

Victor BK9: Ch48

Book 9: Chapter 48: A Visitor

On wings of fiery rage, the Lava King soared through his domain, his blazing eyes hunting for the interloper. This was his hall, his kingdom. This was where his Ash Queens laid their eggs, this was where his father and his father before him had fought free of their shells, and this was where he had fought for the right to call himself King! His domain was deep under the earth, caverns through which lava rivers and lakes stretched farther than the eye could see. His domain was vast, his dominance absolute, and any fool that thought to breach his defenses would feel his claws and taste his fiery breath.

He banked, channeling more Energy into his wings, surging forward faster than any creature with his bulk had a right to move. He passed through a great, natural stone arch, his wings scorching the stones on either side. Once through, he swooped up toward the mile-high, domed stone ceiling, and from that lofty vantage, he scanned his largest cavern, his eyes piercing the darkness, snatching out the blues and greens of things with blood too cool to dip into his molten domain.

“There,” he growled, diving toward four green and blue figures. They were large and bipedal, and they clutched their steely fangs in their forelimbs like so many of their kind. It didn’t matter. The Lava King gathered a great lungful of air, expanded his chest, and, with a spark from his Breath Core, doused the cool-blooded fools with an avalanche of lava. By the time he set down on the steaming, ticking stone shelf where they’d stood, naught but bones and some bits of charred flesh remained.

The Lava King turned to face the center of the cavern and roared his victory, signaling to his brood and his mates that their subterranean world was safe once again. He settled his great bulk on the hot stone and folded his forelegs beneath his chin as he lazily allowed his fiery wings to fade. Absently, he stretched his neck to snatch up one of the hot bones, a bit of flesh still clinging to it. He crunched it, savoring the hot marrow, and then swallowed it whole. Life was good.

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When Victor woke from his vision, he felt so good that he laughed, realizing his cheeks were already sore from the smile plastered on his face. He stretched and rolled over and lay there for a good minute, trying to figure out where he was. Slowly, as the décor of his ducal suite began to register with his sleep-addled mind, he remembered he was in Iron Mountain and that he was Victor—a Quinametzin Titan from Earth. He remembered eating the lava king’s heart, and then he remembered his vision, and the smile returned. What a life! He chuckled again but then noticed, on the edge of his vision, System messages that he’d somehow brushed aside:

Congratulations! You have gained a new Feat: Flight of the Lava King.

Flight of the Lava King: Your species is gifted with the ability to channel Energy into powerful wings capable of providing flight to even the great, scaled, densely boned bodies of your kind. This ability is innate and requires only the fiery Energy in your Core to function.

Victor blinked, staring at the message for several long minutes. It was the same ability his Sojourn armor set provided. However, if it proved to be anything like the flight he'd experienced in his vision, then it would be far more versatile and last a good deal longer.

The System had written the message as though Victor were a lava king. Was that how it was when his titanic nature absorbed the ability of his vanquished foes? Was that what a titan was—a conglomeration of the species it absorbed? Victor stretched out his arms, clenching his ring-covered fingers into fists, turning them left and right. He hadn't grown scales or anything. He brought forth his status page:

Name:

Victor Sandoval

Race:

Quinametzin Bloodline - Epic 5

Class:

Warlord - Legendary

Level:

82

Breath Core:

Elder Class - Advanced 7

Core:

Spirit Class - Epic 3

Breath Core Affinity:

Magma - 9, Blue Ice - 9

Breath Core Energy:

6100/6100

Energy Affinity:

Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Glory 8.6, Inspiration 7.4, Unattuned 3.1

Energy:

43812/43812

Strength:

580

Vitality:

819 (867)

Dexterity:

280 (302)

Agility:

303 (325)

Intelligence:

220

Will:

673

Points Available:

0

Titles & Feats:

Titanic Rage, Ancestral Bond, Flame-Touched, Greater Titanic Constitution, Titanic Presence, Desperate Grace, Unyielding Challenger, Elder Magic, Born of Terror, Battlefield Awareness, Battlefield Presence, Aura of Command, Epic Quinametzin, Mountain's Resilience, Behemoth's Regeneration, Blood Supremacy, Wyrms's Fervor, Warborn Mind, Flight of the Lava King

“Still Quinametzin,” he sighed, arching his back until it popped. He rolled to the side of his bed and sat on the edge, looking around his suite. It was dim; most of the curtains were drawn. Other than that, everything looked much the way it always did. He didn’t see any urgent notes on his bedside table, nor were people clamoring at his door. He didn’t feel like he’d been out all that long, so, hopefully, he hadn’t missed anything important.

