

Victor BK9: Ch40

Book 9: Chapter 40: Dungeon Core

Victor and the Lava King grappled madly on the floating stone platform, each heave and smash of an enormous body sending the stone dipping into the magma so it splashed up and rolled over the two of them. Neither of them cared. Both were fundamentally immune to the fire. Even so, the scene of growling, cursing, clawing, biting, hacking fury was so intense that the iridescent sheen of the lava king's orange-scaled body as it writhed and thrashed against Victor's scaled armor resulted in an incomprehensible tangle of limbs, blood, fangs, and fire.

The Lava King was more than a match for Victor in bulk, but Victor had the edge on strength, especially boosted by Volcanic Fury. He held Lifedrinker with one hand, a handle on his foe as she bucked and dug, screaming her frenzied hunger and pulling Energy from the mighty beast. All the while, Victor punched and grabbed, bit, and kicked while the great reptilian creature did likewise. With fangs and claws, the Lava King stabbed and tore Victor's flesh, rending his armor, shredding his flesh, and cracking his bones.

Victor's regeneration was up to the task, and his fury made him immune to pain or worry, so even though the Lava King was a formidable, mighty foe, it began to wane long before Victor did. After all, it was a two versus one battle at this point. Lifedrinker was taking her due, and the fire of the monstrous reptile's Core was being siphoned off and pulled away from where it was needed. The Lava King tried to cough lava, but only a trickling wheeze erupted from those mighty jaws. Its flesh tried to meld back together, repairing itself from Victor's abuse, but the fire wasn't hot enough.

As he tasted the weakness in his foe, as his kill-hungry mind sensed an edge, his instincts took over, and Victor began to dominate the massive scaled body. He bent a forelimb until the scaled flesh at the joint ripped, and then Victor jerked with all his might, pulling the bone from the socket like he was uprooting a thick tree trunk. Blood and fire sprayed out of the wound, and the Lava King's thrashing became desperate. It tried to claw, three-legged, toward the edge of the platform, but Victor had tasted blood, and there was no escaping his grasp.

He clung to the creature's back, his titanic weight pressing down, driving Lifedrinker further and further into the beast's chest. He pounded his gauntleted fist into shoulder, spine, skull, and jaw. Each blow was like an anvil falling, cracking scales and bones. As the Lava King's remaining foreleg slipped off the platform, futilely grasping for the presumed safety of the fiery lake, Victor grasped two of its thick black horns and cranked with all his might, turning the monster's head until something snapped like a tree branch inside its neck.

Victor dropped the now-limp creature and, heaving for breath, leaped to his feet—one bare with freshly grown flesh—and glared around the eerily silent cavern. When nothing more challenged him, he lifted his face to the cavern ceiling and roared with all the smoldering breath, fury, and madness in his body. If he hadn't been on a small, floating stone island amid a sea of lava, Victor might have continued his rampage, unleashing his wrath on inanimate objects. As it was, the world was a fiery hellscape, and it soothed his volcanic fury.

He sat on the stone, his blazing, brooding glare fixed on the burbling lava, and what thoughts danced through his mad, flame-filled mind would ever remain a mystery for, as the Energy of the Lava King was awarded to him, it washed the heat from his pathways. The surge sent Victor on another psychedelic trip through space and time, an observer of worlds and people strange and wondrous.

When Victor returned to himself, he was sitting on the stone platform, his back against the smoldering scaled body of the Lava King. His feet were splayed out before him, and he chuckled when he saw his bare foot. The memory of his traumatic trip under the lava was just a vague nightmare to him now. His subsequent fury and the System's infusion of mind-healing Energy had smoothed out the jagged edges of the experience, and now he could only find wry humor in the situation. "That pinché son of a gun bit my leg off."

Shaking his head, he looked at the System's messages:

Congratulations! You have achieved level 81 Warlord and gained 24 intelligence and 17 vitality.

Congratulations! You have earned a Class spell: Locate Ally – Basic.

