

Victor BK9: Ch42

Book 9: Chapter 42: Treasure Haul

When Victor stepped out of the portal, he stood in a near-silent cavern—the pedestal where he'd activated the portal into the crucible dungeon stood silent; the System runes that had once swum beneath the stone surface were gone. The lava in the cavern bubbled softly, and if Victor wasn't mistaken, it was darker and thicker. Was it cooling? Was Azforath's irritation soothed to the point where his powerful Energy was no longer stirring up the mountain's wrath?

Was the mountain angry? Was the mountain an entity separate from Azforath? Victor had a feeling that was so; surely all volcanos didn't house sleeping titans. He hadn't gotten the feeling that the mountain where he'd battled Hector had been a titan, but it had definitely been something—an angry spirit of the earth or whatever you wanted to call it. He took a moment to open his vault and store his precious tome of Elder magic inside.

From just a few glimpses of what Azforath had written, he knew the contents were far more valuable than any of the books on Elder magic Ranish Dar had given him. The ancient titan had broken down the components of spell construction and written out examples, whereas the books Dar had given him were more like dictionaries of terms without any real guidance on their usage. He hoped what Azforath had written would help him decipher the book he'd found inside the Iron Prison, too. Maybe he'd end up with a few new Elder magic spells.

As he hung the vault back around his neck, Victor trudged his way back up the tunnel toward the amber-ore wall where, hopefully, Bryn awaited. While walking, he contemplated the treasures he'd gained in the dungeon, from the various powerful ores to the glittering, blue, baseball-sized gemstone to the Energy hearts and various pieces of armor. He had a Lava King heart and hunk of meat to cook and consume, and, above all that, he'd gained almost an entire tier's worth of levels.

Victor could feel the changes in himself; he'd truly been through a crucible and was stronger for it. While his enemies, especially those champions who stood between him and conquering this world, might have been sparring or practicing, he'd battled more than a hundred thousand enemies. He'd conquered hordes and mighty, monstrous foes. He'd done more fighting in that dungeon than most iron-rankers in Sojourn would see in a decade. He'd found treasures that greatly eclipse most of his other equipment, even his relatively new armor set.

It seemed the dungeon, having lain unchallenged for thousands of years, had been eager to award him with the treasures at its disposal and, perhaps, with the challenges it had set before him. It made him wonder about the rules for dungeons. If people entered that dungeon daily, would the monsters

grow weaker? Would the treasures be less potent? He had a feeling that was the case but thought it might be fun to speak to Du, the Dungeon Core, about it.

He'd already sent his armor away, switching it out for his comfortable, finely tailored clothing. Lifedrinker, of course, was stored safely away, so he looked rather casual as he stretched his long legs up the tunnel's length. When he approached the amber-ore wall and the tunnel leading through it, he chuckled as a pair of Kynna's Queensguard snapped into combat stances at the sound of his boots crunching on some loose stone. "Relax!" He waved an empty hand. "It's me."

"Your Grace!" the woman on the right said, snapping a salute and standing stiffly with her spear pointed straight up. Her companion was quick to follow suit.

"At ease." He smiled as he approached, but the two loyal guardians shrank back, and that's when he remembered to rein in his aura; he'd let it flow freely the entire time he'd been in the dungeon and also with Azforath who, apparently, hadn't been bothered in the least. The guards visibly relaxed, and the one on the left lifted a shaky hand to his brow, wiping the sweat away before it could drip into his eyes. "Sorry about that. I'm fresh from battle, so..." Victor shook his head. "It doesn't matter. You can come through the door with me. There's nothing down there anymore."

Victor strode through the metallic tunnel, not waiting for a response, and when he emerged from the partially open vault door, he stood and silently took in the scene. Bryn and her squire's little camp had greatly expanded. He saw a dozen other soldier types milling about, and some sort of official-looking fellow in stately burgundy robes sat at a table near a conical tent, writing in a thick tome. A massive tent had been thrown up further away, and Victor reckoned it was covering the broken body of the iron automaton. In fact, he was pretty sure he caught a glimpse of Trobban leaning over a worktable through one of the open flaps.

