

Victor BK9: Ch31

Book 9: Chapter 31: The Key

“Yes, Your Grace, according to the historical documents, Longar Fray was King of Iron Mountain some three thousand and twenty years ago. It was his son, Cadman, who first took the oath and joined the empire.”

Victor nodded and gave the young man another appraising look. He was another Haveshi—Draj’s fourth son, Sonland, the senior archivist for the duchy. “But I thought Iron Mountain was part of Xan. Was that not the case?”

“Not initially, Your Grace. Iron Mountain was a kingdom in its own right when the Empire was first formed. The kingdom fell to Xan seventy-four years later. Originally, the two nations signed a one-hundred-year treaty, but Fray’s bloodline died out following the war, and when Toradan, King of Xan, sought to make the merger permanent, no one from Iron Mountain stood against him.” Sonland spoke with a clipped precision and often paused to adjust his strange, crystalline spectacles. As he completed his sentences, he had a habit of nodding as though he were confirming his words to himself.

“If Cadman was King of Iron Mountain when the empire was formed, what happened to Longar?”

“Records from that time are limited, Your Grace, but I found no indication that he died. A few archived correspondences indicate that he was ‘seeking enlightenment’ when he passed the rule on to his son. At that time, Ruhn did not have open trade routes with Sojourn, so some of their language was archaic. Still, I believe that the ‘enlightenment’ he sought was related to him being a steel seeker.”

Victor rubbed the back of his neck, shifting in his seat. He wasn’t tired, not physically; his body felt limber and rested after the massive Energy infusion he’d taken in upon slaying the guardian golem. However, he’d been waiting around for hours and was ready to get back to his quest. “So, he became a veil walker and left? That’s your opinion?”

“I believe so, milord. I’ve not found any record of him reappearing on Ruhn.”

“Okay, this is all very interesting, Sonland, but can you tell me if Longar Fray lived here? In this palace?”

The young man nodded, reaching up to adjust his glasses again. “Yes, milord, this has been the seat of Iron Mountain’s ruling house for nearly four thousand years.”

Victor looked around the library with renewed respect; it was hard for him to fathom four thousand years, let alone a palace that was that old. He’d never been much of a scholar in school, but he could remember learning about Ancient Greece and thinking about how impossibly old those structures pictured in his textbook seemed. If he recalled correctly, they were more like two thousand years old. How could this palace, in seemingly perfect condition, be twice that age? He

had to chalk it up to people living a lot longer and to magic—two factors that certainly could change the course of civilizations.

When Victor had come to the library and requested information about Longar Fray, he'd been a little vague about what he wanted. He wasn't sure he wanted people in the palace to know about the vault-like door he'd found in the mountain. He still didn't know who he could trust. "Was there anything else about Longar? Anything to do with the mountain?"

"The histories are ancient, Your Grace, and not very detailed. He was an adventurer king, though, and it's said that he spent many years on the mountain. He's credited with locating many of the richest veins of ore and slaying many ancient and powerful creatures that dwelled on Iron Mountain's slopes and in the depths of its caves."

"Any, um, warnings?" Sonland's expression told Victor that he knew he was fishing, but the historian played along.

"Warnings from Longar Fray, milord?"

"Yeah, concerning the mountain?"

"No, Your Grace, nothing comes to mind."


Victor fidgeted, feeling antsy. "Right, well, who do I talk to about finding a big key with multiple prongs from Longar's era?"

"A key, milord?"

"Yep. A key that wasn't made to open any locks in this palace." He held his fingers about eight inches apart. "It'll be about this long and have three tines, two of which will be pointed to the sides. I'm ninety percent sure it'll be made of amber-ore."

"If it was meant to safeguard valuables, it's likely somewhere in the ducal treasury vault, Your Grace."

Victor snapped his fingers. "Now we're getting somewhere. Where's my treasury?"

"I believe it lies beneath your residential tower, milord. My father and Treasurer Evelda Gladston have access. I'm sure either will gladly show you to—" 

Victor shoved his chair back noisily and stood; he'd remembered the gilded portcullis on the basement level as soon as the man mentioned his tower. Guard Captain Gand had shown it to him on his first day in Iron Mountain. "Thank you, Sonland. It was nice to meet you, and I'll be sure to let your father know that I approve of your appointment here."

Victor strode to the door where his escort—two household guards and a page named Reva—awaited him. Sonland sputtered his thanks and promised to be of service if Victor needed more information, but Victor just waved absently as he exited the library; he couldn't stop thinking about that door and his need to open it. "Reva, fetch Lord Draj and have him meet me at the treasury immediately."

“At once, Your Grace!” She snapped a sharp salute and sprinted toward the nearby stairs, her polished black shoes clicking loudly on the marble.

Victor looked at the two guards. They’d been waiting outside his chambers, stationed there by Queen Kynna to watch for his arrival, and he’d commandeered them for his own purposes. “You two don’t need to follow me around if you don’t want to. I’m heading back to my tower.”

One of the guards, a tall, lanky fellow whom Victor had seen fighting in the Queen’s garden, answered, “Your Grace, we’ve orders to keep sharp about your whereabouts so long as you’re in the palace. Queen Kynna—”

Victor waved his hand, cutting him off. “It’s fine.”

With renewed purpose, he led the way back to his tower. When they’d first arrived through Florent’s portal, he’d sent another page to fetch Trobban, the Artisan, and Florent had gone to brief the queen on his exploits. They were supposed to meet back at his quarters as soon as possible, so it wasn’t just his usual giant strides that spurred his quick pace through the palace; Victor was eager to get back to the mountain, eager to see what was beyond that enormous enchanted metal wall.

The library was in the northern palace annex, so it wasn’t too much of a surprise to find Draj and Reva, the page, already waiting at the stairwell leading to the lower levels of his tower. Despite the very early morning hour, Draj was dressed sharply in a gray and black suit and looked alert as he bowed. “Greetings, Your Grace. I’m told you wish to inspect the treasury. I’d anticipated such, and I assure you that you’ll find all is in order.”

Victor looked at him for a long moment, realization dawning on him. Draj thought he was conducting a surprise inspection of the duchy’s stored wealth. He supposed it made sense; it was probably something he should have done during the first day or two of his arrival. Wouldn’t most new dukes want to confirm with their own eyes that their treasurer hadn’t run away with the duchy’s riches during the changeover?

He nodded and gestured to the stairs. “After you, then.” Draj turned and hurried down the steps, and Victor followed. The treasury was on the first lower level, and when they got off the stairs and approached the gold-plated metal portcullis, Victor was surprised to find the treasurer, a mousy little woman dressed in layered crimson robes, already there, working to disarm the many wards.

“I sent EVELDA ahead, milord,” Draj said, looking over his shoulder. Victor had only met the woman once when he’d been introduced to most of the palace staff, and she hadn’t made much of an impression. Still, she seemed pleasant enough, and as the portcullis began to clatter up into its recess, she turned and bowed low. Draj nodded to her. “Very good, EVELDA. You may wait here.”

“Just a moment, Draj.” Victor turned to the little woman, noting that she’d kept her gaze down, avoiding eye contact. “EVELDA, do you have a good accounting of the contents of this vault?”

“Every bead, coin, gem, and bauble, Your Grace.” Though she answered quickly and with a sure voice, she still didn’t look up.

“Draj, can you say the same?”

“No, milord. I have a general sense of the value and know where the beads are kept, but I—”

“Then I think I’d like Evelda to provide my tour.”

“I—” Draj frowned, glancing back at the small woman, but then he nodded and stepped aside. “Very well, Your Grace.”

Victor smiled at him and, as he walked past, gave him a clap on the shoulder. “It’s nothing personal, Draj, but I’m curious about some of the older...trinkets in here.”

Victor stepped through the opening into a short, metallic tunnel. He could feel the thrumming Energy contained in the runes carved into the metal—runes that would no doubt erupt with deadly traps if Evelda hadn’t disarmed them when she opened the metal gate. As he stepped into the expansive metallic chamber beyond, he could hear Evelda’s shuffling steps behind him.

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To his surprise, the duchy’s treasury wasn’t crowded. It wasn’t piled with gold and gems and sacks of beads. It didn’t have racks of gilded armor and weapons or stacks of antique paintings, vases, and statues. It was a rectangular, metallic room lined with similarly metallic chests in neat rows. Victor turned to Evelda. “Dimensional containers?”