He stood and padded into the bathroom, where he studied himself in the mirror. He looked the same. With a glance to either side of him, ensuring nothing flammable was too close, he concentrated on the new knowledge in his mind, a reflex much the same as extending a limb. Hot Energy poured out of his Breath Core, and wings of smoldering flames sprouted from his back,

stretching out to either side of him. They were enormous, and he'd misjudged the space in the bathroom.

One wing stretched out over his tiled bathtub enclosure, but the other stretched through the doorway into his bedroom, scorching the frame. Not only were the wings made of smoldering fire, but they dripped magma. Sizzling pools grew on the marble floor and the rug outside the door, in his bedroom, instantly began to burn. Victor laughed and stopped the flow of Energy to his wings, and they flickered and faded. He summoned a thin trickle of Blue Ice into his lungs and, with a whistling exhalation, doused the fire in the doorway.

He was pretty sure the materials used to finish his quarters were enchanted to self-repair, but if they weren't, it wouldn't be hard for one of the artisans on his household staff to mend the damage. Glancing at his status sheet, he studied his Breath Core Energy Levels:

Breath Core Energy: 6022/6100

Part of the Energy he'd expended was from the Blue Ice, but even ignoring that, he could see he'd be able to maintain his wings for a long time. "Flight," he sighed, shaking his head with a grin. He cleaned up and got dressed, and the grin faded as he remembered one of the main reasons he'd wanted the ability to fly: so that he could do so with Valla. He bent to pull his boots on and shook his head, banishing the thought. He'd write to her soon, but he was doing better, in his opinion, not thinking about her all the time.

Dressed and feeling refreshed, he walked through the sitting room, past the dining area, and into his library and study. He'd set up his vault in the room, and it sat where he'd left it, dominating most of the free space. Victor took the key from around his neck and put it into the lock, twisting it until it clicked several times, and steam hissed out of the airtight seal. He pulled the door wide and smiled when he saw Lifedrinker at the center of the space, lying on the vault floor, bathed in the Dungeon Core's magenta light.

She was still working on the hunk of silvanite he'd given her. After Trobban took what he'd needed, there'd been more than half of the brick of ore left, and it was clearly difficult for Lifedrinker to process. Victor could still see the ore beneath her mirror-smooth black blade, and it looked like almost all of it was yet to be consumed by the axe. Tiny, spider-web tendrils of the silvery ore were threading into her axe-head, but Victor couldn't see what effect, if any, they were having on her.

He stepped close and gently gripped her haft. "Good, chica, take your time." She didn't reply, but he felt satisfaction and the warmth of love radiate from the weapon, and he stood there for several minutes, gently holding her. One upside to his ill-prepared duel with Trinnie Ro was that he'd

grown even closer to the weapon. When so much had failed him, she'd been there, reliable and ready for anything. "When have you not?" he asked, feeling moisture gather in his eyes.

With a contented sigh, he turned and rifled through one of the satchels he'd left in the vault until he closed his fingers around the "concentrated distillate of a Qo'lorian Essence Drifter." He didn't know how much it would affect him, but he figured it was as good a time as any to find out. As far as the queen or anyone else knew, he was still out of it after having consumed his "natural treasure." If this thing knocked him out for a while, so be it.

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He took the distillate and left, closing and locking the door to his vault behind him. He went to his parlor and stood before the mostly closed curtains to his balcony, staring over the canopy of trees toward the enormous majesty of Iron Mountain. With a crooked smile, he saluted the mountain. "Here's to you, big guy," he grunted as he tossed back the little potion.

The liquid's effect was immediate, and it wasn't gentle. Victor felt every muscle in his body go rigid, like a thousand spasms all at once. He couldn't speak or cry out, so taut was his every muscle. All he could do was spread his arms and arch his back, struggling to inhale the smallest of breaths as he felt like he was being stretched on an invisible rack. Even his fingers seemed like they'd flee their sockets, they strained so hard to stretch and widen. He suffered through the pain for several minutes, and then, like a spring being released, his muscles relaxed and rebounded, and he fell to his knees, gasping in relief.