He'd only taken a single step out of the tunnel when Bryn came charging out of her command tent. She wore her breastplate and vambraces but no other armor and her face was alight with excitement when she caught sight of him. "Your Grace!" she called, jogging toward him. "I sensed your arrival!"

Victor folded his arms, looking down at her as she approached. He cocked an eyebrow and teased, "This is how you greet me? Where's your dress uniform? Where's my assembly with an honor guard and tribute band? I hope there's a feast, at least—"

Bryn came to a halt before him and frowned, a flicker of nervousness behind her dark eyes as she began to scowl. Still, she snapped a perfect salute and stood at attention. "I'm sorry, Your Grace, but —"

“Relax, I’m messing with you.”

She blew out a pent-up breath and groaned. “You got me pretty good, there, milord.” She narrowed her eyes again at the two Queensguard who’d paused behind him. “You should be at your posts.”

“I told them to follow me. We can close the door, Bryn, or leave it open—it doesn’t matter. There’s nothing down there anymore.”

“Nothing?”

“Nope. I’ll explain later. How much time do I have before the duel?”

“As it’s just past midnight, I’d say two days and a few hours.”

Victor nodded. “Good. Is Florent here?”

“He is, but he’s asleep. Shall I wake him?”

“Not yet. I’ll speak to Trobban.” While they’d been talking, a small crowd had gathered—guards, soldiers, a few scholarly types, and the man in the red robes. Victor nodded to them all, and the man in the robe approached as Victor strode toward Trobban’s tent. He was tall and lanky with a bald head and eye sockets that looked to be tattooed black. The dark shading made his bright yellow irises stand out, almost maniacally, as he hurried to keep pace with Victor and cleared his throat. *ã N o.B ÈS,*

“Excuse me, Your Grace.”

“Yeah?” Victor looked down at him for, despite the man’s height, Victor hadn’t altered his size at all, and he stood head and shoulders above him and any of the other Ruhnic natives in the cavern.

“I’m Elder Trong, High Priest among the Elementalists of the Order of the Iron Mountain. We’ve been studying the mountain’s stirring, and—”

“You don’t have to worry. It wasn’t the mountain waking up; it was another entity getting riled up. The threat is gone.”

“I beg your pardon, but I fail to see how you can be sure—”

“How?” Victor paused and glared at the guy, instantly disliking his officious, self-important tone. “I can be sure because I spoke to the being and cleared things up. I can be sure because I am the Herald of the Mountain’s Wrath, and I can feel these things.” Victor didn’t feel it was important to elaborate on the fact that he’d just listed a Class title that he no longer carried. “Now, you can hang around here and probe about with your elemental senses or whatever, but you’re wasting your time.”

The man’s well-tanned flesh paled considerably as Victor barked his remarks, and he stammered a little as he took a step back. “D-do you suppose we might interview you for the records? This latest event was the first rumbling from the mountain in centuries. Perhaps some details about the entity you mentioned would be—”

“You have my statement, but I’ll elaborate a bit. Let it be known that I removed a dungeon from yonder tunnel because it was irritating a being with power sufficient to end this world. Said being does not wish to be bothered, and, in fact, if I thought it were possible to reach him, I’d forbid all access to this mountain. Luckily, he won’t be found unless he wishes to be. I won’t speak further on the matter out of respect for his privacy.” Victor leaned close, and his tone shifted to a growl as he continued, “The fate of the world depends on us honoring that privacy.”

He was being melodramatic, and he knew it. Azforath hadn’t said any such thing, but Victor didn’t like the idea of these self-important people digging into the nature or history of a fellow titan, especially one as great and ancient as Azforath. He wasn’t truly worried; what he’d said earlier was true—there was no way anyone would find Azforath’s resting place if the titan didn’t want them to. Nevertheless, he rather enjoyed watching the man’s face pale further as he took another step away from him. “Understood, Your Grace. We will focus our efforts on calming the lava flows beneath the mountain.”

