

Victor BK9: Ch36

Book 9: Chapter 36: Lifedrinker's Bite

Victor existed in a haze of mad fury and a blind need for destruction. His consciousness had narrowed to a pinpoint focus on the world in front of him and the target of his axe. Besides rage, the only other emotion that brushed the surface of his waking mind was wild, cruel glee as he slaughtered one foe after another. If he could step outside himself and watch the destruction he wrought, he might have been stunned by the carnage. He moved like a piece of construction equipment—a backhoe or bulldozer or excavator—ponderous and unstoppable as he waded through the hordes of obsidian lurkers.

Lifedrinker's razored, glass-smooth blade glowed white-hot with her matching fury and battle lust, and as she bit through each gemstone-hard lurker carapace, the sound of her rending echoed through the canyon like the screams of dying angels. The lurkers felt no pain. They didn't cry out or stop fighting as Lifedrinker took their limbs—they pressed the fight, scrambling over each other for a chance to stab their diamond-hard hooked talons into Victor.

When the battle started, Victor wasn't so incensed, so incapable of strategy. He'd cast Iron Berserk and gotten to work on the hordes of monstrous creatures, using his Energy Charge and Flight of the Lava King whenever they were off cooldown to keep from being swarmed. Even so, each engagement resulted in stabs and gashes, and with the very first wound, his Furious Battle Momentum began the countdown to his unshackled, mindless fury.

And so it went, for minutes and minutes, Victor battled, and inch by inch, he lost his mind. With each hard claw that punched through his wyrm-scale vest, more rage surged into the special pathway that ran parallel to his other one, mingling with his blood, his bones, and his very cells, driving him wild with anger. His thick hide leggings could slow the piercing, grabbing claws, but not enough to keep his flesh whole. Blood flowed, and Victor screamed, and the battle raged on.

Despite his madness, Victor kept to the bridge. He didn't need to chase his foes because they came to him, a never-ending tide of heaving, thrashing, clawing, long-limbed, silently menacing foes. His blows were wild and powerful, his axe like a bladed wrecking ball as he stood and cleaved, throwing bodies and parts of bodies over the sides of the bridge into the barely liquid magma-filled gorge. The piles of obsidian-fleshed corpses mounted upward, macabre tributes to the destruction he wrought.

Despite his strength and speed, his wounds added up, and though his rage-fueled regeneration mended his cuts and his armor worked to repair itself, his Core drained at a steady rate. If he'd had the mind to wonder, he might have been worried about what would happen when his Core ran dry.

His Furious Battle Momentum wasn't something he controlled—that tendril of rage-attuned Energy flowed into its pathway regardless of his desires—but what would happen if there was no more rage to pull?

As the count of his defeated foes climbed into the hundreds and Victor's frenzied swings became so fast that even Lifedrinker, in all her thousands of pounds of impossibly dense metal, cut the air in a blur, the Paragon of the Axe showed its first ghostly visage. Lifedrinker's blows began to land against foes lined up behind the front row of Victor's aggressors. As she cleaved a row of lurkers physically, the paragon did its psychic damage to the poor wretches behind them. With each mighty, lightning-fast sweep of his great axe, Victor demolished a dozen or more of his enemies.

The press of obsidian bodies grew less intense as he swept the bridge before him clear, hacking, turning, hacking, and so on. Hunks of his foes flew through the air, their black, ichor-like blood spewing into the air to fall like a dark, tacky rain that sizzled and popped on the magma lake's surface. Steam filled the air, and Victor's maniac grin widened as he advanced along the bridge.

His armor hung in shreds, too torn to rapidly mend. His body was drenched in sweat, blood, and the steam of his foes' blood. His flesh was whole, however, and the drain on his Core had lessened now that the Paragon of the Axe was with him. That ghostly blade, echoing Lifedrinker's white-hot shape, stretched out, effortlessly slicing through the lurkers that dared to crowd closer or failed to retreat as he pushed forward. Lifedrinker's reach was enormous in his titanic grip, but the paragon added another ten feet.