Locate Ally – Basic: Casting this spell will allow you to sense the location of an ally. Distance will affect the accuracy, and if the void of space or a veil of reality separates you, the most you may discern is whether your ally exists or not.

Congratulations! You have defeated the Lord of the Crucible of Fire! Search his lair to find your reward!

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

Victor stared at the messages for a while, absorbing all of their implications, the first of which was that he'd gained a tier-eight level, and it hadn't taken him months or years. It seemed that, yes, the

curve for gaining levels grew more steep as one climbed toward level 100, but that didn't preclude quick levels if the challenge was intense enough.

The Lava King had been formidable. Victor would have been killed if not for his fire resistance, regeneration, and then his ability to negate the fire damage completely with Volcanic Fury. He could still remember a faint twinge of his panic when he'd felt, through the blinding pain of his repeatedly burning flesh, the creature pulling him deeper.

He shook his head, pushing the memory away as he read about his new spell. He supposed it was useful; certainly, if he had people around him he cared about, it would be nice to be able to find them. Though, he supposed, the benefit was likely meant for a Warlord to better manage a war. Being able to track and find allies when armies and troop movements were scattered over great distances would be invaluable.

Victor stood with a grunt and looked at the enormous, scaled corpse. The Lava King was certainly draconian in appearance, though it seemed to lack the intellect of its greater cousins. It had fought like an animal and never spoken a word. He grabbed ahold of Lifedrinker's haft and pulled her free. She was quiet, and her glassy surface was marked with thick veins of glowing orange Energy. "You had a big drink, didn't you, chica?" Satisfaction radiated from her warm haft, and Victor chuckled, setting her aside and turning back to the Lava King's body.

Lifedrinker had already opened its chest cavity for him, so Victor grasped the top half of the bony, scaled cut and braced his boot on the lower half as he heaved, splitting the wound wider with a sickening—or satisfying to a blood-thirsty titan—cracking, ripping sound. With its chest split wide, Victor could see the thing he wanted: the great, hot heart of the creature, still filled with blood that glowed with fiery Energy-infused blood. Victor summoned a carving knife and sliced it through the massive, rubbery arteries holding the heart in place, and then he pulled the thing free, grinning as hot blood drizzled out to sizzle on the stone by his feet.

If he weren't worried about losing too much time, he would have eaten that heart then and there. His mouth filled with saliva, and his stomach rumbled its need, but Victor exercised his will and sent the heart into his storage ring before it could get the better of him.

"Okay, hermano," he sighed, turned his attention lower, toward the glistening innards partially revealed by the tear he'd made. "Let's see if you've still got my boot in there."

Ten minutes later, Victor set his glistening, slimy boot onto the stone platform and watched as its enchantments went to work cleaning itself. The slime slowly dissolved into steam or ran down the outside like water off a waxed piece of glass. The boot was remarkably intact—only a few teeth

holes persisted, but they were slowly knitting together. Victor had pulled it from his severed leg and, not wanting to leave his poor limb to rot with the monster's corpse, he'd tossed it into the lava, where it had instantly burst into flames and sunk.

He wondered about that. Wasn't it strange that his leg had regenerated, but the flesh that was severed from him did not? He supposed he was glad about that. If it weren't the case, he would have found a copy of himself in the belly of the monstrous reptile. "Hell no," he snorted, shaking his head. "I can do without that." When his boot looked mostly clean, he pulled it on and then picked up Lifedrinker, sending her to rest and work on her absorbed Energy in her storage compartment.

