

Victor BK9: Ch39

Book 9: Chapter 39: Lord of the Crucible

Victor sat and stared at his Class selections for a long while. He was, frankly, surprised that the System was still offering him Warlord. It seemed...bland compared to the other legendary Classes on offer. Was it such a top-tier choice that it warranted being on offer for the last—what was it? Thirty levels? Of course, the people of Zaafor thought so; it was sought after for, supposedly, offering unique and powerful Class abilities as one leveled through it. At one time, Victor had been desperate for it. But now he shook his head, wondering if it was truly as good as people claimed or if those people simply lacked exposure to more exotic and better Classes.

Then there were the other choices—of course, he'd almost talked himself into Colossal Spirit Champion the last time he'd had the option, and he'd picked his current Class with the understanding that it would serve well in a duel situation while he was trying to hide his other talents. He never would have guessed that he'd be done with tier seven so soon. Was it logical and right to take it now? He only had one more refinement coming his way before he had to embark on his test of steel, after all.

“And then there's you,” he muttered, reading the description for Titan of Relentless Wrath again. It was clear to him that it was an upgrade from Berserker of Unstoppable Momentum. Some of the language was even the same, despite crucial differences. For instance, the language warning him of the “madness” stacking with his other berserk abilities was gone, replaced with an almost off-handed mention of an aura projecting fear or terror growing with his “wrath.” More interestingly, it seemed to enhance his will alongside his strength and speed.

Victor focused on that line and then dredged his memory for the description of his current Class. Hadn't it said, “strength, speed, and resilience?” This new Class said, “force of will, strength, and speed.” So, if he understood it correctly, he'd lose some boosted vitality and perhaps regeneration in exchange for a boosted will attribute. Considering he had natural regeneration and other berserking abilities that provided further regeneration, the drawback didn't bother him. Would the improvement be enough for him to control what his “aura of projected fear” did to innocent bystanders, or would he find himself terrorizing the populace every time he fought?

Victor sat and stewed for an hour or more, his inability to make a decision causing his roiling Core to flare with rage-attuned Energy as his frustration mounted. He wanted to choose Titan of Relentless Wrath. His rational mind told him that Colossal Spirit Champion would suit him better as long as he was being forced to fight around crowds of people and so long as he was required to behave in a way that might be contrary to his instincts. However, those very instincts were forcing his eyes back to the description of Warlord again and again. Something in his gut was telling him to take that Class—that he had something to learn from it.

What finally made him pay more attention to that nagging instinct was a snippet of a memory—a conversation he'd had with Valla. Everyone on Zaafor coveted Battlemaster because it led to Warlord, but there were no records about what happened after Warlord. Valla and he had wondered if maybe the "Warlord" had refined his Class into something better. Could it be possible that this less exotic choice would lead to something greater? Looking at the almost cryptic prerequisites, he supposed there was a risk that he wouldn't match up to whatever the next evolution required.

Again, Victor stewed. He pressed his knuckles into his chin and breathed heavily through his nose, mentally running up and down lanes of logic and faux logic. Warlord had been offered to him several times. He only had one more System-generated refinement because, at level 100, he'd be expected to create his own Class. From what he understood, that self-created Class would be influenced by his previous Classes. What if Titan of Relentless Wrath and Colossal Spirit Champion seemed so much better because they were evolved Classes based on Victor's previous choices? What if the one that came after Warlord would put them to shame?

"Too many speculations," he grunted. He rested his hand on Lifedrinker's haft for comfort, and her voice tingled his mind.

"What troubles you, battle-heart?"

"My next Class choice. I don't know what to pick."

"Will any make you weaker?"

"Um, I don't think so, though at least one will likely make me tougher, at least for the short term." Victor's mind was on Titan of Relentless Wrath.

"You are already tough, my blood-mate. Do you struggle because what you want doesn't feel right?"

"Goddamn, chica, how can you know that? What I want doesn't match what seems smart, and my instincts are telling me to ignore both of those choices."

"As I told you before, heart-taker, so long as you can hold me in your hands, all will be well. If you have three voices in your head, listen to the one you cannot ignore."

