

Victor BK9: Ch38

Book 9: Chapter 38: Death Trap

The sixth chest contained five Energy hearts—five globes of potent Energy that required a veil walker’s level of power to create. Victor remembered when Dar had given him Energy hearts to cultivate his glory, inspiration, and magma attunements. His mentor had said that each heart was as potent as a hundred thousand Energy beads but that they were, potentially, far more valuable if traded to the right person—someone who needed a powerful source of a particular brand of Energy.

The five globes of potent power that the dungeon awarded him seemed exotic. So much so that Victor could only guess at their contents. One was filled with brilliant light and warm to the touch. It reminded him of sunlight, and so he guessed that was what it was—a heart of solar-attuned Energy. Another was black, but when he held it to his ear, he could hear the crackling potency of its power, and the sound triggered memories of Florent’s portals. Was it a void-attuned heart?

The third heart was also warm but had a different nature than the solar heart. It radiated pink Energy and tickled Victor’s skin with its delicate, gentle touch. He wondered if it had something to do with healing. The fourth pulsed with a strange, cloudy Energy that reminded him of static. It numbed his hand, and when he held it to his ear, it dulled his thoughts to the point where he yanked it away, fearing it was doing some harm.

The final Energy heart was filled with a deep silver Energy that barely glowed at all. It was cool to the touch, but Victor could feel its signature tingling through his palm, reminding him of Lira’s power in the Iron Prison. He had a feeling it had to do with metal and briefly contemplated trying to feed it to Lifedrinker. “Maybe when we’re done in here,” he muttered, slipping the orb with the others into the ring Dar had given him, the one holding his cultivation items and Arona’s phylactery.

That done, and feeling some pressure to hurry thanks to the time he lost while being out of his mind with rage, Victor grunted, lifting Lifedrinker to his shoulder, and stepped into the gate opening, taking in his first view of the last stretch of the canyon before the dungeon’s end. This time, he could see the next gate clearly, only a quarter of a mile distant or so. No enemies lay between him and it. His gaze met nothing but hard, stony ground strewn with sharp, jagged obsidian gravel.

Scanning left and right, Victor took in the steep red-brown canyon walls and frowned in suspicion as he noted dozens of small cave entrances. He couldn’t be sure from his vantage, but they all looked roughly the same size—ten feet high if he were guessing. It was probably safe to say that no giants would be swarming out of those caves, but there were plenty of smaller horrors that might emerge.

He gave his armor a final once-over. The cuts and tears were repaired. His vest's missing scales had regenerated, once again leaving him to wonder how many times it could do so. Victor secured his helm, ensured he was boosting his strength and vitality with Sovereign Will, and then cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin. With the spell's influence guiding his eyes, he gave the canyon another thorough look.

Nothing new jumped out at him—figuratively or literally—so Victor gripped Lifedrinker in both hands and stepped through the gate. He took one, two, three steps before he heard a low buzzing in the distance that reminded him of cicadas but louder and deeper. As the volume mounted and multiplied, he realized it was coming from the caves, and, as he scanned the cliffsides, he saw his first glimpse of the source: football-sized, red and black flying insects with stingers visible from a hundred yards away as they spiraled toward him.

They exploded from the caves like billowing, buzzing smoke, circling high and then descending toward him—a red and black tsunami of promised pain. Victor watched the cloud approaching—thousands of menacing insects with dripping stingers flexed toward him. He had a hell of a constitution, and his Quinametzin ancestry made him resistant to poison, but he didn't relish having gallons and gallons of caustic poison pumped into his flesh. As the last insects cleared the caves and joined the swirling storm of murderous wasps, a flicker of a plan ran through his mind, and he began to run.

Congratulations! You have reached the seventh gate of the Crucible of Fire! Defeat the swarm to advance! Beware their deadly sting!

Victor charged toward the cliffside on the left, set his eyes on a distant cavemouth high on the sheer wall, and activated Flight of the Lava King. Great fiery wings erupted from his shoulders, and he surged into the air, throwing a cloud of smoke and heat behind. A heartbeat later, his feet impacted the stone of the cavemouth, and he squatted low, ducking inside. Moving toward the depths of the cave, he could hear the swarm behind him getting close to the cave mouth, a susurrating buzz that grew so loud that it vibrated the dust on the cave walls, sending it sheeting toward the ground.