Looking at the huge corpse, knowing that its horns and hide, at least, were worth a great deal to crafters, Victor contemplated trying to harvest it. He'd learned a bit about such processes while on Zaafor, but the thought of undertaking the task at that moment, at the end of the dungeon, felt overwhelming. Instead, he took his carving knife and, with a lot of effort and concentration, worked to cut one of the creature's thick, muscular rear legs free. He sliced the scaly flesh, tendons, and muscles until he could wrench the bone from the bloody hip joint. Then, he sent the leg into storage, intending to try out his new Wyrms' Fervor feat sometime later. ✂

He didn't want to leave the corpse to rot or be absorbed by the dungeon or whatever happened to monster corpses in such places, so instead, he cast Honor the Spirits on the remains. Ghostly fire erupted around the carcass, burning it entirely, the ghostly flames reducing it to spiritual smoke that would make its way through the spirit plane and whatever veil separated that place from his ancestors. "I hope you can make good use of this great creature's remains, ancestors."

After the ghostly smoke had all evaporated, he scanned the fiery cavern, letting his eyes rest on the long, bone-covered ledge. If he were betting, he'd say his reward would be waiting there. Victor focused his gaze and activated Flight of the Lava King. On massive wings of fire, he flew over the lava to land amid the scattered, broken, charred bones. He didn't have to search long—against the rear stone of the cavern, behind a mound of bones and stinking refuse, a large System chest sat waiting, its strange metallic runes shifting languidly beneath the surface.

Unauthorized use of content: if you find this story on Amazon, report the violation.

Victor didn't approach the chest right away. He paused to look around the Lava King's lair. Hadn't Azforath told him he'd find the "dungeon Core" there? Victor stared out over the hissing, bubbling lake of lava and hoped the damn thing wouldn't be down there, at the bottom of all that molten stone. If he cast Volcanic Rage so he could survive a dive, he'd lose his wits and forget what he was trying to do. No, he'd have to think of another plan if that was where it lay hidden.

“Cross that bridge when I come to it,” he muttered, walking over to the chest to flip the lid back. It rattled and clanged against the stone wall as glittering golden steam escaped the container. When it passed, Victor looked inside and cursed softly at what he saw: black leather gauntlets with shiny obsidian metal plates on the backs of the knuckles and around the wrist portion of the armored handwear. They were undoubtedly high-quality equipment—on par with the boots and other items he’d gotten from the dungeon, but Victor cursed because he rather liked his Lava King gauntlet.

Even with that thought lingering, part of his mind was lost in wonder as he studied the intricate whorls and mysterious runes worked into the dense, shiny black metal. They winked with faintly pulsing silver Energy. He reached in to pick one up and had to pause to readjust his footing; they were heavy. Not as heavy as the breastplate he’d found, but he had to put his back into it when he hoisted the right-hand gauntlet out. Curiosity getting the better of him, Victor channeled some Energy into it and blinked as a densely worded System description came to him:

Gauntlets of the Mountain’s Might: Forged in the ancient fires of a slumbering titan’s hall, these gauntlets bear the indelible mark of power imbued by the colossal being’s latent Energy. Crafted from voidforged steel, the gauntlets are incomparably dense, nearly indestructible, and resonate with an overwhelming sense of gravity. They will grant a tremendous boost to the wearer’s physical might, providing the ability to lift, strike, and endure beyond mortal limits. Those unworthy need not attempt to wear these storied grippers—a titan’s strength will ruin the physical form of a lesser being.

“Well, if I didn’t think the System was tailoring the loot for me before, I’d have to say this is a bit too much of a coincidence.” Victor pulled the right gauntlet on, sighing with pleasure as the cool leather hugged his flesh and the metal plates stretched and expanded to fit his knuckles and wrist bones perfectly. It felt good on his hand, but other than that, he didn’t notice a change. He pulled off his “gauntlet of Sojourn” and reached into the chest to grab the other gauntlet.

When he put it on and it finished stretching to accommodate his huge fist, he felt a surge of Energy rush into his bones like a low-grade electrical shock. He felt it go up his arms and spread through his shoulders, then down, along his spine, and into his legs. It felt good, and he laughed at the rush of power vibrating in his bones. Glancing at his attributes, he didn’t see any change to them—no new numbers in brackets—but he felt stronger. More than that, he felt almost like he had an invisible shield of buzzing, humming Energy.

