

Victor BK9: Ch35

Book 9: Chapter 35: Wyrms Dreams

When Victor recovered from his Energy infusion, he was almost surprised by the scant couple of System messages waiting for him:

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

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

“No level?” he chuckled, grunting as he pushed himself to his feet. He regarded the gigantic corpse of the wyrm at his feet. It wasn’t close to the size of the one he’d helped kill on Zaafor, but it was definitely no baby. He figured, from the tip of its fang-filled maw to the tapered point of its distant tail, the thing was seventy or eighty feet long. He might not have gained a level or any skill advancements from his quick battle with the thing, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t claim his own bonus reward.

Grinning, Victor summoned a sharp knife from his storage ring and ran his eyes over the lengthy corpse. “Where’s your heart, eh, hermano?” He got to work trying to find it, slicing lengthwise along a tough ridge of thick, scaly flesh between the wyrm’s under-scales and its much harder back scales. When he found the heart, something in his gut told him it was wrong, and that’s when he remembered that the great, ancient wyrm they’d slain on Zaafor had multiple hearts. Would it matter which one he ate? It felt like it would. He couldn’t verbalize the reason, but instinctually, he knew he had the wrong one.

So, nearly forty minutes later, Victor sat staring at not one but three bloody organs, one of which was a good deal larger than the others. “So, this was your first one, wasn’t it, hermano?” He had a vague memory of Tes explaining that Wyrms developed extra hearts as their bodies grew too large for one to circulate the blood properly. It didn’t quite make sense to Victor; when he doubled in size, so did his heart, but maybe it had something to do with the length of a wyrm’s body.

Shrugging, Victor picked up the big, glistening organ and contemplated storing it away. As he hefted it, though, sticky and lukewarm in his hand, his stomach rumbled, and a slow grin spread his lips. Without further ado, he bit into it, savoring the hot, coppery tang and the surge of Energy that seeped into his blood, even as he chewed the tough meat. It took him a few minutes to chew through all the tough meat—the heart was the size of a Christmas ham. Still, it was good, at least to

Victor's Quinametzin tastebuds, and when he swallowed the last bite, he could feel it churning in his gut, spreading its potent elixir of Energy, spirit, and secrets of the blood.

He took a staggering step back, his heel catching on the downed Wyrms, so he fell against it, sitting on the sharp, bloody obsidian, his back against the great creature's still-warm flesh. He tried to focus, instinctively resisting the pull of oblivion as a wave of tingling, itching, numbing sensation spread through his body, starting with his gut and working outward toward his extremities. His vision darkened, and a wave of exhaustion washed over him. Victor closed his eyes, succumbing to its embrace.

All he knew was hunger. All he knew was the need to fill his belly with something warm and bloody. He slid through dark passages, his body undulating, speeding him along with the contractions that rippled through the muscles under his scales. When the passage ended, he continued, ripping the soil with his breaker-horn, shoving aside rocks, and pushing through the dirt.

It was dark when he exploded into the open air, but his eyes were keen, made for a life hidden from the sun. He saw them below, hundreds of warm bodies, standing amid the tall, soft, cool grass. What a strange world! The air tickled his scales, and the lack of heat cooled his blood, but his Breath Core saw it reheated. He flicked forth his forked tongue, tasting the air, and his stomach clenched with desire when he caught a whiff of the creatures' blood.

He tore over the grass, sliding between tall, smooth-barked trees until he broke into the clearing where the warm creatures grazed. They caught wind of him, but too late. He spread his jaws and bit down, his great fangs sinking through hide and muscle, piercing organs and snapping bones. As the thing thrashed, bloody and broken in the grass, the wyrm—for he'd yet to earn a name—reared up and pumped the bellows of his Breath Core, sending a stream of orange and yellow flames down to cook the thing.

As the rest of the creatures fled, he crunched and swallowed the charred corpse, working the four-legged, stupid, but delicious thing into his throat. As he snapped his jaws back together, he turned, savoring the satisfying lump still working its way down to his stomach, and began to glide back the way he'd come; he'd seek out his lair and sleep, allowing his body to use the fuel he'd given it to build his strength.

Victor coughed, waking with a start. He shook his head, disoriented, but not for long. He recognized his surroundings and knew what had just happened: he'd dreamed a vision of the wyrm's former life. Before he could reflect on it much, he noticed System messages and focused his bleary eyes, reading them:

Congratulations! You have increased the rank of your Breath Core: Advanced 7.

Congratulations! You have gained a new feat: Wyrms Fervor.

Wyrms Fervor: When you slay a creature and cook its meat with your breath weapon, you create a special form of sustenance that will enhance your strength and aid your growth. This is a cumulative effect and will be most pronounced after significant milestones have been reached.

“Chingado!” Victor laughed as he cussed, shaking his head. “What a fucked-up System!” He looked around for Lifedrinker and picked her up, hefting her to his shoulder. “Did you hear that, chica? I guess I’m not done growing.”

“Good!”

