

Victor BK9: Ch37

Book 9: Chapter 37: Horde

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

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

Victor blinked, reaching up to rub his eyes as he read the notifications. Was that his first victory in the dungeon that didn't result in a level? He supposed it had to slow down at some point, but he couldn't help but feel a slight twinge of disappointment. With a grunt, he pushed himself to his feet and regarded the cold, iron corpse of the fifth gate's defender. It looked smaller, somehow pitiful, in its inert, lifeless state. With a shrug, Victor picked up Lifedrinker and stalked toward the open gate.

As he walked, thoughts of his most recent visions crowded his mind. He hadn't seen Tes again, had he? As always, the memories of his visions were far less vivid than he'd like, but he was left with the impression of colossal trials being overcome. Was the System responsible for the strange dreams? Were his ancestors guiding his mind as it was touched by torrents of rich Energy? Were the things he saw just random, or were they messages buried in his blood, in the fabric of his DNA?

Sometimes, he felt like his mind was loose, ripping through the cosmos and experiencing things and places incomprehensibly distant from where he'd left his body. Sometimes, he also felt like the distance was even further—separated from his current reality by not just space but also time. Victor had heard people speak in terms of the “universe,” and he'd heard people offhandedly pluralize that word, speaking as though there were multitudes. Were there more than one? Did they exist on different timelines, or were they separated by some fabric of reality he couldn't perceive? Could people move between them? Had he?

“The same old question,” he sighed, reminding himself that he'd get nowhere down that line of thought. He'd chased it to too many dead ends when he'd learned about Olivia and the timeline of the people from First Landing, which forced him to view his abuela and his time on Earth as something that happened hundreds of years ago. But if they were from different timelines... Victor shook his head. “Focus on the now,” he sighed, stepping toward his latest reward chest.

He rested Lifedrinker against the wall of the gatehouse. She'd been quiet, but he wasn't surprised; the evidence of the enormous feast she was processing still flickered in her mirrored black surface—spider webs of brilliant solar Energy, throbbing and flaring. Victor flipped the chest open, and

when the Energy mist cleared, he frowned, initially thinking the chest was empty. When he leaned closer, though, he saw a black, silken package on the bottom, blending with the shadows.

Victor tried to lift it out, but the hard, rectangular object inside the silk wrapping resisted his efforts. Victor's fingers found the edge of the wrapping and pulled it away, heaving as the material beneath the object slowly slid free. Setting the silk aside, he looked again and saw a brick of red, silver-veined metal sitting on the bottom of the chest. It was the second brick of ore he'd received from the dungeon, though it was far heavier than the silver-hued one he'd gotten from the first gate.

Victor refused to be bested by something so small; he wrapped his hands around it, heaving with his back to pull it out of the chest. Grunting, he shrugged and curled his arms, lifting it to his chest to look down at the metal, wondering if there were any clues to its nature or origin. No engravings or labels met his eyes, so he set it down until he could take a minute to open his vault. He had a feeling that such dense, Energy-rich ore wouldn't sit well in one of his lesser storage devices.

As he worked, Victor thought about the two bricks of ore he'd received in the dungeon. Surely, they were meant as rewards meant to be versatile to adventurers—they could be crafted into armor, weapons, jewelry, and even art. But Victor had another use in mind, and he gave it away with glances he stole at Lifedrinker, leaning against the wall. She'd feasted on Energy aplenty since her evolution, but was she still hungry for metal? What would she do with these new materials?

He wanted to find out, but a small part of him also worried that she'd become too unwieldy for him—that he wasn't ready for her to advance too much yet. This latest piece of metal was nearly as heavy as the soul ore he'd given her back on Sojourn. Would she gain so much weight, or could she shed some of her less potent material? Could she alter the nature of the materials she absorbed? He had no idea. As he hung his vault key around his neck, Victor walked over to the axe and hefted her to his shoulder. "I'll ask you about it when you're more talkative. Maybe you know more, now that you've done it once."

"Mmm."

"Heh," Victor chuckled and stepped outside the gate, fixing his eyes on the next section of the crucible. The dungeon's canyon walls widened before him, stretching to the point where a mile or more of space lay between them. In the distance, Victor could see the sixth wall and gate—just a thin dark band on the distant horizon, and between him and it was arrayed a vast, dark army.

