

Victor BK2: Ch4

Book 2: Chapter 4: Moving Up

Victor stood over the hewn corpses of the hags, panting and dripping blood. When he felt the encroaching darkness at the edges of his vision, he worried at first that there was a third hag or something worse, but then he realized it was simply his vision darkening from blood loss.

“C’mon,” he said, staring at the still, pale flesh. He put Lifedrinker’s axehead against the stone floor and leaned heavily on her handle, willing himself to slow his breathing. As he’d hoped, golden motes began to gather on the dead bodies, and then a stream of Energy surged into him, spreading through his pathways, into his Core, and then out again to speed the knitting of his flesh and partially renew his depleted blood supply.

Victor straightened and looked around; he still stood at the end of the hallway he’d discovered, but now the heavy iron door was partially open, and the stones at his feet were smeared and painted with dark red and black stains. He took a few deep breaths, stretching his back and flexing his legs, happy to see that most of the deep slashes the hags had delivered were closed up. Some were still stiff and sore, with thick scabs, but he was out of danger when it came to bleeding to death.

“Nasty bitches,” he muttered, looking at the broken corpses. He didn’t let his eyes linger long, but he took a moment to pick up the long, razor-sharp knives the two hags had used against him. The weapons had a single edge and no point, designed with slashing in mind. They reminded Victor of miniature cleavers; he wondered if there was a proper name for that kind of knife.

Both knives had polished wooden handles made of dozens of different colored woods pressed together, and Victor marveled at the craftsmanship. He saw a few runes along their blades and figured they might have some enchantments. Happy to take something away from the harrowing encounter, he put the two blades into his ring and then summoned forth his Globe of Inspiration, willing it to resume following closely behind him. As the ball of warm white-gold light took shape, the shaft of courage-attuned light that had initially saved him faded away.

Victor moved to the door and pulled it open, Lifedrinker held ready. The open door revealed a continuation of the corridor, and, looking down into the shadows, Victor didn’t see any other doors. “Gorz, you keep track of our movements?”

“Of course, Victor, I couldn’t stop mapping if I wanted to.”

“That’s kinda shitty. What if you wanted to do something else?”

“No, Victor, you misunderstand; I don’t actively map where I’ve been. It just happens as a function of my enchantments. I don’t think about it, really, until there’s a reason to review the data.”

“Huh, alright. Please let me know if you see any sort of pattern or some hint as to where we are in relation to where Thayla, er, that fucking skull, dumped us.”

“I know, spatially, exactly where we are in relation to that location, but I think you mean if I see a passage or stair that might lead that way, correct?”

“Yeah, I can’t burrow through stone, so we’ll need to find our way through the passages.” Victor chuckled at the idea while slowly advancing into the hallway. He noticed that the temperature, while still chilly, was nothing like it had been at the bottom of the pitfall. He wondered if some of those runes that didn’t activate the secret door were responsible for dropping the temperature. Was it to preserve fallen, dead adventurers’ bodies? Was it meant as some sort of torture? Did the fungus in there require a cold temperature to thrive? “Too many questions.”

“Pardon, Victor?”

“Nothing, Gorz, just thinking out loud.”

As he walked along the stone corridor, Victor’s mind kept returning to the two hags and how they’d manifested that palpable darkness. It had seemed to disperse when he’d cast his new spell, but his spell description didn’t say anything about banishing darkness spells. It said it made him immune to fear effects, though, making Victor wonder if the darkness hadn’t been tangible but some sort of mental trick or manipulation. He wondered how screwed he’d have been if his will wasn’t so high. What if he’d been unable to shake off the panic enough to cast any spells? “No question about it—I’d be hag food.” After a moment, he said, “Just talking to myself, Gorz.”

“Thank you, Victor.”

After another minute of quiet stalking, he came to a left turn in the corridor, and when Victor peered around the corner, he saw a wooden door. When he approached it, he could tell it was in good repair; no light or shadows stood between the slats, and the hinges and latch seemed to be in good working order. Victor reached forward, pushed down on the crude iron latch, lifting it free of the bracket, and pulled it slowly open. It creaked, but just a little. When it was an inch or two ajar, he peered through the opening.