Just as he'd figured, the dungeon was only an imitation of a real-world place; the cave wasn't very deep. After only fifty feet or so beyond the mouth, he came up to a solid stone wall. Victor turned and faced the pale circle of light that was the tunnel mouth, waiting, slowly inhaling, stoking his Breath Core. The light dimmed, then turned to blackness, and the buzzing grew unbearably loud—a sound that vibrated his bones and made his skin crawl.

Victor's Quinametzin eyes weren't blinded by the darkness the swarm tried to impose. He could see their shapes, faintly luminescent with green Energy—the faint aura of these creatures that his epic-tier eyes could suss out. They came at him like floodwaters, pouring into the cave at breakneck speeds. When they were halfway to him, Victor inhaled massively, and when he could almost reach out and grab one of the fat, throbbing, buzzing things, he blew out a gout of magma-infused breath.

In the confined space of the tunnel, it was like a bomb going off. Victor's breath weapon wasn't just fire; it was molten stone. He'd often wondered how that worked; where did the matter come from to make up the lava that poured out of his mouth like a fire hydrant of superheated liquid rock? Somehow, his mind could accept "fire breathing," but "lava breathing" was another matter. It wasn't like his lungs were full of magma. His Core was, though. His Breath Core was packed with the stuff, somehow holding it there, dense and churning and ready to flow forth in its violent, flaming, molten brilliance.

The insects in front of Victor for twenty feet were doused with the stuff, and they burst with the heat. Weighed down by the lava, their parts fell to the floor or were blown back by the continued stream as Victor charged forward, pushing through the hellish nightmare-scape of the tunnel toward the mouth of the cave. His magma Core pulsed and throbbed, releasing more and more of the superheated stuff into Victor's lung pathway, and he breathed it out, roaring as he did so, annihilating hundreds—thousands—of the bugs before he came to the ledge and leaped.

He angled his jump toward the distant canyon wall, narrowly arcing past the still-swarming cloud of bugs. He wondered how many he'd killed—what percentage of the swarm he'd dealt with—as he flew. His wings were on cooldown, but his Titanic Leap had explosive power, and he surged past the swarm, most of which were still confused by the heat and smoke he'd generated. He tried to aim for another cave mouth, but his leap was off target, and he saw he'd impact the opposite cliff a good ten feet to the left of the mark.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker and aimed for the stone wall, and she eagerly began to smolder. Her blade bit into the stone like it was made of cheese, and Victor grunted as he caught his momentum on the soles of his boots. Then, with a herculean surge of strength, he swung himself toward the cavemouth, trusting Lifedrinker to pull herself free as his outstretched arm tugged. She did, having heated her blade to white-hot intensity, melting the stone around herself.

In the new cave, Victor charged forward and found this one a good deal deeper. He glanced inward at his Breath Core and saw he still had about two-thirds of his Energy. "Good," he grumbled, hunched over, hurrying toward the back of the cave as fast as he could. Already, he heard the swarm coming. Having tested his tactic, he decided he could improve on it.

This time, when the swarm came and blotted out the light this time, he waited for them to get close and then annihilated them with a jet of magma, stopping the flow after a few seconds. The insects were mindless and kept coming, refilling the passage, and he did it again. The tunnel was alight with smoldering, burning insects and pools of still-glowing lava as he waited for a third wave. It was slower coming, the bugs comprising it having been outside, swarming around the cave opening.

Victor's Breath Core was down to a quarter of its power when he blasted them, and as they burned, he ran forward, cleaning out the tunnel. A small swarm still lingered near the cave mouth, and he used his Spirit Core to finish them, casting Energy Charge at one of the center-most bugs. He closed the last ten yards on a streak of rage-attuned Energy and burst through the swarm, pulverizing them to a paste as he tore over the ledge and soared out into the air, free-falling toward the distant ground.

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Victor bent his knees and landed with a tremendous thud, sending up clouds of dust and shattering obsidian chips. He looked over his shoulder to see a much-diminished swarm coming his way—the straggling insects that had been buzzing around the cavemouth and out of range of his explosive exit. He backpedaled as he watched the approaching wasps. As far as he could tell, it was just a few hundred insects. Much better than however many thousand had first swarmed him, but Victor didn't want to feel a single one of those stings.

