

## Victor of Tucson

### *Book 2: Chapter 1: Death and Bones*

Victor felt like he was being sucked down a cold whirlpool as the portal drew him in. The sensation was panic-inducing, but just as his mind began to run away from him, it was over. The foot he'd stepped into the portal with was suddenly making contact with a hard surface, and then he was standing in a brightly lit stone room with an exquisitely detailed, shiny gold or brass leaf ceiling. Thayla was next to him, and he realized the bright light was coming from his orb that had made the journey through the portal with them.

"This isn't in my records, Victor," Gorz said in his mind.

"What do you mean? Didn't Reevus have to come through here?" Victor asked aloud, and Thayla gave him a raised eyebrow. He motioned to his necklace while he waited for Gorz's answer.

"One would think so, but I don't recognize this location," Gorz replied.

"He doesn't recognize this area, even though his old owner came through this dungeon."

"Maybe it changes over time or as people enter it?" Thayla leaned against her spear, peering around. "Look at the ceiling in here! Have you ever seen something so fancy?"

"Only on VR."

"VR?"

"Um, I mean like not in person—in pictures, sort of." Victor walked around the square room, pausing at the strange, smooth, round door. He couldn't see any hinges, and the pale, maple-hued wood was without feature. "You ever been in a dungeon, Thayla?"

"No. Adventurers and fortune-seekers go to dungeons; I never had that kind of confidence or ambition in my old life."

"Really?" Victor looked at the tall, black-braided woman with her strong shoulders, fierce expression, and leopard-like grace. "You never struck me as anything other than confident."

"I had other priorities before I was sentenced to the mines. We adjust as we must, right?" She walked forward with her spear and tapped the sharp point against the wooden door. "Do you see a way to open this?"

“Are we ready? I have some ideas.” When Thayla nodded, crouching and pointing her spear at the closed portal, Victor stepped forward and gave it a shove with one hand, his axe gripped in the other. Just as he’d hoped, the door moved easily, receding into the wall an inch and then rolling to the right, disappearing into the hollow stone. A corridor crossed in front of their room, built from the same stone with the same fancy, gilt ceiling. “Just a sec,” he said, willing his globe of inspiration Energy to float to the back corner of the room, then he poked his head out into the corridor and looked both ways.

Outside of the pool of illumination coming from the doorway, the corridor was utterly dark. Victor looked to his globe and willed it to come closer and, again, was surprised by how easily it floated toward him. “This globe is a lot easier to control than before. Do you think it’s the improved spell, or am I getting better at it?”

“Probably both.” Thayla shrugged. “Anything out there?”

“Darkness. Well, there’s no going back.” He gestured to the lack of any other exit, then he moved into the corridor and, trusting his gut, turned right. Victor could feel Thayla’s presence behind him, and he started advancing, his bright light following along with him. After about twenty paces, he saw a T junction ahead and slowly moved toward it. As he drew close and peered both ways, seeing nothing but long, stretching corridors disappearing into darkness in both directions, he noticed, in the light of his globe, a jagged, hairline crack in the wall at the junction.

He stretched out a hand and ran it along the crack, tracing its length from the top of the wall all the way to the ground. “What is it?” Thayla asked.

“There’s a weird line or crack here.” He took a step back and ran his eyes over the wall, and then he saw a tiny, shallow depression near the top of it. He wouldn’t have seen it if his light hadn’t cast the smallest of shadows into the depression. Again, he stretched out his hand and pushed his fingertips into the depression, and, with a click, the stone moved under his touch; the wall separated a couple of inches along the crack he’d seen.

“Woah!” Thayla backed up as the stone moved, but as they both stood ready with their weapons, they realized it wouldn’t open further on its own.

“I’ll pull it open. Ready?” She grunted assent, and he hooked Lifedrinker into his belt, reaching out to pull apart the stone halves of the wall. At first, they didn’t want to move, but they inched apart a tiny amount as he strained. He realized it was just a matter of muscle, so he flooded his arms with strength using Sovereign Will and heaved. The walls slid roughly apart with a deep grind, and when he had a gap big enough to slip through, he backed up and

grabbed up his axe. “Wow, here just a few minutes, and you already found a secret passage?” Thayla clapped him on the shoulder, peering into the revealed space.