“Perfect.” Victor clapped him on the shoulder, gave him a firm nod, and continued toward Trobban’s pavilion.

When they were a dozen paces away, and it was just her and Victor, Bryn asked, “Is it true? Did you save the entire world?”

Victor chuckled. “Not exactly. I mean, maybe eventually things would have gotten to the point that the...entity would have awakened to deal with the dungeon himself, but I don’t know if he would have gone on a rampage or anything.”

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“I was very worried when I didn’t hear from you for so long, Victor—Your Grace.”

Victor slowed. They were about halfway across the cavern when he turned to regard her. She looked just as he remembered her—closely shorn brown hair, a broad, strong face marked by several scars, but her eyes were different. There were dark half-moons under them, and he thought perhaps the lines between her brows were deeper. It must have been difficult to stand up to the queen’s people and maintain control of this place while no one, not even she, was sure what had happened to him. “I’m sorry about that, Bryn. I didn’t mean to lose consciousness for so long.”

“Were you harmed?”

“Not exactly. I lost myself a couple of times, but the one that took me the longest to come back from was due to my battle rage. I fought armies in there, Bryn, and one of those armies was...vast. I had to completely let myself go, to the point where I was rage incarnate. I have very little memory of that battle and none of the time afterward. I have no idea what I got up to in that dungeon while my mind was gone.”

“Well.” She nodded, pressing her lips together in a thin line. “It’s not your fault then. I’m glad you were able to win through.”

Victor smiled, reaching out to grasp her shoulder. “Me too, Bryn. I’ll see that you’re properly rewarded for your loyalty—officially. Unofficially, I’ve got some treasure for you. We’ll talk about it later, okay?”

Her lips curled upward as she nodded, blinking her eyes rapidly. He imagined she felt a mountain of stress rolling off her back. He gave her shoulder another friendly shake, then turned and hurried toward the pavilion. When he was just a dozen yards away, he called, “Trobban! Get your ass out here!”

The Artificer came stumbling through the tent flaps, his eyes obscured by many-lensed, mechanical goggles and his hair disheveled. His fingers were stained with grease or oil, and they shook as he lifted a hand to wave, jittery with lack of sleep or over-stimulation; Victor couldn’t be sure. “You’ve returned! Huzzah!”

Victor laughed, shaking his head as he approached. “How’s it going? Still working on this old thing?” Victor pointed toward the bulk of the automaton through the open tent flaps.

“This old thing is a marvel of craftsmanship! I’m learning a great deal from its study, and that’s without mentioning the wealth of materials I’ve pulled from its innards.”

“Anything useful for our project?” Victor eyed Bryn, wondering if he should ask her to leave. He decided not; she’d proven her loyalty well enough.

“Yes! Much! The actuators, vessels, pathways, and many artificial organs are elegant and, thankfully, quite undamaged by your vicious disposal of the life force within the construct. I believe even the heart is salvageable and, honestly, quite perfect. I’ll need to employ some resizing enchantments, but I believe it and some other innards will work flawlessly with…” Trobban also glanced at Bryn, then shrugged and finished, “our project.”

Victor nodded, then gestured to Bryn. “You can speak openly around her. She knows better than to speak of my business with anyone else. As for the giant automaton behind you, I’m glad you’re gaining some insights and materials from it.”

“I’m learning much, Your Grace. Whoever created this construct was a genius at storing and compressing Energy. Unfortunately, the construct wasn’t exactly conscious and didn’t have a Core, per se, so there are still some glaring vacancies in the list of materials I’ll need.”

Victor smiled and pulled his vault and key from around his neck. “I might be able to help with that. I have a few things I’d like you to examine, one of which might very well be what we’d hoped to gain from this mountain.”

“Truly? An Azurite—”

“Hey! Don’t spoil my surprises.” Victor twisted his key, and as the vault began to hiss and tick, he quickly set it on the ground outside the tent.

“Is-is that Faecraft?”