He didn't feel any different, though it would be hard to tell after that session of torture. All he was sure of was the relief in his trembling muscles. The potion was supposed to boost "one or more attributes permanently," so Victor opened his status sheet, looking to see what had changed:

Strength:

680

Vitality:

819 (867)

Dexterity:

280 (302)

Agility:

303 (325)

Intelligence:

220

Will:

673

There it was, plain as day: he'd gained exactly 100 strength. "Holy shit," he gasped. Considering he gained thirty-six unmodified attribute points with each legendary-Class level, he wasn't going to complain about a potion that gave him a free hundred points. He'd tried talking with Du, asking him about the awards and the suspicious synergy of them all, but the Dungeon Core hadn't uttered a word since taking up residence in Victor's vault. Victor thought maybe it couldn't—maybe it needed to be placed and given a new home before it could interact with people.

"Or maybe he's just a cagey little pendejo," Victor chuckled. He stretched, relieved that his limbs and muscles were feeling normal again. "That didn't take long." Considering that the potion's effects had been near-instantaneous, he contemplated laying low for a while, avoiding more responsibilities by pretending to be recovering longer than needed. With a heavy sigh and the weight of unknown duties on his shoulders, he walked over to the door to his suite and opened it, unsurprised to find Feist slumped on a stool, flipping through another smutty pamphlet.

The fighter almost knocked his stool over as he leaped to his feet, stuffing the leaflet into his belt. "Good, uh, morning, Your Grace."

"Is it?" Victor hadn't looked at the clock.

“Aye, well, good enough for me, milord. I had a lovely breakfast, and my girl, Tienna, she promised me a massage if I didn’t get in trouble with Lady Bryn again and avoided being kept late to review my drills. It doesn’t hurt that she was hired on here in the palace as a scullery—”

Victor held up a hand. “That’s enough detail, Feist. Where’s Bryn?”

“The, uh, Baroness is watching over that craftsman you hired. She said you asked that he and his project be guarded at all hours, and Lady Bryn’s only hired on two others that she trusts so far, so —”

“Go and get her. You can take her place.”

Feist hurriedly saluted, then jogged across the little room to the elevator. Victor watched him push the button to open the doors, then nodded and closed the door. He put on a serious face with the guy, but, in truth, Victor thought Feist was pretty funny, and though the man probably had ten years on him, he reminded Victor of himself when he was younger...and stupider. He chuckled, shaking his head as he walked over to his little kitchen. The cold-cupboard probably had less food in it than Victor’s storage rings, but he thought he’d take a look.

He’d barely taken out a pitcher of fresh-squeezed juice—pale-blue and sweet—and was pouring it into a tall glass when a knock sounded at his door. “That was fast,” he muttered. Had he locked it? “Come in!” he called. The latch clicked, and Victor heard the door open, but he didn’t hear Bryn’s usual bootheels clicking on the marble. When he looked up, he nearly dropped the pitcher, but his fingers were deft, and he caught it before it shattered on the countertop.

A woman stood there. A woman with blond hair, very blue eyes, and wearing a smile that spoke volumes. She stepped forward, her long leg swishing out of her flowing, yellow skirts, her little matching slippers silent on the floor. When she was standing in the center of the front parlor, looking directly at Victor, she gripped the outer layer of her skirts and performed a delicate curtsy. Her blonde ringlets danced with the motion, the yellow ribbons in her hair fighting to hold them in place.

“Milord, Victor,” she said, her bright, crisp voice clear as a crystal chime as she straightened.

“Holy shit. Tes?” Victor’s legs were already moving as he spoke, carrying him around the kitchen counter over the thick rug and into the parlor. He would have stopped and waited for her to respond, but he didn’t need to—her eyes welcomed him, and the smile spreading her perfect, bow-shaped lips was too much for him to resist. He stooped and snatched her up, smashing her against his chest as he turned in a circle, swinging her dangling legs out as she laughed.

When he set her down, her cheeks flushed, and she fanned herself, looking up at him. “Such liberties!”

“Oh, come on. You could have thrown me through that wall over there if you didn’t want me to hug you.”

“True,” she laughed, turning to inspect his quarters. “What a lovely setting.” She walked toward the sitting area near the balcony, peering out at Iron Mountain. “There’s the mountain where your ancient kin sleeps, hmm?”

“You know about him?”

“I have him to thank for my visit.”

“Huh?”

“He’s an ancient primordial—a being who follows his own rules. When he contacted and met with you, it opened some doors for me...politically speaking.”

Victor was having a hard time wrapping his head around the fact that Tes was standing before him, speaking to him almost like nothing had happened since the last time he’d seen her. “Jesus, Tes, I can’t believe you’re standing here!”

“Well, I am, so please try to believe.” She giggled and twirled, looking past him toward the door. “Someone comes.”