“Right.” Victor smiled and rubbed her haft gently for a moment before releasing it. He wanted his mind clear for this decision. The truth was that he was only speculating about why his instincts kept guiding his eyes toward Warlord. It might be that the Class abilities were worth it. It might be that he feared the System wouldn’t offer it again. It might be that it would lead to a unique and powerful refinement at level ninety. It might be something else entirely. All he knew was that it was universally agreed that it wasn’t a bad choice, and if his ancestor-guided instincts said to take it, he doubted it would be something he regretted.

With a final, almost mournful look at Titan of Relentless Wrath and Colossal Spirit Champion, Victor mentally selected the much more boring-sounding Warlord.

Congratulations! You have refined your Class: Warlord.

Your feat, Furious Battle Momentum, is no longer compatible with your Class – Removing.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class skill: Tactical Mastery – Basic.

***Tactical Mastery – Basic: Your mind processes the flow of combat with inhuman precision, allowing you to anticipate and exploit openings in any situation, whether in single combat or in command of mighty hosts. Improving this skill and/or improving your intelligence attribute will enhance the effect.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class feat: Warborn Mind.

Warborn Mind: Your intellect guides your response to threats. This feat permanently boosts your agility and dexterity by ten percent of your intelligence attribute.

Victor stared at the System messages for several long minutes, chasing the implications through his racing mind. As a wide smile spread on his face, he pulled up his attributes, wondering if the “Warborn Mind” feat was already in effect:

Strength:

580

Vitality:

785 (864)

Dexterity:

280 (297)

Agility:

303 (320)

Intelligence:

172

Will:

673

He laughed when he saw the bracketed values beside Dexterity and Agility. His intelligence might be his lowest attribute, but it was already boosting his overall stats by thirty-four points! More importantly, each level of Warlord would increase his intelligence, thereby increasing his dexterity and agility. It almost felt like cheating!

Still smiling hugely, Victor tried to focus on the knowledge he'd gained from his new skill, "Tactical Mastery." Whatever the System had done, though, had certainly integrated the knowledge it provided well; it was all mixed in with his other combat masteries and facts and stratagems that seemed like stuff he might have known his whole life. He hoped it would pay off, but he wasn't sure he'd ever be able to tell when he was actively using the skill. He supposed that if he started recognizing patterns and exploiting weaknesses far more quickly and efficiently than he used to, that would be all the evidence he needed.

With a light heart, pleased that it didn't feel like he'd made a mistake, he stood up from the chest and turned to regard it. "Okay, let's see what we get for a flawless death trap survival." He lifted the lid and took a step back, waving away the much denser than usual fog of silvery Energy steam.

When he stepped close and peered within, despite the size of the container, there were only three small items inside: two boots and a crystal gemstone radiating rich, purple light.

Stolen from its rightful author, this tale is not meant to be on Amazon; report any sightings.

Victor couldn't stop his hand from reaching down to grasp the gemstone. It was shaped like an egg—maybe twice the size of a chicken's. It wasn't smooth, however. It was cut into a thousand little facets that made it glitter like a miniature star in his hand. Victor stared into its depths, entranced by the lustrous, glowing, violet-shaded veins running through the crystalline core. He could feel the depths of the Energy inside but couldn't put a finger on its attunement. It wasn't anything he'd ever felt before.

Setting it aside, Victor reached in to pick up the boots. They were large—sized for a person like Victor—and crafted from supple black, finely scaled leather. Victor smelled them, savoring the heady, spiced-oil scent, and rubbed the leather between his thumb and forefinger, imagining how it would feel embracing his feet. They had high uppers, and if he were still a kid from Tucson with limited world experience, he might say they looked like cowboy boots. As it was, he'd seen thousands of similarly styled boots on thousands of people from multiple worlds. On Sojourn, for instance, people would simply call them cavalry-style boots.

Victor trickled some Energy into the boots and read the System's description:

Terror-scale Boots: Crafted from the scales of a living nightmare, these boots will allow the wearer to more easily slip through the veils that separate the various planes of existence. They will not grant the ability—only enhance one's existing talent. Moreover, though they may be damaged, any harm they suffer will be fleeting; it is impossible to destroy that which isn't wholly real.

“Qué interesante,” Victor muttered, turning the boots in his hands. He was tempted to replace his Lava King hide boots, but that would disable his Sojourn set bonuses, and he didn't want to give those up—not yet. Instead, he took a few minutes to open his vault and stow the beautiful gemstone and the boots inside with his other treasures. When he was done, he picked up Lifedrinker and approached the gateway leading to the “lord of the crucible.”