“That’s correct, Your Grace. All of the wealth is stored in them, save a few items that can’t be housed in such a manner. You’ll find them through yonder door.”

She pointed to a square metal door set into the left-hand wall. “A few conscious baubles left by former members of the ruling household, milord.”

Victor moved deeper into the vault and motioned for Evelda to approach. He hadn’t altered his size, and she only stood a few inches higher than his waist, so he had to lean down when he spoke in a low voice, “I’m looking for a special key. It’ll be one of the oldest items in the treasury. It should have three prongs and be about—”

“I know what it is you seek, Your Grace!” Evelda scurried toward the far right-hand corner of the room and rested her hand atop the chest there. “When I was an apprentice here, I was drilled regularly on the contents of each chest. The objects in this one are the oldest, and I struggled with the many strange items. Still, old Undrona taught me well, and I remember the key quite fondly; it’s been a mystery to the treasurers of Iron Mountain, you see. There’s not a lock in the entire duchy that it fits.”

“That’s what I wanted to hear. I should’ve come to you first.”

At his words, Evelda turned to him, and, for the first time, Victor noted that her eyes were like little blazing suns in her gray-skinned face. “Thank you, Your Grace!”

Victor couldn't help himself and asked, "Do you have Igniant ancestry?"

"Um," she looked away again, turning back to the chest, "yes, milord-from my paternal grandmother."

"You're familiar with the queen's ancestry, right? Ranish Dar?"

"Oh, yes, milord. I believe my grandmother was a cousin to the Dars." She hummed softly, and then, as a gleaming yellow-tinted metallic object appeared in her hand, she crowed, "Found it!" She turned to Victor and held it up. A foot-long key with three distinct prongs, two of which were angled to the sides. It was lengthier than Victor had envisioned, but a good bit of that length was taken up by the knob on the end, set with a golf-ball-sized ruby. "Milord, am I permitted to ask if you found the matching lock?"

Victor stepped forward and took the key. He turned it left and right, then slowly nodded. "I think so. I can't divulge what it's for just yet, but if all goes well, I'll put the mystery to rest for you." He glanced around the treasury and then, leaning close to Evelda, quietly asked, "Can I trust Lord Draj when it comes to the contents of this treasury?"

"You're asking me, Your Grace?" For the second time, the woman looked up with those blazing eyes of hers.

"I am. Call it an instinct, but I think you'll be honest."

"And honest I shall be, milord. Lord Draj submits a quarterly report on the Duchy's finances, and each time, he has me double-check his figures for the treasury. Never once has he asked me to alter the numbers to match a more convenient fiction. I cannot say the same for his predecessor."

"You've been here longer than Draj?"

"I've been here three hundred and fourteen years, Your Grace."

Victor smiled and nodded. "I'm glad we met, Evelda."

Still looking up at him with those bright eyes, she smiled, and her plump cheeks dimpled at the corners of her mouth. "I'm very pleased to have met you more personally, as well, milord."

Clutching the key, Victor nodded and then turned to stride out of the vault. Draj stood in the antechamber, his hands clasped before him. As his little entourage formed around him, Victor nodded to his seneschal. "Draj, I want to congratulate you on maintaining such a well-accounted treasury. Everything looks to be in order."

As he strode up the stairs, his guards and page in tow, Draj called after him, "Thank you, Your Grace!"

A few minutes later, after a short ride in his magical elevator, Victor entered his quarters and found Trobban and Florent awaiting him in the parlor; he'd left the door unlocked for them. As soon as he

bid the guards and Reva farewell and closed the door behind him, Florent called out, “Any luck, Your Grace?”

Victor held aloft his prize, glinting brightly in the light thrown by the recessed Energy lamps. “Hell yes, I had some luck. Can you cast your portal again yet?”

“Nearly, milord. I can sense the cooldown winding away.”

Trobban stood and walked toward him. “What’s this about a gigantic iron automaton, Your Grace?”

“First of all, it’s not iron. It’s black metal, but it’s a hell of a lot tougher than iron. I wrecked it pretty badly, but I think you might find some valuable components inside—maybe even something you could use for our project.”

“I’m always eager to examine the work of other artisans. It sounds like this one might be quite old, yes?”

“Yeah, if my theory is right, it’s over three thousand years old. I think an ancient king put it there to guard his secret. What the secret is,” Victor thumped the heavy ruby-topped key in his palm, “we’re going to find out.”

Florent cleared his throat and added, “The construct used a devastating Energy attack—more Energy than I’ve ever seen released at once. Luckily, Duke Sandoval was able to avoid it.”

Victor arched an eyebrow at him. “You talking about that wave of red lightning?”

“Yes, milord. Your guards and I stood well back until you split the golem’s focus with your axe. I believe it was unable to replicate the tremendous release of Energy without that gigantic sword.”

“A focus, you say?” Trobban rubbed his chin.

Florent nodded. “Yes, it was severed in the battle but remains largely intact. I’m sure you could learn much from studying it.”

Victor had begun to pace back and forth, unable to contain his eagerness to get back to the cavern and the locked door. To distract himself, he asked, “You spoke to Queen Kynna?”

“I tried, Your Grace,” Florent replied, “but she wasn’t here. She traveled early this morning to Gloria—meetings with her family or some such.” As he finished speaking, he leaped to his feet and snapped his fingers. “Portal’s ready, milord.”

Victor nodded and pointed to the empty area in the center of the room. “Let’s do it.”

Florent lifted his staff, gathered some Energy, and released it in a torrent of crackling black sparks that seemed to rip a hole in the universe. As the gap expanded, Victor tried to watch, peering at that weird, dark Energy as it sizzled and stretched the void at its center. He couldn’t find anything to focus on, though, and soon, the portal was large enough to step through. When Florent nodded, Victor used it.

He emerged to a new scene in the gigantic cavern. Bryn and her squire had set up a camp of sorts. They'd put up a sizeable pavilion-style tent about fifty yards from the amber-ore wall, and a wide area around it was fortified with spiked barriers—sections of metallic fence adorned with dozens of three-meter metallic spears. Another smaller pavilion was set up like a kitchen with a table, counters, and a cooktop. In a gap in the fortifications, Bryn and Feist stood, stripped down to their gambesons, sparring with swords.

When they saw and heard Victor emerge from the crackling portal, Bryn shoved Feist away and jogged over to him, red-faced and sweating. “You made good time, milord. Does that mean you were success—” She cut her words short as Victor held up the key.

“Nice little camp.” Victor nodded toward the fortifications. “You had all that shit in a storage ring?”

“Yes, sir! I figured we might need to make camp during your explorations of the mountain and prepared accordingly.”

Victor smiled. “You're pretty damn good, Bryn. Remind me to give you some sort of accolade when we return.” While he spoke, he heard the others come through the portal behind him, and he turned to Trobban, who was standing, mouth agape, staring at the enormous amber-ore wall.

“Incredible!”

“The golem is over there.” Victor gripped his shoulder and turned him so he could point out the black semi-truck-sized figure on the far side of the cavern. Victor looked to Florent, then back to Bryn. “Listen up, folks. I'm going through that door if this key works, and I think it will. You all might as well continue to fortify this position and hold it. I know you're all curious about what's on the other side, and you can look through, of course, but I'll be going alone. If there are more things like that,” he jerked his thumb toward the destroyed construct, “then I'd rather only have me to worry about. Understood?”

“Yes,” Florent was quick to respond.

“Yes, Your Grace.” Bryn snapped a salute.

Victor looked at Trobban, but the artisan was already drifting toward the broken golem. “Okay, my earlier orders still stand: only Queen Kynna can know about this place for now. Don't travel back and forth the palace bringing everyone and their mother here.”

Feist, who'd just jogged over, busy fastening the straps to his breastplate, muttered, “Why would we want everyone's mother here, Your Grace?”

“Exactly my point, bud.” As always, the urge to go deeper, the pull on his blood, was nagging at Victor, and he couldn't stand still any longer. He nodded and turned toward the enormous circular door. “I'm going. I guess, if there's some kind of sleeping evil god or something in there, be ready to run.”

“Do you think...” Bryn's words trailed off, and Victor glanced at her, seeing real fear in her eyes as she appraised the gigantic amber-ore wall in a new light.