Victor stared at the door for a moment, and then, sure enough, knuckles rapped on the wood. Now that he was concentrating on it, he recognized the pattern as Bryn’s. He looked at Tes. “Does anyone know you’re here?”

“Naturally! I greeted many staff as I walked through your palace. Best you don’t announce me as anything other than an old friend, though.”

Victor walked over to the door and opened it. Bryn stood there in her usual uniform, though he noted a new, star-patterned embroidery on her collar. “Hey, Bryn, I think I called for you a little prematurely. I didn’t realize I had a guest in the palace.”

“You do? Shall I escort...them up?”

“No, no. She’s here already. I’ll introduce you after we finish catching up. I’m sorry about dragging you up here for nothing. Go ahead and go back to whatever you were doing, okay?”

Bryn’s eyes narrowed, but her face was nearly expressionless as she responded, “Of course, Your Grace. Nothing is amiss?”

“Nothing with me. Is everything good with the, um, queen and Trobban and all that?”

“Everything is fine, Your Grace. Based on how you spoke yesterday, I thought you’d be out longer.”

“Yesterday?” Victor laughed, shaking his head. “I thought it would be longer. Anyway, it’s good to know I didn’t miss much. I’ll call you soon.” At his words, Bryn nodded, and Victor closed the door.

“You care about her,” Tes observed, still standing near the balcony windows. She’d pulled the curtains wide.

“She’s been great.”

“Good. You’ll need allies.”

“Ahem,” Victor cleared his throat, still feeling off balance. “Care to elaborate on that?”

“Oh, Victor! What a sticky mess you’ve gotten yourself in!” She sighed, shaking her head. “I have some leeway to speak, thanks to him,” she pointed toward the mountain, “but my hands are still a bit tied. Nevertheless, I’m here and can guide you for a while. We’ll see you through this...I hope.”

“Through what?”

“Well, you’re determined to battle your way to the top of the food chain on this world, yes? I won’t lie and say I haven’t been watching you from time to time.”

“Yeah, I guess I’m determined. I made promises to—”

“Well, my dear, sweet titan, you’ve made promises that will prove difficult to keep. There are very powerful, very wealthy people ruling the great kingdoms of this world, and they have vast resources. Do you think you’re the only warrior from another world who’s found himself a position as a champion here? Men and women are lining up to kill you, sweet boy.”

Victor didn’t love her patronizing turn of phrase, but she had a way of delivering the words with that sweet smile and tone that disarmed his flickering anger before it could take root. He shrugged. “They can’t be veil walkers. I’ve fought steel seekers before.”

Tes smiled and stepped closer to him. She was larger than she had been most of the time on Coloss—giant-sized—but she still had to stand on her tip-toes to look more directly into his eyes. Her lips curled up on the right side in a crooked smile as she tsked. “Love, you aren’t the only person in all the worlds connected to Ruhn who has a potent bloodline. You aren’t the only warrior to have the blessing of a strong Core and legendary Classes. There are some true monsters readying themselves to face you—men and women unlike any you’ve faced before. At least one of them has an elder bloodline.”

Tes flickered in and out of focus for the briefest moment, and Victor saw her true form. A great, blue-scaled dragon’s head flashed before his eyes, her white fangs exposed in a wicked, leering smile, her glittering sapphire eyes like jewels with the light of a blazing star at their heart. “If you take my meaning,” she said, back to her human-appearing self.

“A dragon?”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves. The way I see it, you’ve got some time to prepare. It’ll be a while before you face the first of Ruhn’s great houses. Their machinations will take time, their schemes to obstruct your queen’s progress. Oh, what a pit of vipers you’ve gotten yourself mixed up with!” She sighed and tilted her head, arching an eyebrow. “How would you like me to spend some time with you here? I know you’ve been studying elder magic. I can...tutor you.”

“Shit, seriously? Fuck yes, I’d like that!” The idea of having Tes there to help him again filled Victor’s chest with unmitigated joy. He loved her style of “tutoring.” She was straightforward and pleasant and spent time with him when he’d been on Coloss. Of all the “mentors” he’d had, Tes was

more than his favorite—he wouldn't deny that he'd been smitten by her. He could put that aside, couldn't he? He could focus and learn from her. Right?

"Good! Thanks to yonder titan," she pointed out the window at the mountain, "and thanks to your wandering spirit—you visited me, do you remember that?"

"W-what?"