Victor looked at the description again and read the interesting part aloud, “...lift, strike, and endure...” Victor walked over to the stone wall beside the chest and, for lack of a better target, punched it. His right fist impacted the stone like a cannonball. Shards of stone flew in every direction, significant cracks split through the dense rock for a dozen yards like a spider’s web, and, in the cloud of rock dust, Victor grinned. He felt good with those gauntlets on—strong and vital on a whole new level.

It was difficult to force himself to remove them, but he wanted to save them until he'd had time to fully evaluate all of his treasure and make the difficult decision about whether he was ready to give up his Sojourn set. Worse, he had to decide if he'd stop wearing Tes's wyrm-scale hauberk in order to try wearing the "Aegis of Charyssor." He took a minute to open his vault and store the gauntlets away. When he stepped out, preparing to turn and lock the vault up, he spotted something strange.

Where he'd punched the stone wall, one of the cracks was wide enough to see through, and he spied a dim, pulsing red glow in the darkness beyond. Victor paused, frowning. Was it just more lava? It had a different hue, though—it was tinted more toward magenta than orange. He walked back to the chest and picked up his Sojourn gauntlet. Slipping it on, he approached the cracked stone. He picked a spot above the widest crack and punched it. The impact, while enough to split a good-sized tree trunk or fragment a cinderblock, was pathetic compared to the punch he'd delivered with the other gauntlets.

Unrelenting, Victor punched the stone again and again until large chunks fell away, exposing the source of the strange, reddish-pink light. It was a crystal about the size of a softball and just as round. It floated in the air above an obsidian pedestal, spinning rapidly so that the light it threw off danced on the hidden chamber's ceiling, floor, and walls. Victor ducked through the hole he'd created, and a voice, smooth and androgynous, sounded in his head.

"Do you intend me harm, stranger?"

"Who?" Victor asked the air.

"I," the voice replied.

Victor turned around, examining the shiny, polished walls, ensuring nothing else lurked within the chamber. "The crystal?"

"I am a Dungeon Core."

"Oh, great," Victor sighed. Of course the damn thing was alive. "Listen, I didn't know you could talk, but if I don't deal with you, the titan sleeping in this mountain is going to get pissed, and I don't know what kind of disaster that will bring about."

"But you're a titan."

“Not that kind of pinché titan, buddy.”

“What are your intentions?” The swirling crystal—Core—had slowed and now seemed to pulse with each word.

“Afraid it's you or me, or at least some folks I care about, so...” Victor summoned Lifedrinker into his hands.

“If I cannot remain, then move me; why must I be destroyed?”

“Oh. I can do that?” Victor frowned and took a step closer to the pulsing Core.

“Yes. The vessel you opened near the final chest will suffice to hold me. Take me out of this dungeon, and it will cease to be. Place me elsewhere, and I will create a new dungeon.”

“And you won't be...upset?”

“On the contrary, if you can place me where more adventurers will gain entry, I will be grateful. I have languished alone here for millennia. You were the first entrant in a very long while.”

Victor tapped his chin for a moment, thinking, then shrugged. “I don't have a problem with that. How do I...” He trailed off. Stepping closer to the glowing orb, he sent Lifedrinker back into her ring and stretched out his hand.

“Yes. Simply grasp my Core, but be prepared for a backlash of Energy. I believe you are sturdy enough to weather the storm. Why do you not make use of the treasures I toiled to bring to you?”

“You picked those?”

“Yes! I wanted to reward you greatly for your visit and your travails. I hoped you would speak of me to your comrades and kin, and more people would find their way to my dungeon.”

Gritting his teeth and bracing his feet, Victor stretched out his hand to grasp the orb. Wild, potent Energy arced out, striking him like a lightning bolt, but it carried through him, crackling and

sizzling around the room, glaring and reflecting off the shiny black stone walls. It hurt, but nothing close to being burned alive, and Victor “weathered” the backlash, just as the Core had said he would.

As he grasped the crystalline globe and pulled it out of its floating position, the dungeon rumbled and shook. “Hey, uh, Core—do you have a name?”