Victor grinned at Trobban and nodded. “Yeah. I got it from a vampiric warlord from another world. Not sure how he came upon it, but maybe I’ll find out when I go there to conquer them all.” He said

it offhandedly, but it was the first time Victor himself realized that he fully intended to go to Dark Ember to free the human chattel there.

“When do you plan—” Bryn started to ask, but the vault released an explosive jet of steam and bounced, startling her into silence as she hopped away from it.

“Not for a while, Bryn; don’t worry. I’ll finish up our business here on Ruhn first. And, to be honest, I owe some people on another world some help, too. I’m unsure which to tackle first, so I’ll probably need to think about it for a while.” As he spoke, the vault finished its expansion, and he stepped up to the round door, pausing to glance at Bryn and Trobban. “You two wait here. Bryn, kill anyone who tries to follow me in.”

Victor’s tone was deadly serious, and Bryn took it so. She summoned a shimmering, lightning-charged spear and took up a position right behind him, her back to the vault. “Yes, Your Grace.”

Victor smiled to himself, then pulled the door wide, stepping inside the space, narrowing his eyes until they adjusted to Du’s magenta light. He began gathering up the unidentified treasures he’d taken from the dungeon—the baseball-sized, glittering, sapphire-colored gemstone, the brick of lustrous, silver-hued ore, the other brick of red, silver-veined ore, and the strange, egg-shaped crystalline gemstone that glowed and pulsed like a miniature star. As he labored to carry the heavier objects out, he instructed Trobban to turn away lest he ruin the surprise.

When all the objects were arrayed on the ground before his vault door, he slung an old cloak over them, then turned and pushed the vault door closed; he wouldn’t risk anyone catching a glimpse of his other treasures. “Okay, turn around.” When both Bryn and Trobban had their eyes fixed on the cloak at Victor’s feet, he bent to fold back one edge, revealing the silvery ore. “It’s heavy, but can you tell what it is?”

Trobban fell to his hands and knees, putting his face inches from the metal. He began to flip his various lenses, trying different combinations, uttering things like “Ah” and “Oho!” Finally, after nearly ten minutes, he looked up and flipped his lenses away from his eyes so he could lock them onto Victor’s. “Are you willing to let me work with this?”

“Why? What is it?”

“Silvenite. It’s a rare ore found only on worlds with incredibly high Energy saturation. It’s valued for its adaptability and receptiveness to enchantment. With the correct infusions and the right enchantments, silvenite is capable of taking on nearly any property. I was planning to use vitrivine

for our project's flesh—it's a kind of enchanted porcelain that is often used on finer constructs, but this, Victor, this would be far better."

"Is there enough?"

"Hah! I'd need half this much; it's very dense, as you already noted."

"And, do you think the other half would be suitable to feed my axe?"

Bryn made a choking sound, and Trobba's eyes widened as he sat back on his heels. "Your axe?"

Victor laughed and held out his hands, summoning Lifedrinker from her container. "Haven't you met?" Lifedrinker's mirrored-black surface winked in the glow-lamps set up around Trobba's tent, and her wicked, four-foot-long edge seemed to seethe with sharpness. Bryn, having barely recovered from her choking incident, gasped and took a step back, and Trobba cried out, raising his hands as though in supplication.

"By the old gods! What a beautiful weapon! Is it—"

"She. She's conscious. Her name's Lifedrinker, and she's consumed many types of Energy and some metals, too. Do you think she'd benefit from a bite of that stuff?"

"M-may I?" Trobba gingerly held out a hand, his fingers trembling.

Victor frowned, for some reason hating the idea of another man putting his hands on Lifedrinker. She sent a pulse of reassurance through her haft and spoke to him, "Blood-mate, do you doubt my loyalty?"

Victor chuckled, "Nah, chica. Never." He nodded to Trobba. "Go ahead, but don't let your touch linger. She bites."

While Trobba gingerly probed Lifedrinker's axe-head, Bryn spoke in a near-whisper, "I know I saw you swinging this weapon in the queen's garden, but it was so hectic. I was so focused on staying alive that I...I didn't realize how beautiful it—she was."