Chuckling, he looked at the corpse and contemplated trying out his new feat, but he could see it was stone cold, and it didn’t appeal to him. His instincts were telling him the thing wasn’t fresh enough. How long had he been out? Frowning, he set Lifedrinker down and summoned forth Bryns Farscribe book. He flipped to the message he’d sent her and saw two replies:

Your Grace,

I appreciate your update, however curt it was. I’m sure you’re aware, but the mountain moved for the first time in decades, and Magus Florent and I have been fielding quite a few panicked messages from the queen’s people. I’ve assured them that you had nothing to do with the event. Since it seems to have calmed, I’m hopeful that our operation here will go unmolested by the queen or her agents. Your man, Trobban, has been hard at work disassembling the giant automaton. He’s rather thrilled with what he’s found thus far, though I’d be lying if I said I could repeat any of the specifics—I tend to tune such matters out.

Ever your loyal retainer,

Bryn Tama, Unofficial Executor of His Grace’s Orders

Victor snorted at the title she’d given herself but also resolved to give her some official authority in the duchy; he was asking a lot of her, so it only made sense that she should be able to back herself up with the weight of a proper title. His eyes narrowed as he let them drift down to the next message.

Your Grace,

We've not heard from you for a week now, and though the mountain is quiet and no horrors creep up from beyond the amber-ore wall, I must confess some worry. I do hope that you'll spare a moment to peruse this correspondence and deliver some small update. Thus far, the queen has only inquired about your progress once, and I fended her off with a rather clever response—that you were, indeed, progressing. I'm rather sure she's not happy with me, and I worry that her next request for information will be delivered in person.

You could be reading stolen content. Head to Royal Road for the genuine story.

With a heart ever-hopeful that I shouldn't be spending my time hunting for a new employer,

Bryn Tama, Unofficial Executor of His (missing) Grace's Orders

Victor laughed and summoned a pen, eager to respond:

Bryn,

I'm alive, and you still have a job. I was out of it for a short while there, but I'm good now. If the queen puts pressure on you, go ahead and tell her that the mountain was stirring because it wanted me to do something and that if I don't do it, there might be a much bigger rumble, if you get my meaning. Tell Trobban I'm looking forward to hearing about his progress. As for you, Bryn, keep up your excellent work. I'll see you rewarded for your efforts.

By the way, how long has it been since that last message? I lost track of the time while I was...out.

-Victor

Victor put the Farscribe book away and, while he was at it, looked guiltily at some of the others in the same container—his book with Valla, the one he shared with Olivia, the book Thayla had given him, the one for Dar, and the one he used to keep in touch with Edeya and the others on Sojourn. Those were only about half of the books he needed to read through, but he couldn't do it now. He had work to do. So, with a rather heavy sigh, he turned his attention away from the storage ring and picked up Lifedrinker. "Let's go look in our chest, chica."

“With luck, the dungeon’s ancient bounty will award us well!”

Victor thought about her words. He was surprised she hadn’t clamored for blood or battle. He voiced the other thought that came to mind: “You think maybe that’s why the monsters and the treasure have been worth a lot? ‘Cause the dungeon is old?”

“I know not how I have this understanding, but yes, blood-mate—this dungeon has languished unchallenged for long and long. Its denizens grew in age and power, and its treasures multiplied and compounded.”

Lifedrinker’s voice always strummed a chord in Victor’s heart that somehow put him at ease, even before a fight...or during one. He loved it when she was in a talkative mood, so as he walked to the third gate, he asked, “Do you feel like you understand a lot more since your evolution?”

“I think more. I feel more. I want more. More battle, more blood, more of your hands on me, more of your spirit mingling with mine. I want more metal and Energy! I yearn to be greater than I am. Together, we should slaughter all who stand before us, all who threaten those we love, all who dare to think of parting us!”

“Holy shit, Lifedrinker,” Victor was embarrassed to chuckle nervously at her fervor. He gripped her haft with both hands, keenly aware of her weight on his shoulder. “Listen, I want that stuff too, mostly, but there’s more to life than that, right? I know, as an axe made for war, you don’t really understand the concepts of things other than that, but maybe, well, think about what you saw me doing back when I didn’t carry you in a dimensional ring. I wish...I wish there were a way you could experience something other than fighting—”

“But I love to fight! I love to bathe in the blood of your foes! I love to feel your righteous fury course through me! I love our time together as we conquer fools who challenge your nature!”

“I know, I know, chica. That’s great, and I love you for all you’ve done for me, too. Let me think about this, though. I feel like there has to be more to your...development.”

“Think all you like, my gore-mate, my blood-heart. I will continue to dream of red rain and songs of terror.”

Victor didn’t respond, his mind too overwhelmed by the mix of emotions coming from the axe; she was happy and content but hungry for violence, and none of those feelings seemed wrong to him, which was another thing for him to contemplate. He suddenly wished intelligence was his highest

attribute. As he stepped into the gatehouse, he walked over to the chest, identical to the previous two, and lifted the lid, waving away the cloud of golden Energy mist that burst forth.