“I am Du.”

Victor arched an eyebrow. “Doo?”

“Yes, Du, though with a slightly shorter ‘ooh’ sound.”

Victor gave it another try, “Okay, Du. What’s going to happen when I put you in my vault?”

“This dungeon will collapse. Here,” a sizzling portal of lava appeared in the air—a fiery doorway into nothing, “this portal will take you out. Simply store me away and flee through it.”

“If you’re trying to fry me with some lava, it won’t work...”

“No! This portal will not burn you! You have me at your mercy; I’d be a fool to harm you!”

Victor looked at the sizzling portal and then at his vault. “How much time will I have? It takes my vault about a minute to shrink down.”

“You’ll have much longer than that. Once I’m no longer on the same dimensional plane as this dungeon, it will begin to crumble from the outside in. This chamber is the heart of the dungeon space and will be the last part to collapse. I estimate it would take the count of five hundred before it fails.”

Victor stepped into his vault and set Du down near the center. He wasn’t surprised when the crystal globe lifted off the ground and hovered there in the center of his vault, casting its magenta light on the metallic, rune-etched walls. Watching the lights flicker, Victor found it rather beautiful. He gave Du another hard look, straining to listen to his instincts. Nothing was setting off alarm bells, so he shrugged and stepped out, swinging the vault door closed with a heavy, resonant clang.

Alert! This dungeon has lost its Core! The collapse of this dimensional space is imminent.

The message looked like a System message, but hearing that Du was the one who'd chosen his chest rewards, Victor was starting to wonder how much of the System's duties were off-loaded onto beings like Du. As he clicked the key all the way to the left, the vault began to compress rapidly, and the ground rumbled again, more violently. The lava in the lake bubbled and spurting, erupting in miniature geysers as some hidden pockets of gas were shaken loose by the tremors. Victor watched the far gate, wondering if he'd see the dungeon's destruction coming.

He'd begun silently counting when he shut the vault door, and he was at forty-seven when the vault was done shrinking. He snatched it up, slung it over his head, and, without further ado, jumped through the fiery portal. On the other side, he emerged into the very same cavern where he'd entered the dungeon.

In fact, the portal going into the dungeon was still there, though it clearly wasn't stable. It stretched and shrank, sizzling and popping with weird Energy bursts. Victor watched it for several long minutes, and then, with a final hissing, sizzling zwap, the portal shrank in on itself and burst apart in a rainbow of Energy sparkles. Just a moment after it was gone, Azforath, the ancient primal titan, spoke to him, "You have done well, little brother. The thorn is gone from my side. The Other is distant now, no longer siphoning my might. Shall I gift you with knowledge and wisdom? This will be the reward for the small task you have performed—a nudge on the road to greatness."

Victor hesitated. He wanted to say yes, of course, but he worried about the time. What if the ancient being did something that knocked him out for a week? What if it did something that took him out of commission for a decade or a hundred years? "Um, big brother, there are people who will need my aid in a few short days. How long will—"

Victor's words were cut short as yet another portal appeared before him. This one swirled with pale blue Energy that radiated peace like a calm sky over a placid beach. "Come into my soul space, young one. In this realm, I control the flow of time."

Suddenly, Victor's hands felt sweaty, and his heart raced in his chest. Soul space? Realm? What would he be getting himself into if he stepped through that portal? What would he be missing out on if he didn't? His gut said to go through—that this was a bad time to start acting like a chicken shit. Victor inhaled deeply through his nose and stepped through that swirling portal into something called a soul space where he, hopefully, would learn a thing or two from an ancient great titan, a being who claimed he could make or break entire worlds. A small, stray voice in his mind wondered if Azforath had created Ruhn.

The questions and thoughts were dashed from his mind as the portal's Energy washed over him in a cool, electric wave that made his every nerve tingle. Then, he was through and came face to face with a being that radiated power like only one other individual Victor had ever encountered—the Ivid Queen, Crystal.