The light exposed another passage, narrower and with a regular stone ceiling. Victor ducked through the narrow gap and started walking forward, Thayla and his light just behind. The floor of this passage had a layer of dust on it, which made him realize the other hallway hadn't. He didn't know if that were a significant clue as to traffic or just how the dungeon worked, but he appreciated being able to tell that nothing had moved through this corridor ahead of them. A few more minutes of walking brought an ordinary wooden door into view. It was made of vertical slats, and Victor could see it had a black metal latch and hinges.

“That door's in good shape,” Thayla whispered.

“Yeah, let's see if it's locked.” Victor padded forward and reached out the latch. When he tried to depress it, it wouldn't move. He whispered, “Should I try to bash it? I could also use the ring we found.”

“Might as well use the ring; no sense waking up the whole dungeon until we have to.”

“Right.” Victor lifted his left hand with the Ring of the Guest and gently knocked on the door. A raspy click sounded from the metal plate around the latch, and Victor whistled appreciatively before he could catch himself. He clapped his hand to his mouth and winced toward Thayla, but she just shrugged. Once again, he pushed down on the latch, which depressed with a click, opening the door toward them.

Victor stepped back, pulled the door open, and his light revealed the creepiest thing he'd ever seen: a throng of naked, hairless, pale creatures were packed together in the center of the room. They stood with their arms down, swaying and pressing into each other as they stared up at an orb of pulsing, radiating blue-white Energy. They were anatomically similar to humans with all the proper parts, and the way they pressed and hissed at each other through wide, thin-lipped mouths was strangely and disturbingly sexual. When the light from Victor's orb touched them, they jerked their heads away from the ceiling, staring at the duo standing in the doorway.

They didn't scream or growl, but they hissed and gnashed their teeth. For a moment, they stood as if stunned, but then something broke, and they lifted their claw-tipped arms and charged. Victor immediately cast Project Spirit, hoping to drive them mad with his rage-attuned Energy like he had the rats, and it worked, partially. Some of the ghoulish figures paused in their wild

charge, others began to hiss and snap their teeth more frenziedly, and still others started to thrash about with their claws, heedless of the damage they inflicted on their own kind. Before they could regain their composure, Victor stepped forward and started to hack Lifedrinker about.

The axe bit deeply into the naked monsters, but not as easily as Victor had anticipated; their skin was tough like old leather, and their bones a lot harder than those of the cultists outside the dungeon. He failed to remove any limbs, though black blood showered the room from his wide cleaves. Thayla, too, delivered a half dozen terrible stabs to the creatures before they'd managed to shake off Victor's spell and redouble their efforts to claw the two adventurers apart.

They seemed to hate Victor's light, and Victor had to believe that the white-gold glare was counteracting whatever effect the blue orb in the room might have had on him and Thayla. The ghouls were strong, though, and Victor was having a hard time knocking away all the claws and gnashing teeth and accumulated a lot of painful gashes along his arms and legs, despite the carnage he was dishing out with Lifedrinker. He heard Thayla grunt in pain more than once and knew some of their claws were also getting past her guard. "Come on! Fucking kill them!" He screamed, more at himself than Thayla, and he flooded his arms and axe with rage Energy, cast Sovereign Will to improve his agility, and activated Inspiring Presence. The room lit up even brighter in his vision; the ghoul-like monsters seemed smaller, weaker, slower, and Lifedrinker blurred in the air as he began to weave her between their grasping claws, striking terrible wounds to necks, bellies, and joints.

Thayla made a sound like a cross between a growl and a howl and began to drive her spear into eyes and mouths, pushing the ghouls back and sending them flopping on the ground. Between her improved accuracy and Victor's sudden show of speed and skill, they had most of the creatures down in a matter of seconds. Still, they thrashed and writhed and tried to stand and attack them. Not one of them was entirely "dead" yet.

Victor growled and stepped forward, bringing Lifedrinker down on one flopping, prone ghoul's neck with all of his might. With a loud cracking snap, her edge bit through its sturdy spine and clicked against the stone floor. As the monster's head rolled away, the body stopped thrashing, and the clacking jaws ceased their movement. After that, Victor and Thayla knew what to do, and they systematically began to relieve the ghouls of their heads. Thayla kept them down while Victor moved among them, powering through their necks with Lifedrinker's keen, hungry edge.

"Thirteen," Thayla counted as he finally severed the last ghoul's head.