He almost laughed when he saw what sat within: a crown, obsidian-black and set with four hooked teeth or talons rising from the top edge, pointed slightly outward. When he reached into the chest to lift it out, it felt dangerously cold to the touch and strained his muscles with its weight. “What is it with this dungeon and heavy equipment?” Grunting with the effort, he held it up between his hands, inspecting the thing.

Its face was broad, probably the width of his giant-sized palm, and the inside was lined with supple black leather that, to Victor’s memory, seemed a lot like the lining of the breastplate he’d received in the previous chest. The face of the crown was worked in an angular pattern and set with seven black gemstones. At first, he hadn’t noticed them because their glossy surface matched the polished black sheen of the crown’s metal. It was a beautiful thing, sturdy though it was.

With a slight frown of apprehension, Victor trickled some Energy into the metal through his hand and read the System’s description:

Crown of the Dark Colossus: Forged in the fires of the World Heart of Tor-Bahl for the Colossus King, Brome, the metal of this crown is vester-steel tempered with dragon’s blood. Set with the fangs of Angra’lovis’brakaan, the dragon-born assassin whose blood was used to temper the steel, and adorned with umbral opals, this crown is rumored to greatly enhance the wearer’s strength, though only a mighty will can silence the whispers of Angra’lovis’brakaan’s mad spirit.

“What the hell?” Victor frowned, tilting the massive, heavy crown in his hands. Those were dragon’s teeth? It was tempered in dragon’s blood? Part of him found the prospect thrilling, while another was revolted. How would Tes react to such an artifact? Were dragons sentimental about such things? She’d sort of made a big deal about using her blood to craft his armor, hadn’t she? Or had she just said it was only fair, considering he’d given her some of his? As important as it was to him, the memory was a little foggy.

Victor wasn’t an idiot; he could see how this item seemed to go with the armor he’d received from the previous chest. If it could really “greatly enhance” his strength, maybe he’d be able to wear his new armor. Was his will high enough to deal with the whispers of a “mad spirit,” though? He didn’t want to try to find out in the middle of a dungeon with no one to back him up. With that decided, he took a few minutes to add the crown to his growing pile of treasures in the fae vault.

After he slipped the key and vault back around his neck, Victor picked up Lifedrinker and proceeded through the gate into the fourth section of the crucible. Again, caustic gas and smoke

filled the steamy air, and he saw another lake of magma stretching away into the dungeon's strange midnight canyon. This time, rather than tiny islands dotting the magma intended for someone to leapfrog across, the road continued, though it became a stone bridge where it met the lake.

The canyon had a bend about half a mile from where he stood, making it impossible for Victor to see the next gate, nor could he see any defenders. Remembering how the lava sprites had climbed out of the last lake and how the fire wyrm had exploded out of the ground, he readied himself just the same. He summoned his banner, ensured he was still bolstering his strength and vitality with Sovereign Will, and hefted Lifedrinker, holding her ready as he stalked toward the lakeshore.

Nothing attacked him on his way to the bridge, and when he stepped onto it, out of the rough, sharp gravel and onto dark basalt stones, nothing exploded out of the semi-solid surface of the magma lake. Victor chuckled—he'd expected to be swarmed when crossing the lake. With a deep breath of less-than-pleasant air, he started forward, crossing the molten surface under a haze of gasses and vapors. He idly wondered what the temperature was in that canyon and how bad the air would have been for a normal person.

Could he have even walked in this dungeon when he was new to Fanwath—a human with no Core? How different he was! How different his life was! Could he ever have imagined that he'd be striding over a bridge crossing a lake of magma, carrying an axe that a pickup truck would struggle to haul? He laughed, and his voice echoed oddly over the molten lake. If he saw himself now, bigger than any NFL linebacker could ever dream, wearing armor that bullets couldn't touch, flickering with flames like some kind of hell-born warrior, his old self would have shit himself.

As he walked, the rest of the canyon, up to the next gate, slowly revealed itself, and Victor saw that an expansive open area stretched out from the lake shore, and an army stood there, arrayed for battle. They weren't monstrous humanoids like at the first gate. No, these beings looked far more formidable. They were humanoid in shape, but they weren't misshapen or stricken with seemingly random mutations. These figures were lithe and graceful in their movements—tall, angular, and dark, their flesh glinting like polished black glass.

He figured they were all between ten and fifteen feet in height, but their arms and legs were long and lean, their hooked fingers resting on the ground as they stood ready. A thousand smoldering red eyes stared at him as he stopped and took in the sight of the army. They wore no equipment, but it didn't look like they'd need any; their hook-like fingers looked like they could rend steel, and their skin looked harder than metal.

As he stood there, wondering if he should lure them onto the bridge so he wouldn't have to face so many at once, he heard something behind him, the click of stone on stone, and whirled to see, halfway between him and the far shore, another army of the dark figures advancing. As he watched,

slowly nodding, his mind grappling with the challenge before him, stone rumbled, and a hundred cave openings appeared in the canyon walls. Glowering red eyes tracked him from their depths. “Shit,” he breathed.

Congratulations! You have reached the fourth gate of the Crucible of Fire! Survive the obsidian lurker ambush!