“Listen,” Victor said, turning to face them all, “I was mostly joking about that, but this kind of barrier wasn’t made for anything small. Either Longar Fray was trying to keep something in, or he was trying to keep everyone out. We don’t know why, so we need to be careful. Florent, do you have that escape portal ready?”

“Always, Your Grace.”

“Then stand back here with the others.” With that, Victor turned and strode the fifty yards or so to the door. He could feel the call, the pull, the push, and he knew, no matter what, he was going through this wall, whether the key worked or not.

“Your Grace,” Bryn’s voice was right behind him, and he turned to her, frowning.

“What, Bryn?”

“Um, if-if, um…”

Victor groaned. He was so close. He wanted to snap at her, to yell at her to back off, but he gathered his will and took a deep breath, pushing his impatience and the mighty pull aside. “What is it, Bryn? You can say it.”

“If there is something awful, milord, some ancient dead god that wants to kill us all, should—should we close the door?”

Victor grinned. “So that’s all you wanted? Hell, Bryn, if something like that happens, then do it. Yeah, I wouldn’t want to unleash something like that on a bunch of innocent people.” He nodded again, then held out a fist, and she half-heartedly punched his knuckles.

“I hope it’s not something like that, Your Grace. Victor.”

“Me too. Now get the fuck outta here, will you?” He laughed to lighten his words, and she grinned as she turned to jog back to the others. Victor turned back to the door.

His hand was steady as he held the key up to the lock, turning it until the tines lined up with the correctly shaped slots. When he began to push it in, he worried he’d done it wrong or that the key wasn’t quite right because it got stuck about three inches in. He tapped it, twisting lightly left and right, and then it began to sink again, perhaps having cleared some ancient corrosion or grime.

The entire vault door vibrated almost imperceptibly when the key was halfway inserted. When it was three-quarters in, the amber-ore began to glow with faint luminosity. When it was fully inserted, the key clicked, and the ruby shone with brilliant red light. Licking his lips in anticipation, Victor turned the key, and it smoothly rotated with a rapid series of clicks. He kept turning until it stopped after three complete rotations, and then he heard the workings of gigantic gears as the enormous bolts holding the door shut slid open.

When the noise ended, and the door ceased its glowing and humming, Victor pulled on the handle and, on noiseless gigantic hinges, it swung wide. The door was thick—at least eight feet wide—but

swung open with the lightest of touches. Beyond, a twenty-foot tunnel of solid amber-ore stretched toward a circle of darkness. Victor turned back to his companions, watching him with weapons in their hands, and nodded. Then he stepped into the tunnel.

He'd taken three or four steps when the pull on his blood, spirit, or both began to lessen, and the stress of its constant pressure faded. He rolled his neck and took a deep breath, noting the air was much cooler than on the other side of the door. That's when, like a whisper he could hear with his very bones, a voice came to him, "Titan-blood. Long have I awaited one of our kind. Come. Come and hear my tale. Come and earn your prize with a favor."

Book 9: Chapter 32: The Mountain Speaks

Victor stopped in his tracks when he heard the voice in his head. It was deep and grating, and the depth and gravity of it alone would have been enough to give him pause, but the words—the words sent his heart hammering like it wanted to escape his chest. Had it said one of "our" kind? His mind wanted to dispute his memory or his comprehension. Maybe the word had been "your." Gritting his teeth, steeling himself for whatever might come, be it a fight, a revelation, or simply disappointment, Victor continued to the end of the amber-ore tunnel.

On the other side of the enormous metallic wall, the cavern continued, but this half wasn't lit by an artificial, fiery sun. Enough light seeped in from behind for his Quinametzin eyes to pierce the shadows, allowing Victor to see what awaited him: a dusty cavern littered with broken stones that seemed to have fallen from the soaring stony ceiling over the years or centuries. Scanning the irregular cavern walls in the distance, he thought he saw a passage that continued further, so he began walking that way.

As he went, the deep, rumbling voice reverberated through his bones again, "Long have I slumbered, and long will I yet."

Tired of guessing, Victor began to voice his questions aloud, "If you're sleeping, how are you talking to me?"

"An...irritant has disturbed my rest these past few millennia.A...sliver of my consciousness stirs."

"Are you a titan?"

"World breaker—world maker! They cry out their names for us, but deeds speak louder than names." Victor reached the tunnel opening and saw that it descended steeply. He could feel something down there, like a pulsating, radiating heat. As he stared into the darkness, the voice spoke again, "Continue, child of titans. Let my voice guide you in your task."

"Task?"

"The irritant—a dungeon spawned of the Energy rich in the roots of my resting place. Once a distraction, a bit of noise to blot out the memories, now a thorn in

my ribs, infected by something...other, an entity with rules and laws foreign to my nature.”

Victor had begun walking at the voice’s urging, but now he paused again, staring down the slope, noting how a faint, red-orange glow radiated in the depths. “What can I do about a dungeon?”

“Once, another came here. A mortal warrior who hunted in the depths. He was greedy and guarded his discovery with metal he dug from my vaults. I didn’t mind—a simple distraction, something to help me pass the eons. He stopped coming, but then the...other came. It hid the dungeon from my view. Bit by bit, it steals the treasures from the depths and pulls them away. It uses my own dungeon as a gateway! Bit by bit, it leeches the Energy from my veins—some for the dungeon, but most drawn...elsewhere. As my kin, you must deliver justice. Destroy the dungeon if it is no longer mine!”

A sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach forced Victor to reach out and lean against the warm stone wall. Warm? When had the stone stopped being cool to the touch? He shook his head, refocusing on his disturbing realization. “Are you talking about the System?”

The voice came to him again, ponderous and heavy, each word slow to follow the one before, “System? Do not speak in riddles, child of titans. Enter the dungeon. Destroy it, and if the other dwells within, slay it as well! Earn my gratitude and honor the blood of your ancestors!”

Victor turned to lean his back against the stone wall and, after a moment, found himself sliding down to sit on the tunnel floor. So many thoughts fought for his attention that he couldn’t focus on any one of them. Part of him wanted to marvel at the idea that an ancient titan was speaking to him—a being big and powerful enough to claim Iron Mountain was his...resting place? Was he still alive, or was Victor talking to a spirit? Before he could focus on the question, another part of his mind clamored for attention: was he really considering trying to help the being?

Victor was no “world breaker.” He wasn’t someone who could lay down to rest and have a mountain grow over him. If this ancient, powerful being had a beef with the System, then why didn’t he just handle it? Why was he asking Victor to risk everything—to challenge the System’s authority long before he was ready to do so? Worse, he felt like his ancestors were in league with the titan. How else could he explain the call in his blood? The urging to move forward that had seemed to harmonize with the mountain’s pull? Hadn’t it grown in strength ten-fold after he’d spoken to his ancestor in his bloodline vision?

Could Victor even defy the mountain’s—titan’s—request if he wanted to? The pull seemed to have relaxed as soon as he’d stepped through the amber-ore wall, but would it come again with renewed urgency if he turned to leave? Did he want to leave? This was the first being who claimed real kinship with him, and he was a...Victor didn’t know how to describe a being so vast.

Frowning, he shook his head. He was wrong to say the mountain was the first titanic being he'd encountered. The Degh giants on Zaafor were supposedly descended from titans. According to Khul Bach, they'd been far more titan-like before fracturing their ancestor stone. How pitiful they seemed now, though! They were little more than overgrown humans!

Nevertheless, the being speaking to Victor was the real deal. Victor could feel it. He could sense the awesome power behind those words and all around him. Somehow, Iron Mountain was the titan and vice versa. Despite his uncertainty, despite his righteous fear of angering the System, Victor knew he wouldn't back away. He had too many questions and too many answers to gain by cooperating with the mountain. Hadn't Tenecoalt told him to start preparing to go against the System? Well, maybe he could do so without overtly declaring war. Hadn't he almost broken one dungeon already? The System hadn't punished him for that, only kicked him out.

"How," he asked, still sitting on the floor. "How do I break a dungeon when the System will remove me and repair any damage I do?"

"Why do you tarry, titan-blood? Do you fear the other so much? Master your fear, as all great titans do! Slay the beast that claims lordship over the dungeon. Its lair will be the heart of the place. Find the dungeon Core and shatter it. There will be no repairing such damage."