Something about how those stingers dripped their thick, syrupy poison and the fact that the System had mentioned their “deadly sting” told him to avoid it at all costs. He turned to jog, glancing over his shoulder as he checked his Breath Core—ten percent or so. He could feel them gaining on him, but his Flight was probably ready again. He glanced up and to the right, saw a cave entrance, much larger than most of the others, and activated his Flight. Flaming wings burst forth, and he streaked up, black smoke trailing. This time, when he landed, he reached out and gripped the stone cave mouth, stopping himself.

He turned and watched the much-reduced swarm coming, ensuring they saw where he'd gone. “Come on, you little assholes!” he laughed, looking into his Breath Core again and seeing it had swelled a little. He had enough for one good blast. As the enormous wasps flew toward him, Victor turned and ran toward the back of the cave. It was only fifteen feet deep. He turned, frowning. Could he do it? Could he get them all in there before one of them stung him? He wished he had a way to bunch them up.

At that thought, he realized he did: he could summon his bear and have it fight at the entrance. Would their poison hurt a spirit totem? It wasn't that he worried about the bear dying. He knew his totem would just go back to the spirit plane, but was it right to summon one of his brave companions only to use him as a buffer, to absorb damage that might be torturous to it? Shouldn't he only summon his brothers when he thought they had a chance of winning? But why wouldn't his mighty bear have a chance? Didn't bears deal with bees all the time?

Victor began to laugh madly as he stared at the cave mouth, and just before the first wasp crossed the threshold, he cast Wild Totem with a torrent of rage-attuned Energy. His bear burst into being near the cavemouth, huge, hulking, and furious. He crowded the cave mouth despite its high ceiling.

The bear could barely turn left to right, he filled the space so thoroughly. “Come on, hermano! Gather those little pinché fuckers up!”

His bear roared, and Victor watched his mottled, thick hide ripple as he swiped his powerful arms, trying to bat the insects aside. He couldn’t see beyond his companion, but Victor figured the swarm must be gathering close. His bear roared again, and then he was gone—vanished in a puff of red-tinted Energy steam. “What the fu—” ãNÖbÊŠ

The swarming insects buzzed madly and surged into the cave. Had they killed—dispelled—his totem with a single sting? He felt guilty but hadn’t felt anything from his bear; usually, when his totems were fighting desperately, he could feel their wounds, excitement, anger, or fear, but his bear hadn’t sent a single emotion his way. Whatever had snuffed his totem had been quick and decisive—like an instantly lethal poison.

Victor focused on the swarm with renewed concentration as he gathered his breath and met them with a torrent of crackling, brilliant lava, spraying the product of his magma-attuned Energy in a cone that enveloped every one of the creatures. They exploded in ash and steam and fell burning to the ground, sizzling in the puddle of Victor’s lava as it rapidly cooled. He stood ready, Lifedrinker up, prepared to cast Energy Charge if more appeared in the cave mouth.

Nothing came, though, and after a moment, he saw the Energy gathering around the mutilated bodies in the cave. “That was it? Just a big swarm of bugs?” His hopes of gaining another level began to fade, but then, as the misty, wispy white Energy bubbles lifted into the air, they were joined by a river of the stuff spilling into the cavemouth. It hit Victor, and he arched his back, his mind fleeing the joyous rapture of his body as it embraced the flood.

Sometime later, he blinked his eyes, refreshed and reinvigorated as System messages crowded his vision. Blearily, he read through them:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 80 Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum and gained 9 strength, 14 vitality, 9 agility, and 9 dexterity.

Level 80 Class refinement is available. Class refinement is permanent. Quinametzin Energy cultivators will next be offered a Class refinement selection at level 90. To view your options and make your selection, access the menu through your status page.

Congratulations! Your Breath Weapon Mastery is now: Improved.

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

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

Congratulations! You have cleared a deadly encounter with flawless success, ensuring that none of your party members were slain, earning a bonus to the value of your reward!

You have cleared all seven gates of the Crucible of Fire! Make your way through the final gate to face the Lord of the Crucible.