Lifedrinker pulsed with satisfaction at Bryn's words, and Victor laughed. "She likes the compliment."

Trobban began flipping his lenses again, and after a few minutes, he sat back and chuckled, shaking his head. "Such a wonder! She was heart-silver at first, am I right?"

Victor grinned and nodded. "Yeah."

"She's holding a surplus of Energy, and, to answer your question, yes, she could easily consume and make use of half this ore. Even more! I sense a great spirit within that weapon, Victor; you've cultivated something wonderful. I can't begin to predict what she'd do with such fine ore, but it would be amazing to witness."

"Good." Victor nodded and, giving Lifedrinker's haft a gentle pat, sent her back into storage. "Now, for the next!" He bent over and folded the cloak back, revealing the other ore—another brick, slightly larger, deep red with veins of brilliant silver.

"Oh, ancient wonders!" Trobban cried. "It's ferrithium ore! Victor, I'd recognize it with my eyes closed! Can't you feel the potential? Tell me, is it exceptionally heavy?"

"Oh yeah." Victor chuckled.

"It makes wondrous armor—it takes meticulous forging and some tempering with other elements, but, with the right process, I could craft this brick into a pair of nearly indestructible vambraces or greaves. What's more, the metal has enormous enchantment potential."

"And Lifedrinker?"

Trobban nodded. "Again, that wondrous axe could probably make use of it, though I doubt she could absorb both metals at this time."

"I'll have to think about that then. I'll have a talk with her to see which seems better." He nodded, satisfied that Lifedrinker would see at least one more upgrade from his time in the dungeon. "Okay, next." He bent to fold the cloth back further, revealing the brilliant blue gemstone.

"Aah!" Trobban cried, slapping his hands to his head. "You've done it!"

Bryn laughed at Trobban's theatrics, but she, too, stared at the gem with mystified eyes. Victor squatted to look at the hysterical Artificer more easily. "Well? Is it an Azurite Star?"

To his surprise, Trobban's eyes began to pool with moisture, and tears slid down his cheeks as he nodded. "It is. I never dreamed I'd be in the presence of one. It's..." His voice cracked, and he shook his head, struggling for words.

"It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen," Bryn breathed. "Gods! What's it for?"

"It can be used in a thousand—a million ways, young woman," Trobban cried. "If our dear duke is willing to part with it, though, it can be shaped into an artificial Core." He glanced at Bryn and shrugged. "For our project, I mean."

"What attunement would it have?" Victor asked.

"That will take some research; there will be an array of possibilities, but I'll need to conduct tests to see what they are." He peered up at Victor. "Are you truly willing to part with this for your friend?"

Victor shrugged. "Probably. I got it from the first chest I opened in that place."

"What place?" Trobban wailed.

Victor laughed. "A dungeon I had to close. Sorry, man." He reached for the cloak. "One more object. Brace yourself, buddy." As he slid the cloth away, the egg-shaped gemstone glittered like a star, its magenta veins pulsing with hidden power within the crystalline depths. "Any idea what this thing is?"

Trobban opened his mouth, gawking at the crystal. He raked his gaze over the other treasures. When he tried to speak, only choked-off consonants came out. Bryn laughed and spoke into the silence. "Whatever it is, it's even prettier than the other one."

"It's..." Trobban tried to say, gasping and shaking his head. He stood and walked away, his fists clenching and unclenching.

“The hell is that guy’s deal?” Victor laughed. “You’d think he never saw a haul of super rare treasure before.”

Bryn giggled, watching Trobban. When he finally turned around, clearly pumping his breaths to get ahold of himself, the man stopped a dozen feet away and, with his eyes closed, said, “Victor, Your Grace, you must be System-blessed.”

“Why’s that?”

“Because this is exactly the best possible thing you could have acquired for our project. It’s an egg of crystalline sentience. It’s the perfect object with which to craft an artificial mind. Your friend’s consciousness will easily take root within it. More than that, she’ll likely receive a significant boost to her intelligence attribute.”