“Those fucking things were tough,” Victor said, looking at the carnage. His arms and legs were burning from all the gashes he’d received, and, now that his Inspiring Presence had faded, he was feeling exhausted and drained. He was about to suggest a rest when motes of Energy began to gather above the fallen creatures, and every single one was tinged with purple. “This is going to be a big one!” he crowed, bracing himself. Just as he’d predicted, the surge of Energy that flooded into him and Thayla was enormous, lifting them both off the ground.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You’ve achieved level 24 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Congratulations! You’ve learned the spell: Channel Spirit - Improved.\*\*\*

\*\*\*Channel Spirit - Improved: Apply your Core’s Energy to your physical attacks, manifesting your attuned Energy as a destructive force that scales based on the amount of Energy you channel. This skill will bypass the usual effect spirit affinities have on the cultivator’s emotional state. Energy Cost: Variable. Cooldown: Minimal\*\*\*

“I leveled!” Thayla said, a look of surprise on her face. “That’s fast, Victor!”

“Yeah, well, that was a lot of Energy. I leveled too, by the way.”

“Victor, do you feel that?”

“What?”

“The orb there, the blue one, I can feel it in my Core. It’s like my Core is hungry for it. Does that make sense?”

“I guess? I don’t know—I don’t feel anything from it.” Victor looked to the pale blue orb, unable to shake the notion that its light was sickly somehow, especially after watching those creepy ghoulish assholes basking in it. “Hold on,” he said and then canceled his Globe of Insight. Suddenly the room was bathed in the pale blue glow of the other orb, and Victor felt its chill seeping into his bones. It was an unpleasant chill that brought to mind hunger, despair, and finality. “I don’t like it.”

“It’s Energy, Victor, and my Core is practically salivating for it. I think I could gain something if I try to cultivate it.”

“Well, you know more about this stuff than I do. Can we take it with us? This room is disgusting.” It was true; the square room was like a scene from a nightmare, with ghoulish bodies and their heads scattered around in big dark smears all over the stone floor. The walls were splashed with black fluid, and

the smell was ripe, though the cold air emanating from the orb seemed to dampen the stench. “What is it anyway? Ice-attuned?”

“I don’t know, not ‘til I try it, and no, I don’t think we can move it.” She looked around and then started shoving the bodies away from the center of the room. She motioned to the door, “Can you watch my back while I try to cultivate it?”

“Alright. You sure you want to mess with that?”

“There’s a reason this was kept behind a secret door, Victor; I really think it will upgrade my Core.”

“I’ll guard you, then.” Victor resummoned his Globe of Insight, sighing as the cold pressure of the other orb was pushed back, and then he pushed the door closed and stood in front of it, with Lifedrinker, watching Thayla. She sat down with her back to Victor, her legs crossed, and her hands on her knees, just as Yrella taught Victor to sit when he cultivated. While he watched her, he took another look at his attributes:

Strength:

82

Vitality:

90

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

48

Intelligence:

32

Will:

123

Points Available:

10

Victor knew that, logically, there had to be a perfect way to distribute attribute points, but he kept reminding himself that more than one person had told him how rare it was to have unbound points to spend. That meant that a class usually defined a person, which meant that he had a rather uncommon

chance to define himself, at least to some degree. Sure, he was forced to fight savagely for his survival at this time, but did he always want to live that way? Maybe he'd be forced to, but would it hurt to plan for a bit more diversity in his skillset? He felt good, using his free points to keep his minor attributes from lagging too far behind, even if pumping up his strength and vitality might make his current situation more bearable. "But I could pump up lots of attributes with Sovereign Will," he muttered, careful not to bother Thayla.

"Victor, could I be of some help?"

"I'm struggling with how to spend my extra attribute points. How rare a skill is Sovereign Will? It seems pretty great that I could pump up my strength one minute and then my agility or vitality the next."

"That's beyond my scope of knowledge, Victor. I can say that Reevus did not have a similar ability."

"Hold on," Victor paused to really consider the problem. Will was important for a number of factors: according to Yrella, it increased his maximum Energy, his Energy regeneration, his mental fortitude for both resisting effects and forcing them upon his foes, and, in his seemingly rare case, allowed him to boost any other physical attribute. "I'm going to keep improving my will for now." He explained his logic to Gorz, and the spirit indicated that it couldn't find fault with it.

"With 133 will, I can boost any of my stats by over forty points now!"

"It seems quite significant, Victor."