He could feel the heat radiating from the opening. When he stood inside the gateway, observing the lair of the dungeon boss, for the first time in a long while, he had to narrow his eyes and make his breathing shallow because of the temperature. The gateway marked the end of the canyon and opened into a high-ceilinged cavern with a floor nearly entirely covered with bubbling, liquid lava. It wasn't the thick, almost solid stuff in the lakes he'd crossed on his way through the crucible. It

was fluid, flowing, orange-hot stuff that gave off waves of vaporous heat that would've spelled doom to a natural human.

To Victor, it was just uncomfortable. Looking around the space in the baleful reddish-orange light of the bubbling lava, he saw platforms of stone here and there and, against the far wall of the cavern, maybe two hundred yards distant, a long ledge littered with bones. "No sign of the boss," he muttered, knowing full well the gate would slam shut behind him, and the dungeon would probably announce the battle when he stepped through.

He hesitated, but only for a moment; what was the point? He knew he'd keep going. He hadn't battled his way to this point only to turn back now. That didn't stop morbid thoughts from dancing through his mind. What would the System do with his stuff if he died here? Would Lifedrinker become a dungeon treasure? Would Arona's phylactery become cursed—a strange haunted bone given to some hapless adventurer in a thousand years? Perhaps the System would be kinder to her since she was a fully sentient being. Maybe Lifedrinker would get special treatment, for that matter.

Victor shook his head, banishing the idle musings, and stepped onto the narrow stone platform stretching ten yards into the lava-filled cavern. Just as he'd predicted, he only took two steps before the iron gates fell shut behind him, and the System announced:

You have reached the final conflict in the Crucible of Fire! Defeat the Lord of the Crucible to claim your prize!

Victor twisted his hands on Lifedrinker's haft, waiting and watching. He wasn't sure what the "lord of the crucible" would be, but he didn't want to step into a trap. He cast Inspiration of the Quinametzin, allowing the bright white-gold Energy to infuse his being and, with that new perspective, continued to scan the cavern. A strangely rhythmic burbling off to the left caught his attention, and Victor focused, staring at the thin line of bubbles moving through the lava. Something swimming, then? Another lava sprite, this time gigantic, perhaps?

Victor focused on a distant stone platform in the general direction and used Titanic Leap to send himself soaring through the cavern. His aim was good, and he came down with a thud, startled to feel the stone shift and wobble under his feet. It was floating! Victor lifted Lifedrinker, ready, as he watched the line of bubbles, now only fifty yards distant, turn toward him and the rocking stone platform.

With each tilt, Lava burbled over the sides, but Victor wasn't thrown off balance. He was too much at home among the lava and rocks of the earth. His time as a Herald of the Mountain's Wrath had taught him to be steady on shifting stone. A droplet of lava splashed up, landing on his arm to sizzle

against his flesh. Victor brushed it off, and it fell, already cooling into dark stone. A rapidly fading pink spot on his flesh was the only evidence it had hit him. His Flame-Touched and Mountain's Resilience feats made him nearly fireproof.

It was a good thing, too, because a gigantic reptilian head emerged from the lava before him and coughed an enormous gout of lava onto the platform, drenching Victor and sending him stumbling back. His boots slid over the molten rock, and he fell directly into the lava. Victor squeezed his eyes shut, and though he wanted to scream, he clamped his mouth closed, too.

While Flame-Touched made him immune to "lesser fires" and allowed him to heal from burns more easily, it didn't protect him from being bathed in lava. Mountain's Resilience protected him from eighty percent of fire-based damage. That meant that rather than being wholly incinerated by the super-heated liquid stone, he was simply burned viciously, over and over, as his regeneration repaired him. A single spot on his arm was one thing—something he could shrug off—but his entire body at once? Victor almost lost his mind to the pain.

His armor, resilient and immune to fire for the most part, protected him initially, but when submerged in a liquid, clothing only helps for an instant. Soon, the lava was under his armor, against his skin, burning and cooking as his regeneration battled to keep him alive. Worse, something bit his ankle, grinding down on his boot, crunching his bone, and dragging him deeper. Victor almost dropped Lifedrinker in his panicked attempts to tread lava as it burned the flesh from his bones over and over.