Victor stood, brushing his pants off as he contemplated. The only dungeon "boss" he'd killed had been in the dungeon near Greatbone Mine, and he hadn't exactly hung around looking for a dungeon Core. Would it be so easy? Kill a boss and break some object, and then he'd be done? Would the System be angry? Despite his questions and qualms, Victor's feet began to move almost of their own accord. He didn't walk away but further down the tunnel.

"How old are you?" he asked the dry, warm air.

"Ancient, child. I've slept for longer than I can recall. I've watched the seasons change millions of times."

"How do you sound so...normal? How do you stay sane for millions of years?"

"I sleep, and I dream. You speak to only a tiny part of me, child. Remove this thorn, and this fraction will sleep a while, too."

Victor wanted to ask how that was possible. How could a person fragment their consciousness, leaving most of it to slumber while a piece awoke to deal with an irritant? Did various parts of the titan's mind wake at different times? Hadn't it said it watched Longar Fray as he delved into the dungeon before the System took it over? Was Victor filling in too many blanks, or did that make sense? He realized he didn't know when the System had come to Ruhn. A thousand years to him seemed like ancient history, but it was, apparently, a blink of an eye to the mountain.

Just as he couldn't fathom existing for millions of years, he realized he couldn't properly grasp the mind of an entity like the one speaking to him. They might be—distantly—related, but that didn't mean Victor could properly comprehend the motivations of a being so...vast. "I could tell you about

the ‘other,’ if you’d like,” he offered, trying to see if he could get a bit more out of the sleeping titan.

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“A thorn. A nuisance.”

Victor continued to descend, and while he did so, he spoke, hoping the System was too busy to listen to his every word as most people under its dominion assumed. “Everyone calls the ‘other’ the System. I don’t know how it got that name, but it controls Energy in a huge part of the universe. It rules over millions of worlds. It rarely speaks directly to people, but it inserts itself into everyone’s lives by controlling their Energy, their attributes, their skills, spells, levels, Classes—everything. It controls every dungeon on the worlds it rules over, and if you dare to go against it, it does what it can to see you destroyed. It—” Victor stopped speaking as he felt a faint vibration under his feet. The mountain had shifted.

“Child, I am not ready to wake, but you stir my wrath. Shall I rise? Shall I bring ruin to this world and challenge the Other? Shall I ravage world after world? I feel my blood begin to quicken! Is this fury, is this rage? Do I feel again? Shall I return to the waking world? Shall the lesser beings scream my name in their lamentations and prayers once more?”

The ground rumbled again, this time more violently, and dust fell from the ceiling as tiny cracks appeared. Victor felt his heart hammer as the furious magma in his Breath Core began to roil, responding to the mountain’s waking ire. “No!” he screamed. “No, brother!” he shouted, “Let me be your axe. Let me be the one who strikes a blow for our kind and reminds the System of your power!”

Victor stood stock still, afraid he’d doomed Ruhn and perhaps other worlds with his loose tongue. He should have thought things through a little more—of course, a titan like the one under Iron Mountain would have an insurmountably massive pride. How else would he respond to Victor telling him the System was ruling over him? As dust continued to trickle down, Victor held his breath, fearing another, larger tremor, and he slowly became aware of a different sound, a distant rhythmic, rumbling susurrantion. Was the mountain breathing?

“I would slumber yet. You are young and tiny, but you have the blood. Yes, a small brother, but a hardy one. You will suffice, and I will grant you guidance and a boon, but first, you must do as I ask and remove this thorn from my side. Should you fail and die, my fury will spark alight my blood, and vengeance will be exacted in your name, young titan.”

It seemed a cliché, but Victor gulped—the first time he could remember doing so in light of disturbing news or events. His “favor” for the sleeping titan had just taken on a new level of gravity. If he failed to help the titan—if he died—it wouldn’t only be him that paid the price. All of Ruhn would suffer. “At least,” Victor sighed, imagining the ancient, powerful being going on a rampage against the System.

While the sleeping titan had spoken, Victor's feet had carried him forward, and now he stood in a great, dome-shaped cavern. The warmth and red-orange light came from a pool of bubbling magma at the center. Caustic gases hung in the air, but Victor's feats and bloodline protected him from the poisons and the heat. He stepped forward, eyes focused on the pool because he saw something on the far side—a pedestal of stone cut in perfect right angles.

Because the mountain seemed to have calmed, Victor asked, "Can I know your name, hermano?"

"Speak it not lightly, little brother: my name is Azforath."

As he walked around the bubbling, stinking pit of magma, Victor said, "My name is Victor."

"Victor. Yes. This is a suitable name."

Victor grinned, pleased by the mountain's approval, and stepped close to the pedestal. It was about eight feet high, its top a perfect square of black stone about a yard on a side. As he drew near, the smooth surface shifted, and golden runes far too reminiscent of those in System city-stones moved just out of reach. Standing before the pedestal, Victor waited for Azforath to tell him what to do, but the titan was silent. With a shrug, he reached forward and pressed his palm to the smooth surface.

*****Congratulations! You have discovered the Crucible of Fire! Enter? Yes/No*****

The System message danced in his vision, almost mockingly. "So this is the entrance to the dungeon," Victor grunted. He felt a tiny echo of the outrage Azforath had hinted at. What bullshit! The System showed up on worlds like Ruhn after beings like Azforath had already conquered—created?—them and gone to rest, and had the gall to take over as though it were responsible for everything they'd done? It controlled everyone's lives, putting training wheels on every aspect of Energy-based advancement, and for that simplification, it took a tithe in Energy, freedom, and... glory.

That realization hit Victor like a hammer. Living, advancing, and thriving under the System's dominance meant nothing truly belonged to anyone. Everything everyone gained was done with the System snooping over their shoulder: every spell and skill, every level and Class—all curated and approved by the System. If someone strayed outside the lines, it would offer a quest to someone else to come and kill them. Victor knew he was being watched. He knew Lesh's abandonment of his quest didn't mean the System had pardoned him. The System was biding its time, waiting for him to stray outside the lines again. Would this be that time?

"Do you have any words for me before I enter?" he asked the hot, smoky air.

"Go boldly, child—brother. Take what you will and destroy the Core. I will be here to guide you further upon your exit."

"And my prize?"

"Hah! Spoken like a true titan. I will have your prize as well, little brother."

Victor nodded, focused on the System message before him, and selected the “yes” option. Energy, pure and golden, pulsed out of the pedestal, washing over the stone, the magma, and Victor. As it passed, Victor’s reality shifted, and rather than the lava-lit cavern, he found himself standing at the mouth of a canyon with high red-toned rock walls.

A roadway of sorts, paved in crumbled, sharp, obsidian-hued gravel, led into the canyon, where, perhaps a quarter of a mile distant, a high black stone wall stood. At its center was an enormous metal portcullis, and five rows of ten armored figures were arrayed before it. The figures were huge and monstrous—some with two heads, some with four arms, some with bat-like wings, and many with claws and scales and fangs. All wore rusty iron plate armor and carried oversized weapons—axes, spiked clubs, spears, and hammers.

Victor took a single step, and a System message appeared:

*****You have entered the Crucible of Fire! Fight your way past the seven gates to challenge the Lord of the Crucible.*****

“All right.” Victor channeled Energy into his armor, cladding himself in wyrm scales and thick, tough hide. He glared out of the Lava King’s maw, summoning Lifedrinker to his hands.

Do we fight?

“Hell yeah, chica. We’re gonna kick some ass.” As he strode down the road, his boots crunching on the sharp stones, Victor cast Iron Berserk and summoned his banner. He exploded with power, his vision tinted toward crimson, and he reveled in the idea that he was about to strike his first deliberate blow against the System. He might not be ready to challenge the System directly, but destroying a dungeon it was using to siphon Energy away from an ancient titan seemed like an excellent way to dip his toes in the “disruptor” pool.

He’d be lying if he claimed his nervousness about the prospect had wholly left him. He wasn’t sure the System would take his actions as a deliberate affront, but he knew he’d have to contend with some consequences if it did. In his mind, though, it was a moot point: he was Quinametzin. He was a titan. His ancestors told him that, ultimately, his path couldn’t be contained by the System’s rules. They’d told him to listen to his instincts, and everything in him said he couldn’t say no to Azforath. What good, then, would it do for him to worry about the System’s reaction? It would be what it would be.