As he whipped Lifedrinker in cutting arcs, he decimated the foes before him. When he felt them crowding close, he'd whirl, acting on pure battle instinct, and hack her in a great cleave that slaughtered tens of the things. The vile, murderous lurkers had ceased their endless streams out of the caves, and, for the first time, their numbers began to dwindle as Victor pushed toward the distant gate.

If he could speak or understand the question, Victor wouldn't have an answer to why he fought toward the gate; perhaps some instinct drove him, some fighting desire to constantly press the attack. He was like a rabid panther set loose among similarly wild-eyed rats. The obsidian lurkers knew no fear and didn't hesitate in their relentless desire to rip Victor to shreds, but each time they were close enough, Victor swiped them away, torn to pieces.

The fight went on and on, and after a time, Victor reached the end of the bridge and pushed into the dwindling lines of lurkers, gaining a foothold on the solid ground before the gate. He didn't have to chase after enemies to fight; they kept coming—meat into a grinder. It wasn't until his rage began to fade and fresh-born lucidity blossomed in his mind that Victor realized he was still hacking his axe, though no further foes advanced. He turned in a slow circle and surveyed the carnage. Thousands of corpses littered the field or burned on their pyres—great heaps of the hard-fleshed creatures piled high on the semi-solid surface of the magma lake.

Some still twitched; one nearby clung to life and tried to crawl toward him, using its pointed hook fingers to drag its severed body forward. Victor stomped its hard skull, grinding it like the shell of a coconut into the stony ground. He spat, realizing some gore clung to his lips, and wiped his face on his forearm, only to smear more gore across his cheek. He looked down at himself, at his still-shredded pants and armor drenched in black filth. He hoped his armor would recover and clean itself, but his flesh beneath was hopelessly soiled.

Victor walked through the carnage until he came to a relatively clean section of the gravel road. There, he retrieved a barrel of water and some towels from his storage container and prepared to clean himself. Even as he pulled off his damaged armor, though, the System finally acknowledged his victory. A tremendous rush of Energy knocked him off his feet, lifting him into the air, driving his muscles into rigidity and his mind into senseless wandering.

He experienced a familiar cascade of visions, the kind that always flooded his mind when struck by an overwhelming surge of Energy: mountains erupting, planets forming and colliding, shadowy figures locked in titanic struggles—how he knew what each meant, he couldn't say; he simply understood. Though the scenes were like those he'd seen before, each was distinct, and this time, something new emerged toward the end. He saw a landscape of pastoral beauty, a hillside blanketed in lush, green grass. Resting there, bathed in sunlight, was a blue-tinted dragon—scales bright and metalline. Her golden eyes shifted upward to meet his, shining with a glint of recognition.

When he came to himself, it was like waking from a deep, restful slumber; he knew he'd dreamed of something meaningful but struggled to recall it. Victor traced the fragments of his memories, trying to pull the images into his conscious mind's eye, but he only saw pieces—snatches of color, feelings, and impressions. Had he dreamed of someone he knew? He thought for certain he had. He was sure it had been someone he missed, someone he wanted to see again, though he couldn't quite put his finger on who it had been. "Valla?" he wondered aloud, but it didn't feel right.

With a mental shrug, he looked to the System messages crowding his vision:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 77 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.

Congratulations! Your feat, Challenger, has been upgraded! New Feat: Unyielding Challenger.

***Unyielding Challenger: Time and time again, you have not only faced powerful foes but held your ground against entire armies, emerging victorious through sheer will and skill. The strength of

your aura has become a force of nature, radiating defiance that breaks the spirits of those who stand against you. Effect: Enemies within range of your aura will feel the weight of inevitable defeat more keenly, further reducing their resistance to fear and causing those of lesser power to hesitate or falter when facing you alone.***

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

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

Victor stood and stretched, smiling at what he'd read. After finishing what he'd started with the barrel of water, rinsing himself thoroughly, he picked up Lifedrinker and hefted her onto his shoulder. Though he wasn't berserk, she felt more manageable in his hands and didn't pain his shoulder as her tremendous weight pressed down on him. He'd gained a few levels, and each one gave him nine strength and fourteen vitality; it added up. Grinning, still feeling good thanks to his dreams and the good news from the System, he walked over to the gatehouse and approached his fourth chest.