Victor couldn't help a snort of laughter when he read about his bonus for not letting any "party members" be slain. "Well," he sighed, resting a hand on Lifedrinker's haft, "we did it. Eighty."

"I wish I could have fought in that battle, heart-mate. I yearn for the taste of your enemies' blood!"

"Heh. Soon enough, chica." He summoned his Farscribe book with Bryn, turning to the last page to ensure he hadn't somehow slept for days again. Luckily, there weren't any new messages. Just to be sure, he wrote a note:

Bryn, how much time has passed since our last message?

He stared at the page for several seconds, and then Bryn's neat printing began to populate the following line:

A bit more than two hours. Is something the matter?

Victor smiled, stretching his neck until it popped.

No. Everything's good, just checking. Talk soon.

He closed the book and stood. Grabbing Lifedrinker's haft, he lifted her to his shoulder and walked to the edge of the cave, dropping down with a ground-shaking impact. He turned to the final gate and jogged to it, covering the distance in a few seconds. When he was inside, he turned to the little

alcove where he always found his chests waiting, and this time, he was pleased to see one nearly twice the size of the previous containers. He was eager to see what was inside, but he was just as anxious to look at his Class refinements.

Victor walked over to the chest and sat atop it. He canceled his Sovereign Will boost and then pulled up his stat menu, looking at his attributes and appreciating how they'd changed during his very brief time as a Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum:

Strength:

580

Vitality:

785 (864)

Dexterity:

280

Agility:

303

Intelligence:

172

Will:

673

He was pleased to see that his dexterity and agility didn't seem so anemic next to his other attributes any longer. They were certainly lower than his strength and vitality, especially with his wyrm-scale vest's boost, but they were, in his limited experience, respectable. He'd liked that about the Class, that it had forced him to improve those attributes, and he hadn't had to think about where he should be putting any unassigned ones.

He'd enjoyed the power of his Furious Battle Momentum, but he didn't think he'd be sad to see it go. If it were a spell, he might have tried to alter it somehow, maybe with Elder magic, but it wasn't. It was a feat, and he had no idea how he was supposed to improve or change it. Maybe with a new Class. The thought made him blink, and he pulled up the Class Refinement menu, scanning through his options:

Class refinement option 1: Warlord - Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Prior Class levels in Battlemaster, Martial Sage, or Combat Savant. 2. Sufficiently advanced bloodline. 3. Sufficiently advanced weapon skills. 4. Sufficiently advanced attributes. 5. A sufficiently advanced Core with appropriate affinities. 6. A history of leading followers into large-scale conflicts and achieving victory. Class attributes: Vitality, Intelligence.

Class refinement option 2: Colossal Spirit Champion – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Titan, giantkin, leviathan, behemoth, or colossus bloodline. 2. A significant portion of your total Energy earned from solo combat. 3. An affinity for glory, valor, justice, or honor. 4. Sufficiently advanced will attribute. 5. Sufficiently advanced Spirit Core. Through your many victories against difficult odds, you've gained the favor of your ancestors, and they see you as a living champion of their ideals. You embody titanic power, standing for glory, justice, and honor. Through your Spirit Core, your ancestors will unleash their fury on those who defy the might of their bloodline. Class attributes: Will, Vitality, Intelligence.

Class refinement option 3: Titan of Relentless Wrath – Legendary. Prerequisites: 1. Epic-tier titanic bloodline with a storied history of warriors or berserkers. 2. Rage, fury, or related affinity. 3. Fear, terror, or related affinity. 4. A prerequisite Class rooted in combat momentum. 5. Berserk or berserk-like ability. 6. Sufficiently advanced strength, vitality, and will attributes. So long as you hold this Class, your force of will, strength, and speed will be fueled by combat. Every wound you take and every blow you strike will drive your battle lust to new heights. The enhancements of this "battle momentum" will stack with traditional berserk-type abilities. As your wrath mounts, your aura of projected fear or terror will grow alongside it. Class attributes: Strength, Vitality, Will.

Class refinement option 4: No Refinement - You are pleased with the path on which you find yourself and choose to continue until your next refinement option.

"Well." Victor reached up to rub his chin. "Isn't that pretty damn interesting?"