The thought was so liberating that Victor lifted his head to the black sky and howled, invigorated by the freedom of a mind unshackled from fear. What was the point of fearing choices already made? The monstrous figures heard his howl and, though they’d been waiting, ready to play out some predetermined System-designed drama, they began to bark, howl, roar, and yip. Some of them broke ranks and charged toward him, and Victor felt the giddy anticipation for a fight that always made him grin.

He channeled his Sovereign Will into his strength and vitality, lifted Lifedrinker, and cast Energy Charge, ripping up the gravel road as he tore down the slope to the lead figure—a massive, two-headed giant wielding a gnarled, spike-studded club. As he drew near and had to look down to see

his foe, he realized they were giants, but they weren't nearly titan-sized. Lifedrinker ripped the first enemy in half before he could even crash into the creature.

His charge carried him past the massacred foe to slam into a cluster of three, and then the fight was on. Victor waded into the mass of monstrous figures, swinging Lifedrinker like she was a baseball bat. She whistled through the air, and as her multi-ton axe-head impacted the monsters, she ripped them to pieces. Their armor was like cardboard, their flesh and bones like gelatin. The hot, dry air became humid with blood as it exploded in sprays and mists for hundreds of feet with each impact.

Victor was a machine of destruction, and Lifedrinker was his wrecking ball. The monsters were numerous—fifty, all told—but they might as well have been wheat trying to stand before a master harvester with the world's sharpest scythe. In less than five minutes, Victor stood over a mound of broken, gory bodies, the dark ground slick with viscera and blood. He looked toward the gate, expecting it to open, but then a System message appeared:

*****Congratulations! You have overcome the first of ten waves guarding the gate. Brace yourself—wave two approaches. Each wave will be fiercer than the last. Flee now, if you must!*****

Victor looked back the way he'd come and saw a glowing yellow portal shaped like a doorway back at the mouth of the canyon. He wondered if he'd be offered a chance to leave after each wave. Growling, he twisted his hands on Lifedrinker's haft and turned to face the gate. "Come on then, pinché assholes. Let's get to work."

Book 9: Chapter 33: The Crucible of Fire

Victor stood, chest heaving, atop the latest pile of bodies, the remains of the final wave of attackers sent to defend the first gate of the dungeon's "crucible." Gore dripped from his axe and him—every inch of his armor was soaked with it, dripping into the widening pool at his feet as the armor's self-cleaning enchantments worked to sluice it away. Grunting, he hefted Lifedrinker to his shoulder and stepped around the broken, torn remnants of his foes, glaring left and right, hunting for further targets for his rage, hoping that some still lurked among the charnel mounds.

His Iron Berserk had worn off during that last wave, and his fight had grown a bit more desperate, contending with the much stronger foes. Even so, he'd never contemplated failure; his Furious Battle Momentum had never let up, and as the blows of his enemies mounted, Victor's strength, speed, and ferocity had risen to incredible levels. Even now, as he glared around, seeking something more to fight, the world was tinted in deep shades of crimson, and his hunger for battle was unslaked.

Even without his active berserk ability, his natural regeneration continued to knit the cuts in his flesh and smooth out the lumps of countless contusions. He was distantly aware of System messages floating in front of his face, and though they irritated him, a tiny part of his mind knew they were important. With nothing left to fight, he stood amid the corpses, viscera, pools of blood, and gore and simply breathed, waiting—at first for something more to kill and then, as his rage slowly cooled, for his mind to come back to him.

The process was accelerated as a great mist of Energy rose from the corpses of his foes and poured into him. The waves of euphoria washed away his fury, recharged his Core, and finished the

renewal of his flesh. His consciousness wasn't aware of any of that, though, as it drifted through strange, disjointed visions—oceans churning, geysers erupting, strange, shadow figures climbing insurmountable slopes, planets colliding, breaking apart, and reforming as great beings traversed their broken landscapes.

When his mind returned to his body, and he saw that he knelt before the open gate amid the wreckage of his foes, Victor smiled, almost lazily rising to his feet as he scanned through the System's messages:

*****Congratulations! You have cleared the first gate of the Crucible of Fire! Collect your reward inside the gatehouse!*****

*****Congratulations! You have cleared the first wave of a group-rated challenge as a solo adventurer, earning a bonus to the value of your reward!*****

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 75 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.*****

*****Congratulations! You have increased the rank of your Sovereign Will ability: Epic.*****

*****Sovereign Will - Epic: As an act of concentration, you can apply up to 50% of your total will attribute to any two of your physical attributes.*****

“Holy shit.” Victor's eyes were focused on the last two messages—he'd nearly given up on improving Sovereign Will. He ran it all the time, and the only guidance he'd gotten from Dar about the ability was to keep using it. It looked like his persistence had finally paid off in a big way. Before, he'd been able to apply a third of his will to two of his physical attributes. At this point, a third of his will was about 224 points. Now, he could apply half or roughly 336 points. In other words, this upgrade had granted him another 112 attribute points times two.

“Two hundred and twenty-four extra stat points for free, chica!” he crowed, hefting his enormously heavy axe above his head.

We have bathed in the blood of your foes, and now we reap the glory!

Victor laughed, pleased by Lifedrinker's outlook. After a moment to savor their bond, he regarded the other messages again. Another level, which didn't surprise him, even though levels were supposed to be getting slow now that he was mid-tier-seven. After all, he'd just killed five hundred foes, and the last few waves hadn't been pushovers. More intriguing was the fact that the System had just rewarded him for completing “group” content by himself. What did that portend for the rest of the crucible?

Victor walked through the squelching, blood-soaked gravel to the gate and looked inside. Sure enough, a black stone chest sat to the left of the pathway, flickering with golden System-style runes. The messages and the chest helped him confirm his suspicion that the System wasn't always listening and watching what he did. If it knew he was in the dungeon with the intent to destroy it, to help a sleeping ancient being strike a blow against it, would the System reward him? Would it be

increasing his rewards for the difficulty of the challenge? Wouldn't it, instead, make things harder for him?

Of course, the thought brought to mind a dozen other questions. Could the System listen to him and watch him all the time? It certainly seemed able to send him messages whenever he leveled or did something with one of his skills or spells. Victor couldn't help imagining it was like a complicated network—constantly monitoring on a base level but only really paying attention when something specific happened. It chafed—feeling like he was always being watched, but the idea that it wasn't consciously watching all the time gave him a little comfort; there was some wiggle room, an opportunity for...rebellion.

Victor had to face the facts; his current trajectory was leading that way. He might not be able to do anything significant yet, but if his ancestors and the very nature of his blood were steering him in that direction, would he fight it? Would he turn aside? Would he turn his back on that part of his nature? And if he didn't? What price would he pay to try to throw the System off, to operate outside it? How might an entity capable of conquering galaxies respond?

The mountain, the sleeping ancient titan, had grumbled about rising from his slumber and battling against the System's imposed control, but how far could even such a mighty being take his war? He'd spoken about breaking the world and others besides, but would the System even care? It controlled millions of worlds. If the System couldn't oppose a titan like Azforath directly, couldn't it simply isolate him or wait for him to wear himself out and go back to sleep? What would the System care if a few billion lives were lost in the process?

Victor sighed, pushing the thoughts from his mind; he had work to do and couldn't solve the riddles that plagued his mind by standing there in the gateway. He walked to the chest and unceremoniously lifted the lid, waving away the glittering golden steam that poured forth so he could look within. Two objects lay inside the chest—a brilliant, glittering, sapphire-colored gemstone the size of a baseball and a brick of lustrous, silver-hued ore.

The ore was dense, heavier than gold as Victor lifted it out, but there wasn't any clue about its nature other than the deep well of Energy he could feel within it. As for the gemstone, it was a similar situation. It felt incredibly potent and rich with Energy, but there wasn't any sort of identifying label tucked away inside the chest, and the System didn't provide any further enlightenment. Victor tucked both treasures away, intent on asking Trobban about them.

Part of him hoped the gem was what he'd come to the mountain hoping to find: an "azurite star." It matched Trobban's description, but Victor couldn't believe he'd already found one. It seemed too easy. Before moving on, he sat on the now-empty chest and took out the Farscribe book he shared with Bryn. He figured he'd delayed giving her an update long enough:

Bryn – Don't go any deeper than where I left you. Everything should be fine, though. There aren't hordes of demons or anything on their way up. Haha. Guard that door, and I should be back before too long. I'll update you if anything delays me too much.