The first rank was probably a quarter of a mile distant, and Victor, counting by tens, could estimate their number at two hundred. Two hundred in the first rank, and behind them were hundreds more ranks—Victor couldn't be sure because they grew tiny with the distance, but he thought there had to be four or five hundred. Adding the zeroes together, he chuckled, shaking his head. "A hundred thousand?"

He didn't fully step out of the gate; he wasn't sure he was ready for such a challenge. Instead, he dug around in his rings for the weird little scope he'd gotten during the conquest for the Untamed Marches—something he'd failed to use so many times that it was almost funny to try to think of them. The thought made him laugh, chagrined as he scolded himself. He lifted the scope to his eye. "Wouldn't it be nice to know how tough your enemies are sometimes, you pendejo?"

The view the scope presented to him brought more humor to his heart. The enemies in that first row of the enormous army were skeletons. Undead creatures in dark, tattered armor, with rotten flesh hanging from their bones. Their eyes glowed with baleful red light, but each was limned with a green aura; the scope was saying they were all well beneath him. Lowering the glass and sending it into storage, Victor still hesitated. A hundred thousand! Even if he killed each enemy with a single blow, could he even swing Lifedrinker that many times?

As he envisioned the battle and thought about how long it would take and how much Energy he'd have to conserve, he couldn't keep the smile from returning to his lips over and over. To say he'd fought an army of a thousand was one thing. He'd done it more than once now. To say he stood before a hundred times that many? The grin pulled at his cheeks, a hungry gleam in his eyes to match it. "So I won't cast any spells. I'll let my Battle Momentum do its work.

He figured if he reserved the Energy in his core for the rage generated by the ability, it would last a very long time. Victor was certain of one thing: he wouldn't be turning around. Accepting that fact, he lifted Lifedrinker and stepped through the gate.

Congratulations! You have reached the sixth gate of the Crucible of Fire! Defeat the undead horde to advance!

Victor heard a distant rumble and, at first, thought the dungeon would throw him a curveball, adding in some artificial storm or lightning. It took him a minute to realize the host before him was marching, a great cloud of dust lifting into the air above them. They weren't going to wait for him to come to them. "All right. Let's do this!"

He stalked forward, wondering when he'd begun to accept the inevitability of injury and pain without a second thought. He understood he'd be wounded; his strategy was banking on it. How else could he get his Furious Battle Momentum to kick in, enhancing his strength and speed to the point where he could possibly consider a battle against such overwhelming odds? Those skeletal warriors might be beneath him, but green was different from gray—they were strong enough to register.

As they grew closer, he saw them running, saw their long, skeletal limbs, and realized they were all giant-sized. For the first time, a sliver of doubt entered Victor's heart—how prideful must he be to think he could face down a hundred thousand giant skeletons? Had he lost his mind? He glanced over his shoulder, saw the closed gate, and laughed; his chance for rational behavior was gone. "Fuck it," he growled and lifted Lifedrinker high, charging forward to meet the endless-seeming sea of foes.

As he closed the distance, the thunder of the tens of thousands of stomping feet under massive, bony bodies clad in all manner of armor was enough to drown out even Victor's titanic roar as he broke his promise with himself and cast Energy Charge to start the battle. On a trail of cloudy, purple-black, smoky shadows, he streaked toward the front line of undead, and the resultant impact utterly shattered half a dozen of the fiends. Those six, exploding into bone fragments and broken, shattered gear, destroyed another twenty and knocked back a hundred, leaving Victor standing alone, chest heaving, Lifedrinker poised, for nearly five heartbeats before the horde fell on him.

The undead were big and strong and never grew tired, but they were fragile compared to Victor's titanic figure. Lifedrinker exploded them effortlessly, though the effort of swinging her was likely to take a toll on his muscles, eventually. Victor's vitality was over twelve hundred with his various boosts, though, and he felt like he could run a marathon up the slopes of Mount Olympus at a sprint and still have energy left over. Even so, could he fight a hundred thousand foes? He shook the thought aside, allowing his mind to drift and willing his fury to take over.

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When he'd fought the reaver army in the Untamed Marches, Victor used all of his abilities. He ran himself dry and would have succumbed if not for his ancestor's fire. He knew he had to be smart if he was going to fight a hundred times that many foes. He had to leave his Core full and let it slowly feed the rage into his pathways as Furious Battle Momentum called for it. His passive regeneration was enormous, thanks to his prodigious will, but even so, eventually, the ability would run him dry. He just hoped he'd finish the undead before then.

