in Yankee Stadium, he would have hit that fucker out of the park. Tkelvíc screamed, and Lifedrinker shattered the beak, catching it on the underside of its "chin," carving deep through it into the gray abdomen of the Yovashi.

Tkelvíc's tentacles thrashed and whipped, two of which were tipped in hard claws that clicked and scratched at Victor's armor. He shrugged them off, grabbed one, and tugged hard enough to jerk the monster to the side, and with his other hand, he began to hack in earnest, wielding Lifedrinker like he did when he was Berserking—one-handed. Though he was his normal size, Victor was a big, strong man, and the axe whipped through the air without much difficulty, seeming to add to the momentum of his swings with her own vibrant will.

Before long, Tkelvíc's gurgling, inarticulate cries began to die down to weak, wet gasps, and Victor was covered in the black ichor that was the Yovashi's blood. Bits of chopped, broken tentacles and

chitin littered the ground, and Victor decided he'd wasted enough time—he stepped one booted foot onto the Yovashi's crumpled chest and brought Lifedrinker down in a killing blow, chopping through three-fourths of that stiff, gray neck, severing the spine and ending his erstwhile tormentor's life.

“Enough,” Victor growled, jerking Lifedrinker free and turning toward the massive bronze doors. He raised his voice, “Ksajik! I gotta get in there! Is there a trick to opening these doors?”

The bright green man haltingly descended the steps into view, glancing at the horrifying mess Victor had left against the wall and then at Victor's gore-covered figure and said, “They're locked and warded from the inside. Perhaps you can smash them open in your giant form, but I wouldn't be sure.”

“No time to dick around,” Victor said, building the pattern for his new spell, The Inevitable Huntsman. He felt the magic draw from all of his Energy affinities, and then his vision became monochrome, and he had thoughts only for delivering justice. He looked around himself, noting the absolute lack of shadow and deception, nodded at the broken corpse of the Yovashi, and expanded his thoughts—who deserved justice?

When he'd cast the spell, Victor had been hopeful that he'd have some sort of control over who he hunted down or, failing that, that he'd seek out the person nearest, most deserving—he'd had reasonable confidence that Boaegh would top the list because that was who he'd stalked toward when he'd first cast the spell. His luck held up—he felt his gaze turn to the bronze doors, to the feeling of a presence beyond them, and he nodded; justice would be served.

Victor took a step toward the door and paused, staring at it as he felt the now-familiar buildup of Energy in his gut. It wasn't quite ready, so he watched the doors, unmoving, unwavering, implacable. He heard a voice in the background, but it was of little consequence; some question about his actions from an innocent party. He ignored it, waiting. Then it was time; the Energy began to push at its bounds, and his urge to move toward his quarry grew almost unbearable, so he released it.

Victor stepped into another large, round room. In his monochromatic vision, nothing could hide from him, and he saw his quarry, bright and scurrying on a raised dais. The other objects in the room were of no import—furniture lining the walls, books, tables, scattered papers, and a swirling doorway of brilliant Energy. It was all meaningless next to the need for justice. Victor stepped forward, and it wasn't until he was nearly upon him that Boaegh realized Victor had come into the room.

The Pyromancer wailed in surprise as Victor ascended the steps to the dais. He raised his hands, throwing out a sheet of fire that flared into a towering wall of crackling flames at the top of the steps. Victor stepped through it. The flames were uncomfortable and damaged his clothing, singed his hair, and reddened his flesh, but Victor ignored them—his quarry was three strides away; a few flames and some discomfort shouldn't stop justice.

Boaegh seemed surprised that Victor stepped out of his curtain of flames, and he turned, panicked, toward his portal, abandoning the trunk he'd been digging through. With the patience of a glacier,

Victor stepped toward him, saw the mage's intent to flee, and measured the distance. Unless he moved very quickly, indeed, the mage would escape. "No!" Victor said, his voice like grinding granite plates. He lifted Lifedrinker and whipped her toward the mage's back. She cut the air with a whistling shriek, a Valkyrie cry that echoed through the round stone room, shattering glass beakers and vials.

Lifedrinker struck the Pyromancer's back with such force that her entire metal head followed her blade into his torso, leaving nothing but her quivering axe haft protruding between his shoulder blades. The mage coughed in agony, blood following his utterance in a spray of gory liquid he stumbled through. His own momentum, coupled with the power of Lifedrinker's impact, sent him flailing headlong through the portal.

Victor continued on, unfazed—what was a portal in the face of justice? He saw it narrowing, saw the whirling bands of Energy begin to shrink, and knew that it would wink out of existence in seconds, so he simply pushed out another pulse of that implacable Energy and willed himself over the dais and into the swirling, shrinking disc of Energies.

Victor floated in darkness but kept his focus on his quarry, only to feel it fade and wink out of existence. He looked around in the endless black, seeking some likely target for justice, but when nothing came to him, no heat on the horizon to stride toward, his spell began to unravel, and Victor came fully back to himself. Instantly he knew what had happened—he could vaguely recollect all of his actions in his Inevitable Huntsman form and knew he was traversing a portal—a very long one.