-Your Boss

He chuckled at his lame attempts at humor and almost scratched out the “Your Boss” part, not sure Bryn knew him well enough to realize he was being stupid. He shrugged, though, and left it. He knew, if he were being truly conscientious, he'd warn her about the sleeping god-like being on whose resting site they were treading and probably about the dungeon he'd entered, but some lingering paranoia kept him from doing so. As far as he was concerned, the fewer people who knew exactly what he was up to, the better. Shrugging, he walked the rest of the way through the gatehouse and laid his eyes on the second part of the “crucible.”

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The sharp, black gravel road continued for a hundred yards and ended at the edge of a lake of bubbling lava. Victor could feel the deep well of magma-attuned Energy out there and briefly contemplated pausing to cultivate it for his Breath Core. The oxygen in the air was thin, and Victor knew if he weren't Quinametzin and if he didn't have a magma affinity and the feats that made him resistant to poisons, he'd be suffering from the gases that hung above the burbling, hissing, smoldering semi-liquid. As it was, he simply breathed shallowly and narrowed his eyes as the caustic blend made them water.

Stepping closer to the edge of the lake, he saw solid stone platforms or pedestals dotting its surface, leading away to the distant shore where, another hundred yards further on, he could see the next gate. “So, I need to cross, huh?” He almost laughed. The lake was maybe a quarter-mile across, and he figured he could cover the distance in a few Titanic Leaps. Even easier, he knew he could use his armor's enchantment, Flight of the Lava King, to clear the distance in a matter of seconds. He wouldn't need to hop from platform to platform.

Nodding with a grin spreading over his face, he held Lifedrinker before himself, channeled some Energy into his armor, and activated the Flight of the Lava King. With a crackling woosh, his fiery wings sprouted from the air near the center of his back and cracked down, sending black smoke and ash whirling behind him as he sprang into the air, streaking across the lake of lava just as he'd envisioned it. He moved his gaze toward the far, rocky shore and descended, ripping through the air with no resistance.

When his feet set down and he jogged toward the gate, gradually slowing his momentum with each step, he wondered if he'd cheated somehow, breaking the gauntlet by trivializing a crossing that was supposed to be a challenge. When his fiery wings faded, and he stood a dozen yards from the gate, he stared at it, waiting. He wondered if something would come through that he'd have to fight or if the entire point of the second gate was to see if he could cross the lava.

The gate didn't move, but after two or three minutes, he heard a noise behind him—a squelching, hissing, burbling sound. At first, it had blended in with the usual sounds of the hissing magma as its surface broke with giant, swollen gas bubbles. Victor whirled, lifting Lifedrinker high, only to see dozens of dark lumps of cooling magma forging through the barely liquid surface of the lava lake.

They looked like stones being pulled by invisible lines through the thick liquid, moving quickly enough to leave short wakes.

Victor narrowed his eyes, watching as the first of the dark lumps reached the shore, and then, with a squelching surge, it exploded out of the lava to land on two lumpy, magma-coated legs. “What the fuck?” Victor readied Lifedrinker and pulled a rope of furious rage-attuned Energy into his pathways, preparing to cast Iron Berserk. As he did so, more and more of the magma-covered humanoids lurched onto the shore, dripping molten rock around them that hissed and sizzled.

They weren't huge—somewhere between a human and a giant in size, but they were bulky, and their very nature sent a shiver of doubt down Victor's spine. How could you kill something made of lava? “One way to find out,” he grunted, striding toward the nearest one. It didn't seem to have eyes or ears, but somehow, it knew he was coming. It squared off with him, spreading broad hands with glowing-hot fingers. Victor grunted, hacking Lifedrinker down in an overhead chop, aiming her massive, gleaming axe-head at the monster's crown.

To Victor's amazement, the thing reached up and grasped the sides of Lifedrinker's blade, halting her momentum cold. Victor's eyes grew wide with shock as the creature pulled, nearly yanking his axe from his hands. “Hell no!” Victor roared and cast Iron Berserk. Victor gave in to his rage as his muscles exploded with unnatural growth, and his figure stretched, towering over the monster. How dare this thing try to strip Lifedrinker from him?

He ripped the axe back, viciously raking her blade over the creature's fingers. They fell to the stone ground with little plops, but by the time Victor turned, lifting the axe high, ready to hack into the monster, he saw that they'd regrown. Worse, five more of the monsters were closing in on him. In his titanic form, they were like children to him—stocky, fiery, faceless, extremely strong children. Victor, his vision clouded with crimson, stepped forward and heaved Lifedrinker in a broad, flat cleave. Her impossibly sharp obsidian edge split the magma creature like a cleaver through taffy.

As the top half flew to the side and the bottom staggered and fell, Victor bore down and roared at the other approaching magma-men, activating Voice of the Angry Earth. The roar echoed through the vast canyon, shaking the ground, sending waves of magma over the lake, toward the far shore, and, nearer to hand, the magma-men fell to their knees or toppled backward, stunned by the force of his voice. Victor gleefully, madly, strode among them, ripping Lifedrinker left and right, sending chunks of semi-liquid magma sliding over the ground on steaming, hissing skid marks like monstrous versions of a snail's trail.

All told, he slaughtered thirty of the magma things, killing them before they could even muster an attack, thanks to the stunning effect of his furious sonic attack. When he stood on the shore, and no further creatures approached, he whirled to face the gate, only to see that the magma-men he'd first slain were climbing to their feet—new, bubbling magma-meat growing to replace the parts he'd cleaved

away. Worse, the pieces he'd cut off were growing new parts! As Victor stared, his enemies recovered and more than doubled in number.

*****Congratulations! You have reached the second gate of the Crucible of Fire! Survive the magma sprite onslaught!*****

Despite his rage, Victor's will and the magic of Iron Berserk allowed him to regain his senses. Enough so, that he realized he might be working against himself if he went on another rampage. Would they continue to multiply? Victor bolted down the shore of the lake, breaking out of their midst and taking advantage of their plodding movement to give himself time to think.

"Let's try something, Beautiful," he grunted, lifting Lifedrinker high. He darted forward and brought her down, just hard enough to cleave into one of the sprite's shoulders but not split it in half. Once she'd gotten a good, deep bite, he let go, allowing her to do her thing. "Drink!" he screamed, kicking another sprite away and then jogging off. When he turned to see how Lifedrinker's ability to drain Energy was progressing, he was horrified to see another of the sprites grab her handle and yank her out of his comrade.

As the little pendejo lifted her high, looking almost comical with the oversized weapon, Victor growled and ran toward him, channeling his Energy Charge spell. He slammed into his enemy, leading with his shoulder, and when he made impact, it felt like he'd tried to tackle a brick mailbox—back when he was an ordinary human. The crash was thunderous, the shockwave enough to knock all the nearest magma sprites onto their asses, and Victor felt his Core pouring Energy into the shield to protect him from the forces generated.

The sprite was a sturdy, heavy, strong creature, but it wasn't powerful enough to withstand those torrential forces. As the creature exploded, hunks of magma flying in every direction, Lifedrinker fell to the ground with a tremendous thud, splitting the stone like a ball-bearing hitting glass. Victor yanked her up immediately, feeling relief and pride vibrate through her and into his hand. "Sorry, chica!" he cried, mortified that an enemy had held her against her will.

Let us slay!

Victor grinned madly despite his lack of a plan. He turned and jogged ahead of the small horde of magma sprites, wracking his brain for a new idea. He'd killed one, hadn't he? Could he just whittle them down with Energy Charge? As he turned to assess the field, he had a rapid change of heart. The magma sprite he'd "killed" was coming back to life—a hundred times! Each chunk that had resulted from Victor's explosive impact was growing into a new sprite.

"Chingado!" Victor spat, then jogged closer to the wall, running parallel to it to give himself more space as the much larger horde of magma sprites inexorably advanced. Mentally, he ran through his abilities, trying to think of one that could kill a sprite without splitting it. His gauntlet's lava lash would be useless, likewise

his berserking abilities; what good would it do to make himself more deadly with an axe that could only increase the count of his foes?