At first, the weight of the waves and waves of giant skeletons was too much. He'd cleave with Lifedrinker, but as the axe swung out, shattering five or six foes, twenty more would fill in, piling on him, pounding, stabbing, grabbing, and biting. Victor would take fifty or more wounds before he could throw them off with another enormous swing. None of the injuries were severe, nothing he couldn't recover from in a handful of seconds, but they triggered his Furious Battle Momentum, flooding him with rage.

This happened five, ten, twenty times, and then something changed. Lifedrinker began to do more than cleave or dismember the undead; she began to explode them. Victor's strength and speed had

mounted to the point where it was a matter of simple physics—a multi-ton implement of war was impacting heavy, dense things at speeds that obliterated anything in her path. Each swing didn't just cut through bone; it reduced the undead to clouds of dust and fragments, sending shockwaves that rippled outward, staggering those further back.

The ground trembled with each impact, and the force of Victor's strikes sent shattered remnants flying through the air, piercing and scattering the ranks before they could close in. Lifedrinker was no longer just an axe in his hands—she was a force of devastation. No longer did the hordes close in before he could swing again; Victor had to stand ready, his vision lost in the blood-red insanity of his momentum, waiting for the untouched lines to climb over their staggered, broken comrades to attempt to swarm him again.

This carried on for a time, but Victor had lost all sense of strategy and didn't bother to clear his flanks. He simply drove forward, pushing himself into the surging sea of the undead until they began to close in around him. Once he couldn't destroy all his nearby foes with a single swing, they began to fly at him from the sides and rear. They drove spears into him, punched knives through his armor, and pounded heavy maces against his helmet, his back, and his shoulders.

Victor screamed an endless warcry, his eyes alight with smoldering red flames, his mouth frothing with bloody saliva, his corded muscles standing out like coiled anchor chains. Black smoke drifted from his figure as he grew ever more incensed, a mindless killing machine. Lifedrinker answered the heat building from his fury and his impossible physical activity; she blazed white-hot, further magnifying the terrible explosive impacts of her booming sweeps through the air.

Bone dust ignited in the air, filling the canyon with black smoke. When Victor staggered from a blow mid-swing, and Lifedrinker impacted the stony ground, it may as well have been a meteor strike for all the damage it did. Rock fragments erupted from the resultant crater, vaulting up and out to tumble into the horde, smashing more of the undead. All the while, Victor roared and screamed until he tore his vocal cords and blood flecked his heaving exhalations.

He fought his way through the horde once, and when they were all at his back, his madness forced him to turn and charge into them again. That first passage through the sea of undead took him hours. The second, back to the start of his mad battle, was much quicker—a few dozen minutes. Even so, Victor was constantly beset, surrounded, stabbed, hammered, bitten, and his rage increased.

If he knew anything other than a need to kill and destroy, he might have begun to wonder if his body could take much more. He might have wondered if his Core was running low, and if it wasn't—if it kept feeding the fury that continued to build his speed and power—could he take it? How fast

could he swing a weapon like Lifedrinker without ripping his arms from his torso? How much rage-attuned Energy could swell his muscles and bones before they came apart at an atomic level?

Whatever the answers to those unasked questions might be, Victor had no such worries. Most of what made him “Victor” was gone—unconscious—drifting through a dreamlike haze, unaware of the toll on his body or the cataclysmic forces roiling through it. The part of him that existed in the dungeon, that drove his body, had but one desire, one goal: destroy everything. And so he did. He waded through the horde again and again, each time more quickly and more easily.

By the end, when he swung Lifedrinker at the final cluster of undead giants, the impact of her blade exploded them into fiery showers of bone dust. Nothing remained of them. Even after they were gone, Victor fought on, his madness utter and complete. He smashed his axe into the ground and against the canyon walls. He even waded back and forth across the battlefield, pulverizing the bits of skeleton that weren’t already dust. The only thing that saved him was the nature of his momentum; it wouldn’t increase if he didn’t take damage. As his wounds healed and he burned off the rage in his system, Victor slowly returned to himself.

When his consciousness fully returned, Victor looked around to see himself sitting atop a mound of bones and broken armor in a devastated wasteland. Craters and trenches filled the battlefield. Piles of rubble lay everywhere. The canyon walls were slumped and broken up like there had been landslides, and the ruination of the undead horde was utter and complete. Not a single skeleton remained intact. Not a single skeleton remained half intact.