Something about his vitality, his Quinametzin nature, his magma-attuned Core, or his many feats must have lessened the pain somehow. How else could he have managed to avoid going mad in those seconds as his mind reeled for a response to the assault? How else could a corner of his mind have found the freedom of thought to realize he'd recognized the reptile that attacked him—it was a larger, more horn-bedecked version of the Lava King helmet he was currently wearing. He was fighting an actual Lava King.

No, he realized. He wasn't fighting; he was being dragged to his doom, slowly dying and soon to be made lunch by the enormous reptile. Finally, all the neurons fired in the right order, and Victor pushed aside his panic and pain long enough to know what he had to do. He gathered up his Energy from both his Breath Core and Spirit Core, and he cast Volcanic Fury.

Instantly, the pain faded as his flesh came alive with fire of its own. He opened his eyes, and through those burning orbs, he beheld the realm of Lava King. A wide, menace-filled grin spread his lips, and laughter bubbled out of Victor's chest in bubbles of superheated air that slowly drifted up through the thick molten stone. With his transformation, the thing biting his boot had let go, likely finding it strange for its morsel to enlarge in its mouth.

Victor looked down, furiously searching for something to kill, but saw only the fiery orange-red liquid. He had no idea how far he was seeing—an inch or a mile, it didn't matter. Out of reflex, he began to kick and pull with his free arm, dragging himself and Lifedrinker upward. Though he felt naught but rage, a tiny fragment of his mind marveled at the warmth and comfort of the lava bath to his magma-infused body. The agony of his descent was a distant memory, and only the need to kill whatever had bitten him remained.

Some instinct kept him from breathing the lava, but Victor's body didn't need much air. He made slow progress upward, toiling hard, the frustration of his arduous journey serving to keep the rage boiling in his veins. When he noticed a lightening in the orange-red glow, his primal mind knew he was near the surface. Then something enormous bit his leg again, jerking it side to side like a terrier with a rat, and Victor screamed in pain and fury as he felt the teeth sawing through the tendons of his knee.

Instinctively, he tried to hack Lifedrinker at the aggressor, but she moved slowly in the lava despite his titanic strength, and her edge, though it hit true, was rebuffed by a great black horn. Then, the pulling and thrashing ceased, and Victor kicked his way up again. He thrust Lifedrinker up, and her edge caught on a shadow. Victor pulled, heaving himself out of the lava onto a stone platform.

He was too furious to lay there and pant. He was too angry to bother examining his wounded leg. If he had, he might have balked. He might have lost the fury coursing through his veins—his leg was severed at the knee. Even so, Victor rolled to his belly and got up on his hands and knees, one fist still tight around Lifedrinker's haft. He felt no pain. He felt no fear. He knew only a blood-red mad lust to kill whatever had bitten him.

Even as his regeneration—boosted by his berserk nature—began to rebuild the lower half of his leg, stretching out naked bone inch-by-inch and clothing it in veins, flesh, cartilage, muscle, sinew, and flesh, he staggered up to his remaining leg, using Lifedrinker as a crutch. With blood-red, wild eyes, he faced the lake and roared his challenge, activating Voice of the Angry Mountain out of pure instinct.

The shout rippled over the surface like a gale-force wind on a placid lake. It echoed and rang from the walls, and then, like a thing from a myth, the Lava King breached the surface fifty yards out. It erupted from the lava like a whale breaching the ocean waves, though this fiery whale sprouted wings of fire and soared into the air, circling the distant rocky ceiling of the cavern, banking around long, jagged stalactites as it circled its foe. It was like a stubby, muscular, meaner version of a dragon. Of course, Victor had only seen one dragon, but if he'd been sane enough to care, he might have concluded this creature was a relative.

When it swooped into a dive, aiming for Victor, he stood his ground. When it was only thirty yards above him and began to belch a torrent of fiery lava, Victor didn't flinch. When it flapped those massive, fiery wings and brought its taloned rear feet forward to snatch or impale him, Victor leaned into the attack and heaved on Livedrinker's haft, arcing her over his shoulder in an overhead chop.

As the Lava King drove its foot-long talons into his titanic shoulders, Livedrinker buried her mirror-smooth obsidian edge into the creature's chest, splitting its tough scales and flesh under her impressive weight and Victor's enormous strength. Fire poured from the horrific gash, and the Lava King roared its agony. Its forward momentum turned downward, and they fell together, a tangle of scales, blood, lava, and rolling, screaming, fighting, clawing madness as Titan and Lava King both refused to accept defeat.