He could switch weapons, but to what? A spear, a sword, a hammer? What difference would any of them make? If he hammered one hard enough to kill it, would that not splatter the magma? He could pull them apart—same problem. He could throw them into the lava, but that would only delay them. He could summon coyotes or his bear, but again, they couldn't harm the sprites without increasing their numbers. In the end, Victor figured he had two possible strategies.

His nightmare alter ego, Terror, could probably kill the creatures, draining them of Energy, but only if they were capable of feeling fear. Victor wasn't sure about that, and he wanted to keep his wits about him as much as possible, so he decided to go with his other idea. He sent Lifedrinker into her storage container, and then he began to pace back and forth, waiting for the horde of magma sprites to get closer. While he paced, he breathed in and out, deeper and deeper, gathering his breath, channeling the Energy that hung thick in the air.

As the front row of the magma men closed the distance to twenty yards, Victor grinned at them. "Okay, assholes. You like fire, huh? How do you like ice?"

Book 9: Chapter 34: Elemental Lessons

Victor exhaled, infusing his breath with frigid Energy. A plume of frosty air exploded from his lips, instantly dropping the ambient temperature and bathing the front line of the magma sprites in its icy embrace. Victor's affinity wasn't with water or even simple ice—it was with something called "blue ice," and, though it might be related to a typical water affinity, it was different—always frozen. He'd tried to manipulate the output, but just like his magma, it was what it was; there was no liquid component.

He'd even experimented, spraying his frozen breath with its flecks of brutally cold ice onto the ground, watching as it took ages to dissipate, never leaving any water behind. So, while his Breath Core's capacity wasn't nearly as robust as his Spirit Core, the Energies inside were exceptionally potent. Like his magma, his blue ice went a long way, and when that foggy, bitterly cold air hit the sprites, it bit into the molten material of their flesh and froze it on the spot. There was no eruption of steam; that would imply the sprite's heat was sufficient to alter the state of Victor's breath. It wasn't.

Victor's breath weapon wrapped its glacial embrace around the leading sprites and almost instantaneously extinguished the heat radiating from within them. They shrank in on themselves, contracting as their molten flesh turned to solid stone in a series of rapid gunshot-like cracks that rang through the cavern. Their glowing, fiery bodies turned dark, and as Victor backed away, peering through the icy fog to see the results of his efforts, he found that nearly a dozen of the sprites had slumped down, looking more like inert basalt boulders than monstrous humanoids.

“Hell, yeah!” he grunted, backpedaling, giving himself a little more room for his next blast. He moved to his right, angling for the edge of the oncoming horde, and unleashed another gout of frozen air. As his breath stole the vital force from the sprites, he worked his way around his slow, trudging foes, jogging along the shore of the molten lake. When he’d reached their back line, he blew forth another great plume of frozen air, catching a swath of them in its icy embrace.

Victor turned his gaze inward, weighing the Energy left in his Breath Core, and saw that it was low, just tiny globes of magma and blue ice swirling in the space, languidly chasing each other’s tails. “All right.” Victor began to pump his lungs like a bellows, drawing the magma-thick air into his chest, siphoning off the rich Energy, and exhaling plumes of black smoke. Quietly, he thanked whatever magic in his Breath Core allowed him to use one Energy type to fuel both his attunements as he stoked his ball of magma-attuned Energy into a massive, blazing orb.

As soon as his Breath Core felt full to bursting, he pulled a strand of the blue ice Energy into his lungs and blew out another plume of frozen air, this time only catching half a dozen of the sprites in its cone. Even so, he’d whittled their numbers down significantly. Where before, he’d faced more than a hundred and fifty of the things, he thought he was down to something closer to a hundred. Their formation was shaped like a teardrop—thick, where they drew near to him and tapered where the stragglers got hung up on the inert forms of their frozen brethren. Victor continued to lead them in a circular chase as he, once again, drew magma-attuned Energy from the air.

It seemed that, as long as he had even a tiny bit of blue ice Energy in his Breath Core if he started a breath attack with it, his Core would convert his magma-attuned Energy on the fly, bolstering his attack. Unfortunately, it didn’t seem to be a one-to-one conversion. Fueling his icy breath with mostly magma-attuned Energy drained his Core rapidly. It didn’t matter; Victor had everything he needed to keep recharging his Core, and the creatures were incredibly easy to lead on a merry chase.

As he worked, he contemplated the challenge of the second gate; it was a good trap, he supposed. The magma sprites were tough, and killing them with anything other than ice seemed nearly impossible. Still, if this dungeon had been designed for “groups,” what would the odds be that at least one member couldn’t produce a similar attack? He honestly didn’t know—would regular ice work? Was his attack only so effective because of the extreme coldness of his “blue ice?”

On the other hand, if the sprites were faster or had ranged attacks, it would have been a lot more difficult, even for Victor. As it was, he took his time, circling his growing garden of inert, seemingly dead sprites, dragging the living ones through it, getting them hung up, and blasting them with frozen breath whenever he had enough Energy. It took him nearly an hour, most of that time spent building up his Breath Core’s Energy, but he did it, whittling them down until, with a final blast of frigid air, he leached the smoldering, life-giving Energy from the final cluster of magma sprites.

He’d breathed his icy breath so many times that the ground was white with it. The temperature had plummeted on that side of the lava lake so much that the surface of the bubbling, roiling body of molten stone had solidified for nearly a dozen paces out from the shore. Victor stood, hands on knees, regaining his breath as the System confirmed his victory—thousands of motes of Energy began to gather around the basalt garden of dead, inert sprites. The Energy gathered into a great pool of shimmering white, luminescent liquid-like pools and then, in a rush, flowed toward Victor.

As before, he was struck dumb—blinded and deafened by the euphoria that sent his mind tripping through now-familiar scenes. Later, as his conscious thoughts began to reform, he thought he understood something about the visions, a sort of pattern. They all had to do with growth or strife or creation—great challenges overcome by tremendous forces or effort. It was the inkling of an idea, but it was there, tickling the back of his mind as his subconscious worked on it. When he opened his eyes, he found more System messages awaiting his attention:

*****Congratulations! You have achieved level 76 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.*****

*****Congratulations! You have increased your Breath Core's Rank: Advanced 6.*****

*****Congratulations! You have learned the Breath Weapon Mastery skill: Basic.*****

*****Congratulations! You have cleared the second gate of the Crucible of Fire! Collect your reward inside the gatehouse!*****

*****Congratulations! You have cleared the second wave of a group-rated challenge as a solo adventurer, earning a bonus to the value of your reward!*****

Victor initially celebrated another rapid level gain, but when he read the line about “breath weapon mastery,” he stood, dumbstruck for several seconds, trying to wrap his head around the idea. How had he only just now gained such a skill? Thinking about it, he realized that, despite knowing how to breathe magma for a good long while, he’d only done it a handful of times. He never used it during sparring because who would want to be bathed in magma? Even Lesh wasn’t fireproof.

In this battle, he’d crossed some invisible threshold of understanding, and the System had recognized his efforts. Searching the contents of his mind, thinking about “breath attacks,” he found new thoughts—things he’d “learned” via the System’s instantaneous delivery of knowledge. He understood better how to posture his chest, how to control his airflow, and how to properly feed the Energy in his Breath Core into the wind he exhaled. He understood that his natural form of “breath attack” was a cone but that there were other variants available if he’d only practice them.

“Holy shit,” he laughed, surprised by the sudden windfall of knowledge. Of course, his celebrations made him reconsider his dark musings about the System only hours earlier. Was it overbearing? Was it a leech? Or did it provide an opportunity for people to wield power that might have, otherwise, been hoarded by beings like Titans, Dragons, and the Fae, to name just a few of the “elder” races Victor had heard of? If nothing else, the reward reminded him that the System and its designs weren’t a simple matter of black and white.

As he walked toward the now-open gate, his thoughts of dragons brought his mind around to Tes. Had she been “against” the System? It didn’t feel like it to Victor. She’d mentioned that her homeworld, Aradnue, had driven the System away when it tried to insert itself into their affairs, but the dragons weren’t exactly at war with the System, were they? Wasn’t Tes working within the rules? Wasn’t she, in fact, a member of some group called the Celestial Envoys? She’d been careful to warn Victor about Elder magic, insisting he not share it, hadn’t she?