He was looking at his Energy numbers, happy to see he had over 1,500 maximum, when the orb Thayla was studying suddenly flared. A stream of blue Energy with a sickly white undertone started streaming into her, just below her breastbone. "That's going to her Core, right, Gorz?"

"Yes, Victor, and it is not water-attuned Energy as you speculated. I've met Elementalists while with Reevus, and their signature was quite different."

"Great." Victor watched as Thayla arched her back, and the stream of Energy continued. Her whole body was limned with the cold, blue light now, and he could feel the pressure of it, even with his Globe of Insight floating between him and her. After another moment or two, the stream finally trailed off, and as it was absorbed into Thayla, Victor saw that the orb was gone. He continued to watch her as she seemed to be processing what had happened. Then, finally, she unfolded her legs and stood up. "You okay?" he asked.

“I’m...” she looked around, moving her hands and flexing her fingers, then she turned to Victor, and he saw that her dark-irised eyes were now fully black; the whites were gone. “I’m not sure, Victor. I hope I didn’t just make a terrible mistake. My Core has changed, and I have a new affinity.”

“What changed? What affinity?”

“I used to have a pearl class Core—now it’s a whisper class. Whisper! I’ve never heard of it, but worse, Victor, the affinity is for death. I have a death affinity and a big pool of death-attuned Energy in my Core.”

“Uh, is that bad? It sounds bad.”

“I don’t know! I feel strange! I feel cold. Victor, take my hand; is it cold?” She stepped forward, reaching out her red fingers, and Victor took them. They didn’t feel cold, exactly, but they weren’t as warm as he felt they should be.

“Nah, they aren’t cold, Thayla. Look, um, I’m going to tell you this because I’d want to know. I’m sure it’s nothing, but your eyes are black.”

“My eyes? They’ve always been dark.”

“No, I mean all of them. You don’t have any white parts. Don’t freak out!” Thayla had slapped her hands to her eyes and was pressing her fingers against them as though she could feel what Victor was describing. “They don’t look bad, Thayla! I mean, they’re kind of intimidating, which can be good, right?”

“Victor! What did I do? Am I still me?”

“Of course you are! You wouldn’t be freaking out asking that if you weren’t. Come on, there has to be some bright side to this. Did you gain any more Energy? Any new skills?”

“No new skills, but I have a higher affinity with this new Energy than I used to have, and my Core is two levels higher.”

“Alright! Well, that’s something. You might pick up some skills or spells as we go along.”

“I might get offered a different class option at thirty, too,” she said quietly, her breathing back to normal.

“That’s the spirit. You ready to get out of this stinking room?”

“Yes.” She stepped forward and opened the door, and Victor couldn’t help but notice that her movements seemed different. It took him a minute to put a finger on it, but he realized she didn’t turn to look at him as she went by and



didn't smile or frown—just pulled the door open and walked through. He hoped it was just the strange experience and that she'd get back to herself soon, but he was worried about her.

They made their way back to the T junction, and Victor took a left turn, walking ahead of Thayla. The hallway continued for a hundred paces or more, and then Victor saw a flickering blue light ahead. He crouched and moved forward, glancing back to be sure Thayla knew something was up. When he saw a chamber opening up ahead at the end of the tunnel, he tried to creep forward to get a peek at what was in there, but suddenly a blue, whistling ball of flame tore through the darkness toward him. He flattened to his belly, and the flames whistled by, Thayla narrowly dodging to the right.

Figuring stealth was no longer an option, Victor leaped up, lifted Lifedrinker, and focusing Sovereign Will into boosting his agility, he charged into the chamber. Almost without thought, he urged his Globe of Insight to rush along behind him, and when the bright light burst over the larger space, Victor almost stopped in his tracks. Standing before him was a headless skeleton built from thick, gray bones standing nearly nine feet tall. It held a skull in its right hand, though it was much too small and the wrong shade of yellow to be the skeleton's missing head. As Victor registered what he was seeing, the skeleton turned the skull to face him. Blue flames flickered in the eye sockets, and, as they caught sight of Victor, they flared brightly, and a ball of blue Energy streaked toward him.

Victor played baseball every summer, and it was almost a reflex when he stepped to the left and swung Lifedrinker to perfectly bisect the ball of flames. The result wasn't what he'd hoped; rather than knock the ball away, it simply burst into a conflagration of flames that engulfed Victor and sent him sprawling back to tumble over the gray stones. The flames burned and ignited his clothing, and Victor screamed as he extended his tumble into a log roll, trying to get them out.