"Yes! Your spirit came my way during some fever dream or another. Anyway, thanks to that little fact—you contacted me, technically—the Celestial Envoys have granted me permission to visit. I'm not allowed to reveal my true nature to others, and I'm not allowed to intervene, but I think some gentle guidance and a little tutoring are well within my limitations."

Victor laughed and stooped, reaching for her, wanting to pull her into another sweeping embrace, but she took a step back. "Easy, now!" she laughed, "We've much work to do and...well, we need to keep things professional. I'm so impressed with your growth, Victor; I truly am. You've made tremendous strides in so many ways. You're truly a man of great accomplishments. Nevertheless, if I'm going to teach you, you must take me seriously, as well."

Victor nodded, a little embarrassed but too happy, too relieved to have Tes there, to care. She was a lifeline for him, someone he trusted implicitly—more than Arona, more than Queen Kynna, more than anyone else on Ruhn—even more than Ranish Dar. No, the truth was, he felt that way, especially about Dar. How wonderful would it be to have a mentor again whom he wasn't second-guessing, whom he didn't think might have ulterior motives? He still wasn't sure Dar expected him to win all these duels. As far as he knew, Dar had plans based on either outcome—success or failure.

"Good!" Tes nodded, turning back to the balcony. "Let's start with a review of where things stand. You can tell me about your allies here, your equipment, and the things about you that have changed. I can see much, but I can't see everything. Truly, Victor, you impress me! So?" She produced a crystalline decanter. "Would you have a drink and sit with me? I might have a tale or two to share with you, as well."

Victor smiled and nodded, moving to the couch where he sat. She walked over and settled beside him, tilting her knees so they pointed his way. She set the decanter on the table beside them and produced two crystal glasses. She put them on the table and nodded. "You pour."

"Oh, sure," Victor reached for the decanter and pulled the stopper. The heady scent of potent alcohol and something cloyingly sweet filled his nostrils. "Smells good."

“It is! And,” she leaned forward and smiled, slapping his knee, “it would kill most people even to have a sip. You’ve advanced your race past epic, though; I can feel it. You’ll be fine.”

Victor’s eyes widened, his mouth set in a stupid grin; he felt like the drink was a peace offering. It was Tes acknowledging that he’d changed, that he was ready for more from her. They might be embarking on a student-mentor relationship for now, but he was more than just a student to her, and she was showing him as much. He poured the honey-colored liquid into Tes’s glass, and the potent fumes wafted into his nose. He smelled fire, rain, and something like cherry blossoms in that eye-watering haze. “Nice.”

After he poured them both a finger of the stuff, he handed one of the glasses to Tes and then tapped his against it. As their glasses clicked together with a crystalline chime, she said, “To old friendships made new again.”

Victor nodded. “To old friends and warm hearts.”

She smiled, and they drank. Victor took just a tiny sip, afraid he’d get drunk too quickly, but it went down easily, and, despite Tes’s earlier words, it didn’t seem all that dangerous. Still, he set the glass down and turned to look into Tes’s eyes. “I’m so grateful that you came.”

“I love that about you, Victor—how you wear your heart openly for all to see. Now, tell me everything, and you can start with the shadow on that big heart. What steered your course to Ruhn, and where has Valla gone?”

“Ah.” Victor’s smile faltered. He leaned back, contemplated picking up and draining his glass, then sighed, shaking his head. “Things started to get difficult for us when we got to Sojourn...” So, he and Tes sat together, and he told her everything. For the first time in as long as he could remember, he bared his soul to another person, sharing his fears, his doubts, and his heartache. Tes listened and, to his relief, didn’t offer any platitudes. She nodded and commiserated, and before long, their conversation turned to Ranish Dar and Victor’s mad quest to make Kynna Empress of Ruhn.

Before he got far, though, Tes asked him to back up and tell him about what he’d done since Coloss. Victor nodded, and he recounted his time on Fanwath, his conquest of the Untamed Marches, and how he and his allies had traveled to Sojourn to save Edeya. In a way, it was cathartic to sit there rehashing everything he’d done, all he’d been through, and all he hoped to do. It helped him to remember that he had accomplished a lot. He might have gotten himself into a “viper’s nest” there on Ruhn, but just because he had some tough pendejos lining up to fight him, that didn’t mean he couldn’t find a way to win.

So, he talked, and then Tes talked, and they planned, and they plotted, and before he knew it, the night had grown late, and they were both drunk and laughing. Victor's chest was filled with joy as he shared all his troubles, and that shared weight made them light, and he forgot about them for the first time in a very long while.