Lifedrinker’s haft sat in his hand, her axe-head on the ground before him. She was cool to the touch, but he could see from the molten ripples on the stone where she rested that she’d been very hot indeed when he’d stopped fighting. Victor looked at himself; his armor was mostly intact, but many large rends still struggled to close. His hands were black with soot and blood—his own—but he wasn’t hurt. When he stood, his knees and hips were stiff, but only for a moment. How long had he sat, waiting for his mind to return?

“How long—” He started to ask his question aloud but stopped when he saw the System messages crowded to the side of his vision. Had he swiped them aside in his madness? He focused on them, pulling them into view:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 79 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 18 strength, 28 vitality, 18 agility, and 18 dexterity.

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

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

Victor blinked. Gaining two levels was great, but...was this the first time he'd been so mad with rage that an Energy infusion after a battle hadn't sobered him? How far gone had he been? He squeezed Lifedrinker's haft. "Chica, do you know how long I fought? How long I was out of it?"

"Our dance of death and destruction was glorious, blood-mate! Long did we tear the life force from our foes! We fought on and on, ruining the fools who thought to overwhelm you with their numbers. Like ants into a fire, they fed us! I only wish they'd had blood, my battle-love. What glory to wade through a lake of it! Time isn't easy to mark in this strange, sunless place. But, blood-heart, I processed the metal man's Energy, which should have taken me days."

Victor licked his lips, a sudden cool shiver licking the back of his neck. He summoned his Farscribe book for Bryn and flipped to the last message he'd sent. There was a new one beneath it:

Your Grace,

Her Majesty, Queen Kynna Dar, has requested your presence. She's scheduled your next duel, and the meeting for terms will take place fifteen days hence. Please contact us as soon as possible to confirm your receipt of this message.

Your humble servant,

Bryn

"Shit!" Victor summoned a pen, but when he turned the page to write a response, he saw another message from Bryn.

Your Grace—Victor,

The queen's new chamberlain was watching me write that last message, so I couldn't add a few details. There are people here. The queen's people have set up a camp and brought in Elementalists to assess the situation beyond the amber-ore wall. I've been able to fend them off, warning them that you'll be furious if they interfere with your activities, but as the days pass and we don't hear

from you, the queen grows increasingly impatient, and her servants here grow more and more bold. Please respond! Your duel is in four days! There are rumors among the servants that come and go—some say that Queen Kynna has reached out to her new stable of champions and is interviewing for the best candidate to face Lovania’s champion.

I will be watching this page, Victor, until the last possible moment. Please respond!

Bryn

“Shit, shit!” Victor repeated, then quickly scrawled a reply.

Bryn, you there?

A response immediately appeared.

Victor? Thank the gods!

Victor smiled, then wrote the only question that mattered:

How much time do I have? I was out of it again.

The response sent his mind spinning:

Three days!

Victor exhaled loudly, blowing his stress with the breath. He stretched his neck, popping it, then wrote:

I’m almost done in here. Tell those fuckers to stay out, or they might bring the mountain down on us all, and I think I’m the only one who might survive that. The mountain doesn’t give a shit about Elementalists. You have my permission to tell them that. Tell Kynna I’ll be ready to fight for her again soon—I’ll make it to her duel. I’m coming, Bryn, and I’ll be bearing gifts.

Victor slapped the book closed and hefted Lifedrinker, chuckling at how she felt almost comfortable in his hands. He broke into a jog toward the sixth gatehouse. If he understood things right, he had one more gate to get through, and then he could face the boss and, if things went well, destroy the dungeon Core. Jogging through the ruin of the battlefield he'd created, he shook his head, chuckling. His Furious Battle Momentum was formidable as hell, but it was also insane; he'd been out of it for days—at least! He didn't know how much time had passed before Bryn's first message.

At the gate, he turned to examine the destruction one more time. "A hundred-goddamn-thousand undead!" As he ducked into the gatehouse, Victor hoped he'd gain a level before he fought the dungeon boss; he couldn't deny the potency of the "Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum," but he didn't like losing himself so much, and he certainly didn't like losing days or weeks as he recovered his senses. Was there a chance that he might not come back to himself? The System hadn't sent him any fine print. Was it possible for him to lose his mind for good? He didn't want to find out.