By the time the flames stopped licking at his flesh and clothing, Victor was a dozen paces away from the skeleton. When he looked up, he saw Thayla dancing with it, her spear striking out in wicked blue flashes. The skeleton tried to launch fireballs at her, but she moved nimbly, keeping the skull-holding hand awkwardly chasing after her, unable to draw a bead. Victor jumped up, cast Inspiring Presence, used Sovereign Will to boost his strength, and flooded his axe with Energy using Channel Spirit. He pumped nearly half of his rage Energy into Lifedrinker, and she flared with a blazing red aura as he lifted her over his head.

Thayla had the skeleton's attention, so Victor caught it completely unaware as he brought Lifedrinker down on the skeleton's spine. Her shining razor edge tore into the bone, and the rage Energy stored in the weapon surged down, shattering the spine and dozens of attached bones in a shower of splinters and powder. The skeleton collapsed, and its blazing-eyed head rolled away. Victor saw the eyes still burning, and he quickly stepped around so that he could approach the skull from the side. He saw Thayla do the same, and they came to stand over it from opposite sides. "Stand back," Victor said, lifting Lifedrinker.

"Wait!" Thayla said, holding out a hand.

"What? It's still alive."

"I know; I can hear it."

"What, now?"

"It's talking to me, Victor. It says it can teach me things."

"Thayla, fuck that! You saw what this thing did!"

"Victor, what if it can tell me more about my new Core or affinity?"

"I'm sure it can, but can you trust anything it says? It's a fucking skull!"

"It's promising a lot, Victor," Thayla said, her voice rising as her stress elevated.

"Thayla, back up. Trust me, will you? I don't have a skull whispering in my head."

"Victor! You have that amulet talking to you! I didn't try to destroy it, did I?"

"Gorz? Gorz isn't an undead thing."

"Well, Victor, I don't have my memories from my life, but I was once a living thing."

"Not helping, Gorz."

"Victor, this skull won't hurt you. I promise I'll let you chop it to bits if it does anything. You asked me to trust you, but will you trust me?"

"Argh!" Victor growled, backing up a step and letting Lifedrinker hang at his side. "Thayla, I hope you know what you're doing."

"Me too, Victor," she said, kneeling to pick up the old, yellow, humanoid skull. As she lifted it, Victor saw it had a lot more sharp teeth than a human, and the eye sockets weren't round, more angular. They still held flickering flames in

them, though they didn't flare at all when Thayla looked into them. "He's offering me a contract, Victor. In exchange for saving him from your axe, he's saying he'll tutor me until I reach tier four."

"Then what?"

"Then we will renegotiate." Thayla pulled some strips of leather out of her ring and began to make a harness to hold the skull. "His name is Belikot, and he says this room is safe to rest in if we shut the door to the hallway we came through."

"We really going to listen to a pinche skull? Alright, Thayla." Victor turned and saw a large black iron door on heavy hinges that he could swing closed, blocking off the hallway. He did it, throwing the bolt home with a satisfying clank. He scanned the room and saw a similar door on the far wall and several trunks and cabinets along the wall to the right, near where he'd destroyed Belikot's skeleton.

"Belikot says you can search those trunks safely; there are books I should study, some ingredients for alchemy, and one of the trunks has over a thousand Energy beads in it!" Thayla sat down, occupied with her project, pulling strips of leather around the skull and braiding them near the top of the skull. Victor didn't reply to her, still feeling annoyed. He thought about why he was irritated and realized a big part of it was that he'd viscerally wanted to chop Lifedrinker into that skull.

"I'll check it out," he said, trying not to grouse.

"Victor, when you're done, and if we're going to rest here, I think I have an idea that might be promising. I'd like to try to teach you a weave, a way to combine your different affinities into a different end product."

"What? What will that do?" he asked, walking over to the first trunk.

"It will allow you to use the new Energy type in one of your existing spell patterns, creating a new result, just as you did with your inspiration-attuned Energy."

"What do rage and inspiration make when they combine?"

"I'm not sure, Victor; I don't know that exact weave, so we'll need to experiment. I think it will pay off, though."

"Alright. Let me get this stuff sorted, first." Victor looked around at Thayla and saw that, though she seemed quite focused on the skull, there was a genuine spark in her eyes, and he hoped it was there for good reasons.