If he'd known the battle experience and loot that awaited him in the dungeon, Victor wouldn't have needed any sort of quest from a primordial titan to enter. How could he complain about gaining levels, treasure, and feats? Chuckling, he lifted the lid and waited for the Energy mist to fade. Looking inside, he saw a single object, a bottle with dark green glass. He lifted it out, palming it, figuring it was about the size of a beer bottle. To his surprise and delight, it bore a label affixed to the cork stopper:

Concentrated distillate of a Qo'lorian Essence Drifter—Drink to gain a permanent boost to one or more attributes.

“Nice!” Victor almost pulled the stopper and tilted it into his mouth immediately, but he paused, rethinking the action. If it was a significant boost, and judging by his other awards in the dungeon, he figured it probably was, it might knock him out for a while—days or weeks, even. “Better save it.” Wincing and ready to pull it back immediately, he carefully sent it into his storage ring. The ring immediately began to heat up, so he yanked it out.

While it was irritating to have to go through the process of putting it into his vault, the fact that his ring couldn't hold it portended good things about the “distillate.” So, with a cheerful demeanor, he

activated his vault, stowed his new treasure away, and then closed it up. He secured it around his neck, some deeply buried part of him thrilling at the idea of his growing hoard.

With a sigh and a stretch, he stepped toward the gate but paused to examine his armor. His pants had recovered, and so had his wyrm-scale vest. He ran his fingers over the scales, pressing and tugging on them. They seemed fine, but how many times could they regenerate? Was it an infinite process, or were they growing slightly weaker with each repair? He wished he could ask Tes about it. The thought brought to mind a faint memory—a great blue dragon in the sun—and suddenly Victor remembered his dream. “I saw her.” His voice was hushed, a whisper, but Lifedrinker heard him.

“Who, war-heart?”

“Tes. I think I saw her when I leveled—when the Energy overwhelmed me.”

“The one who hid her teeth as she guided you through the wastes?”

Victor snorted, smiling. “Yeah, that was her.”

“She liked me, battle-love. She said I was special—would that she could see me now!”

“Yeah, she’d be impressed, chica. For sure.” Victor patted Lifedrinker’s haft and then stepped through the gate. The distance to the next gate was much shorter than the previous ones. He could see it across a barren plain of rocky, broken obsidian shards. Of course, he could also see its defender. The metallic warrior reminded Victor of the automaton he’d destroyed outside the amber-ore wall. There were distinct differences, however.

This being didn’t strike Victor as being a construct. To Victor, it looked very much like a gigantic, metal human man. It didn’t have seams at its joints, nor did the expression on its shiny gray face look devoid of emotion. Its gleaming black eyes traced Victor’s movements, and a scowl creased its metallic forehead, drawing its brow down as it snarled. It was titanic in size, something between twenty or thirty feet tall, and powerfully built. The giant stepped forward and stretched out an arm from which a blazing spear of light erupted, stretching to a length of twenty or thirty feet, flickering with the potent charge of its Energy.

“Mano a mano, eh, pendejo

?” Victor grinned as he channeled Energy into Iron Berserk. His form exploded with size and power, and in seconds, he stood, eye to eye, facing the metal giant over the length of the battlefield. He took a single step, and the System chimed in:

Congratulations! You have reached the fifth gate of the Crucible of Fire! Defeat the Iron Colossus to advance!

Victor hoped the description was accurate. He hoped the thing was made of iron; Lifedrinker would cut it like butter. In a way, the defender reminded him of Lira, Ronkerz’s Big One, who’d clad herself in a gigantic metal shell. Lifedrinker hadn’t been effective against her, but that was before she’d grown, before she’d absorbed the “soul ore” and massively increased her...mass. “Okay, chica. Time to show this big metal asshole how you can bite.”

“Yes!” she practically screamed. “Yes, blood-heart! War-mate! Let us test my edge!”