This book's true home is on another platform. Check it out there for the real experience.

Maybe that would be the path for him, too—apart from the System, but still working within it. Was it right to try to destroy something that benefited other people? Again, the questions only reminded Victor that he had a long way to go and a lot to learn before he declared war on the System. His actions in this dungeon, whatever they turned out to be, were a favor to an ancient, powerful being—nothing more. He chuckled as he lifted the lid to his second chest. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that, pendejo.”

Inside, he saw something that made him frown and nervously press a hand to the wyrm-scale hauberk Tes had crafted for him—put her own blood into. It was a breastplate, a piece of armor obviously finely made and practically humming with the Energy that thrummed through its dense material. Victor tentatively stretched out his left hand, touching the cool, deep blue-black surface. It was smooth and slick, reminding him of the paint on a fancy sports car; though it was clear the metal wasn't painted or enameled, the luxurious sheen was due to the material itself.

Gorget plates rose up on either side of the neck-hole, and around them and down the sides, the armor was lined with engraved and faintly glowing silver runes. Victor's studies with Dar—the many books the master had assigned him to read—finally paid off, allowing him to discern the import of those magical letters: they were enchantments for resizing, repair, and Energy absorption. It wasn't until Victor reached down to lift the breastplate out of the chest that its potency really sank home. He couldn't lift it with one arm.

Grunting with stubborn effort, he grasped the neck, sinking his fingers into the supple black leather of the lining, and pulled, only managing to tilt it up against the side of the chest. “What the hell?” The thing was heavier than Lifedrinker. Victor brushed his hands together and then grasped it by the armholes with both hands, heaving in a proper deadlift posture, and managed to pull the absurdly heavy armor out of the chest, staggering backward with the weight.

He had a feeling that, if he bonded with the thing, it would get easier for him to carry, but he'd stubbornly wanted to see if he could lift it. Thus, having proven himself, he sent a trickle of Energy into the shiny blue-black metal, and a System message crowded into his vision:

*****Aegis of Charyssor: Crafted from the discarded shell of Charyssor, an abyssal leviathan found in the depths of the Umbral Sea of Maersh, this armor has been painstakingly cut from one of the densest, most Energy-rich natural substances in the known universe. Originally designed for the Behemoth-King Dotra the Ever-hungry, it was stolen by the master thief Lonagan Heart and discarded into the Endless Pit of the Vas'ra Wasteland during the Entorridian Uprising. With Dotra's demise, the armor is free to be bonded by a new bearer. It is a living artifact, capable of growth, healing, and the consumption and dispersal of tremendous amounts of Energy.*****

Victor read the paragraph, still staggering from the weight in his arms, his eyebrows arching in surprise. He'd never read a System item description like it,

and it was clear that the artifact he held in his arms was special. What wasn't clear was whether he was even capable of wearing it. He knew he was strong, especially for his level, but even with Sovereign Will pumping his strength close to a thousand, he was struggling to hold the armor. It would be easier if he cast Iron Berserk, but he still doubted it would be bearable for more than a few minutes. He shook his head in dismay. Was he honestly going to have to set this thing aside until he got stronger?

Even as he contemplated it, he'd had to set the armor at his feet, unable to hold it even waist high any longer. If he somehow managed to wear it, he wasn't sure how long he could stand under its enormous downward pull—even berserk. "Well," he grunted, "at least I have something to look forward to." He reached down and sent the armor into his largest, high-quality dimensional container ring, the one he'd taken from Fak Loyle. Almost immediately, the ring grew hot on his finger, going from an elegant silver-colored band to red to orange to white-hot in seconds.

In a panic, Victor reached in and summoned the armor out, dropping it to the stone floor with a thunderous crash that dislodged stones from the gatehouse ceiling. "Chingado!" Victor punched his fist into his palm, then shook his hand as the ring rapidly cooled. He'd almost destroyed it! He stared at the armor where it sat on the crumbled stone pavers. There was no way he was going to leave it behind; it seemed like it was more than just a magic item; it was a legendary item. He reached to his chest, where the vault sat under his armor. "If it can hold the ivid royal jelly, then it can hold this armor. Right?"

When the empty air didn't provide an answer, Victor lifted the vault off his neck and backed out of the gatehouse. He set it on the field where he'd killed the magma sprites and twisted the key, allowing the vault to expand with its usual show of sparks, steam, and clacking, clicking hops. He'd never put something too powerful into a storage ring before, and, in a way, he was glad to see what would happen; at least he'd had a little warning before the ring blew up or collapsed or whatever it would do if it actually failed.

With that in mind, he comforted himself as he dragged the armor into the vault; he figured he'd have a few seconds to get it out if things went badly. With the armor leaned against the vault wall, opposite his satchel with the royal jelly, he stepped out and closed the door. He stood for several long minutes, watching the vault, his hand held against the side, waiting to see if it would warn him in any way that the contents were too potent to contain in its miniaturized state. Nothing happened, though, and Victor, holding his breath, turned the key, activating the vault's shrinking magic.

It seemed to contract at its usual rate, and Victor didn't notice any more steam or sparks than usual. When it stopped, and he picked up the marble-sized vault, it wasn't hot. Still, he held it for several minutes, and when nothing happened, he expanded it again, looking inside to reassure himself that his two most valuable treasures were still intact. After he'd shrunk it again and hung the marble and key back around his neck, Victor quietly thanked the invaders from Dark Ember for the powerful, Fae-crafted vault.

With that handled, Victor touched his hand to his wyrm-scale armor again, almost glad that he hadn't had to choose his new treasure over Tes's gift just yet. He strode through the gatehouse into

the third section of the “crucible” and stopped in his tracks, feeling like he was being watched despite the empty, black gravel road that stretched ahead, meandering through the strange canyon walls to the distant third gate. He narrowed his eyes, scanning the walls of the canyon and peering up into the impenetrable darkness of the dungeon’s “sky.” Nothing moved.

He continued forward, his boots crunching on the sharp obsidian gravel, and summoned Lifedrinker to his hands. It was almost funny to feel her weight, in comparison to the breastplate, and find her easy to wield. “Okay, chica, something’s out there. You ready for—”

Victor’s words were cut short as the road a dozen yards ahead of him exploded in a shower of stinging, razor-sharp, stony projectiles. He leaped backward, ducking his chin to protect his eyes as the shower continued. He heard his enemy before he saw it, a rough susurration, as scales slid over stone and then great hissing screeches as it tore out of the ground and slithered toward him. It was a wyrm—a big, red-scaled one with a crown of smoldering horns.

Victor didn’t need to think about it; he cast Iron Berserk instantly as he lifted Lifedrinker and got ready for the assault. The creature didn’t charge him, though; it didn’t try to clamp down on him with its jaws that could probably bite through a small passenger car. It reared up, trying to match Victor’s enormous height, and belched forth a massive cloud of black smoke followed by a hissing, crackling gout of fire. The flames hit Victor full in the chest, washing over him in a wave that felt oddly like standing in a hot shower.

In his fury, Victor laughed cruelly, baring his teeth and roaring into the wyrm’s fire. The poor creature couldn’t have known how ineffective its flame attack would be. How could it know that Victor had a magma-attuned Breath Core? How could it know that his titan bloodline was resistant to the elements? How could it know about his brush with fiery death and his acquisition of the Flame-Touched feat? How could it know that his armor was incredibly resistant to fire?

As the thing continued to belch forth a truly prodigious jet of flames, Victor lifted Lifedrinker high and cast Energy Charge, streaking into those flames and bringing the axe down with unimaginable force, splitting the wyrm’s horn-covered crown to tear through scaly hide and bone, to bury her blade into its enormous skull. Victor wasn’t sure if that was a wound a wyrm could normally live through, but Lifedrinker didn’t give it any chance to regenerate. She drew torrents of fiery Energy into herself as the wyrm collapsed, falling like a smoking, smoldering giant serpent from a King Kong movie.

Victor watched as the great corpse twitched and the light faded from its saucer-sized yellow eyes. It was dead. Before he could even wonder if there were more enemies en route, he saw the Energy gathering around the serpent’s body, and he knew he’d passed another obstacle. The System might not announce it yet, but it wouldn’t grant him Energy unless the fighting was over. “That was quick,” he commented as the surge of Energy slammed into him.