"Oh fuck," he groaned, sudden memories coming back. He'd just stepped into his abuela's living room when he'd been sucked into a blackness just like this. How long had that taken? A few minutes? An hour? It had been hard to measure time then, just as it was now. He gripped his empty hands, hardly believing he'd thrown Lifedrinker. "Still, I fucking got that asshole. I better get his Energy when I get to the other side!"

He wracked his brain, trying to remember the details of the portal room, trying to think about what he'd seen—had Valla been there? Had her corpse? "Shit!" he growled, knowing it was impossible to know; everything but his target had been a blur. The spell was undoubtedly useful for hunting down a creep like Boaegh, but it had some definite drawbacks. He hoped he'd gain more control as he continued to improve his will and the spell's rank. His mind snapped back to the present when he saw a pinpoint of light in the blackness.

The light expanded, just as it had when he'd been summoned to Fanwath. It grew to the size of a golf ball, then a basketball. It doubled in size several times until all Victor could see was a bleak, sandy landscape and a bright blue sky with a tinge of yellow. He felt solid ground under his feet, and, just like that, the portal was gone, and he was through it. Boaegh's body lay at his feet, and to his great relief, so did Valla—bound with silvery chains and thrashing, trying to work her hands free.

Victor reached down and jerked Lifedrinker out of Boaegh's body. He smiled at her, noting that her heartsilver veins had grown thicker from his time in ap'Horrin's oubliette, and then he glanced down at the dead Pyromancer. "Just in case," he said with gritted teeth. He stepped to the side and hacked Lifedrinker through his neck, severing the mage's head and letting it roll down the gentle, sandy slope.

“Ungh!” Valla groaned through the metal chains wrapped around her mouth and head, staring at him with wide, furious eyes.

“Right, right! Sorry!” Victor said, kneeling at her side and pushing her so the chains holding her hands behind her back came into view. They were thin, delicate things, and when he reached for them, he could feel their Energy. He pulled at the end, seemingly hanging loose, wondering why Valla didn’t just unravel them. It came away easily, and he kept unwinding until Valla jerked her hands back to the front of herself.

She reached up and tried to pull away the chain at her mouth, but Victor saw it wouldn’t move no matter how she strained. “Let me,” he said, reaching for the loose end of the chain and easily unwinding it. “Must be enchanted not to let the prisoner take it off. Makes sense,” he chuckled.

“Not funny! Nothing about this is funny! Where are we?” Valla asked with storm clouds in her seafoam eyes.

“Um, Boaegh’s world, I guess. I think it’s called something like Zafer; no, it had a longer Zaa sound. Zaafor. That’s it.”

“Get this damn chain off my ankles, please!”

“Right,” Victor said, unwinding the third chain. They were delicate but powerful things, so he slipped them into his storage ring, “Might come in handy.” He dusted his hands off and looked to the horizon to take in the sights, but then an enormous surge of Energy poleaxed him. “Fucking hell!” he groaned as it lifted him off the ground with an orgasmic surge of well-being and euphoria. He howled and laughed as the purple-gold wave of Energy rushed through him.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 35 Spirit Carver, gained 10 will, 10 vitality, and have 8 attribute points to allocate.\*\*\*

“Hell yes!” Victor crowed, lifting Lifedrinker into the air. He saw Valla staring at him from the sandy ground and smiled, “Level.”

“Congratulations. Something tells me you’re going to need it if we’re going to get back to Fanwath in one piece,” Valla said, standing up and pointing to something behind him. Victor turned, looking out over the desert landscape. Scrubs dotted the rough, sandy ground here and there, along with strange cacti, similar enough to what he’d seen around his home to be identifiable as such.

Some of the cacti were thin with long spikes, others were short and shaped a lot like prickly pears, and still others reminded him of square barrel cacti. “They’re called cactususes, er cacti.”

“Not the plants. That thing,” Valla said, pointing to the right. Victor tracked the direction of her finger and sucked his breath through his teeth. A monstrous snake-shaped creature the size of a couple of city buses hooked together was

gliding over the sand in the distance. Its back was covered with horned bone-like plates, and its head was maned with similar bony spikes. It didn't glance their way as it faded from view over the horizon, and Victor exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

“Was that a fucking dragon?”

Status

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Improved 4

Class:

Spirit Carver - Epic

Level:

35

Core:

Spirit Class - Improved 1

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

3041/3041

Strength:

135

Vitality:

140

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

63

Intelligence:

32

Will:



315

Points Available:

8

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Flame Touched

Skills:

System Language Integration - Not Upgradeable

Cooking - Basic

Animal Taming - Basic

Unarmed Combat - Basic

Knife Combat - Basic

Axe Mastery - Advanced

Spear Mastery - Basic

Bludgeon Mastery - Improved

Grappling - Advanced

Spirit Core Cultivation Drill - Basic

Berserk - Improved

Sovereign Will - Improved

Channel Spirit - Improved

Inspiring Presence - Basic

Enraging Orb - Basic

Globe of Insight - Improved

Project Spirit - Improved

Dauntless Radiance - Basic

Heroic Heart - Basic

Spirit Walk - Basic

Tether Spirit - Basic

Manifest Spirit - Improved

Shape Spirit - Improved

Harsh Light of Justice - Improved

The Inevitable Huntsman - Improved

Aspect of Terror - Basic