Grinning, Victor cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, and as the clarity of its wonderful Energy washed over him, he crouched into a battle stance and stalked toward his enemy. The colossus moved, and it wasn’t slow or ponderous. It leaped forward and to the left, significantly closing the distance between them. As Victor shifted to square off with it again, the thing pivoted and bolted into a charge, its great metal feet thunderously pounding into the hard gravel surface.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker, contemplating how to parry a spear of pure light, but even as the colossus closed to a mere fifty feet, it lunged, and the spear shot forth, lengthening to close the gap and punching into Victor’s chest, just beneath his left collarbone. It had been aiming for his heart! The pain was enormous; it seared his flesh like no fire could. When the shaft of light recoiled, shortening to its regular length, the colossus raised it high, readying another blow.

The entire attack took less than a heartbeat, less than a single inhalation. The speed of the graceful metal giant combined with the lightning flash of the spear’s attack was enough to confound any attempt to parry the blow, but Victor was no slouch, and he knew what he was up against now. As his titanic constitution and berserk regeneration worked to reverse the damage to his chest, he braced Lifedrinker before him and cast Energy Charge, fueling the spell with inspiration-attuned Energy.

When he streaked over the ground, closing the gap between them in a flash, Victor was confident that he’d strike his foe; had any enemy managed to dodge his charge? He was too focused to dig through his memories of countless fights, but he didn’t think so. It was with some shock, then, that he realized the colossus wasn’t standing where it should be, and he tore over the empty gravel-strewn field. When his charge ended, he whirled, only to be stabbed again, this time right in the center of his stomach. The pain was enormous, and he faltered for a moment, stumbling to his knees as the shaft of burning light burned through his spine.

Such a blow would have ruined most fighters; how could a man fight with his spine severed? It wouldn't be easy, certainly, but Victor didn't have to figure it out. He'd barely inhaled to roar his fury when his incredible regeneration reknit his spinal cord, and he leaped to his feet, his fury mounting by the second. This time, as he sprinted toward his foe, he watched that spear, and as it lanced out again, Lifedrinker's mirrored black blade deflected the shaft of light, and she screamed her pride and bloodlust.

The colossus drew its spear back, ready to launch another blazing attack, but Victor had closed the distance, and Lifedrinker was already arcing out in an upward-angled backswing. Her brilliant, white-hot edge met the colossus at the hip, and she tore through the fabric of his being like a hatchet through an aluminum can. Light exploded from the rend, blazing forth with burning intensity, and Victor had to use Titanic Leap to launch away from the burning plume.

As he sailed backward, he watched the colossus stagger, its Energy bursting forth like air from a balloon, and then it stopped, and Victor could see that its right leg, the one Lifedrinker had cut, had gone inert, like solid, dead iron. The rest of the colossus was still vibrant, still alive, and it took a step with its good leg, dragging the other as it rotated to put Victor in its sights. It drew back its spear, tracing Victor as he descended from his leap, and launched another lance-like stab.

Victor, mid-air, focused on the colossus's waist and activated Flight of the Lava King, streaking down beneath the arc of the spear's lance of light. He flew through the air, trailing flames and black smoke as he crashed into the colossus, his shoulder smashing into its rock-hard stomach. It might have hurt if the thing didn't move, but it did, toppling back like an unsecured light pole, crashing onto the ground with an earth-shaking clang. One thing about Victor: he wasn't one to hesitate to press an advantage in a fight. The colossus bounced once, and then Lifedrinker was buried in its chest, slamming it into the ground.

As light exploded from the massive tear, Victor leaped backward, out of the burning rays, and watched as Lifedrinker began to thrum and vibrate, drawing that explosion of Energy into herself, stifling the leak, and singing her bloody war cries as she tore the vital force from the colossal being. "Hell, yes! Get it, chica!" Victor roared, his voice hoarse with rage, his mouth frothing as he worked to control the effects of his Furious Battle Momentum.

He still had his mind, and the fight was well and truly over, so it didn't take long for the rage to bleed from his pathways. When Lifedrinker stopped vibrating, and the entire colossus was dull, dead metal, he reached for her haft and pulled her out, widening the cut in the strange giant's metal. Lifedrinker's blade throbbed with veins of blinding light, and he knew it would be a while before she processed her massive feast.

Victor only had a moment to wonder if the fight was truly over, if there would be another defender of the gate before he saw an enormous puddle of glittering, ghostly-white Energy orbs begin to bubble up out of the colossus's metallic form. The sight answered his question—the fight was done, and he was about to get knocked out again.