Another stone block room lay beyond the door, illuminated by half a dozen flickering candles on little tables that reminded Victor of old-fashioned school desks. His globe cast a beam of light through the open door, though, laying a shaft of bright light through the center of the room, over a few of the desks, and alerting the creepy, hooded creatures sitting at them. They lifted their cowed heads, peering toward the light source and hissing. “Shit,” Victor grunted, then backed up a step, readying Lifedrinker.

A cold wind whistled through the cracks around the door, and when Victor saw palpable darkness writhing through the opening, pushing against his light, he didn’t waste any time and cast Heroic Heart. As the heat spread out from his chest, the wispy darkness seemed to fade away, and the cold wind felt more like a simple breeze. He didn’t know how long his new spell would last and decided to go on the offensive, no longer worried about what might be waiting on the other side of the door. He strode forward, pulled it open, and stared into the cloaked figures’ hooded, flickering red eyes.

They didn't utter any words or screams, just continued to hiss sibilantly as they swarmed toward him, knives in their hands. Two of the creatures near the back stood stock still, lifting their hands and seeming to manifest blue, swirling Energy between the pale, clawed appendages. Victor surged forward, a choked-up grip on Lifedrinker, unable to make a wide swing in the corridor.

As he chopped at the closest creature, he cast Channel Spirit, filling Lifedrinker with a blazing, red surge of rage-attuned Energy. She ripped forward, her bright blade slicing through the creature's robe and biting into something dense and soft beneath it. She pulled and sank deeply into its flesh, and Victor could almost feel her exult in the Energy she drew from it.

As Victor pulled her back to block an arcing knife swipe, the creatures in the back unleashed their balls of blue fire, sending them swirling through the air, over the heads of their comrades, and right at Victor's face. He crouched and hopped to the side, planting his back against the corridor's stone wall, and the balls of blue flame howled past, smashing into the stone ceiling of the hall a few feet past him. They expanded into a blazing blue inferno, the heat of which singed Victor's eyebrows and caused him to close his eyes in reflex. Deep pain in his thigh and a sharp pain in his abdomen had him blindly cleaving in an arc, trying to knock away the swarming creatures.

When the heat faded, he opened his eyes, and while he continued to hack at the creatures, he saw a knife with a pale hand and arm still attached jutting out of his thigh. Victor screamed, kicking out with his good leg to give himself a bit of space, then he released Lifedrinker with one hand and yanked the knife out. He threw it, arm still grimly hanging on, at the creature in front of him. Its smoldering eyes blinked, and Victor gripped Lifedrinker and made a quick chop at its neck. She sliced through its robe, and Victor felt the blade bite through a stiffly resisting neck, and then the creature fell, flopping, to the ground.

Another blaze of blue light alerted him to danger, and he squatted low. This time, the monster in the back hadn't been so careful of its friends; the fiery blue Energy ball hit one of them in the back and burst into a conflagration. Victor rolled backward away from the explosion, and when he regained his feet, he saw that all three of the robed creatures that had been holding the doorway were aflame, flopping and thrashing on the ground as the fire consumed them. Victor took that opportunity to charge, leaping over their flaming bodies and smashing into one of the desks as he broke into the room.

The two creatures making the fireballs stumbled back, the preparations for their next spells spoiled by his encroachment. Victor charged, growling and swinging Lifedrinker for all he was worth, using the entire length of his improvised axe haft and the larger space in the room to give her a proper, whistling cleave. Her bearded, gleaming edge met the first creature midway between its shoulder and hip, snapping through little bones and splashing through soft flesh and innards. Her arc continued, biting into the shoulder of the second caster, relieving it of its arm.

The first fell, rolling to its side and moaning softly as its life poured out with its glistening entrails. The second hissed more loudly, falling back and clutching at its stump. Not wanting to give it a chance to spring any sort of surprise, Victor pressed the attack and jabbed Lifedrinker into its face, leading with the top, pointed edge of her blade, and he felt her hit bone. He grunted and drove forward, pinning the creature's skull between Lifedrinker's edge and the stone wall and grinding until she broke through, sinking into the meat behind the bone. She surged and pulsed, and Victor saw blue veins of Energy flow through the caster's pale flesh into her blade.

When it ceased twitching and Lifedrinker seemed to relax, Victor yanked her free and looked around the room. The strange desks all had paper on them, and the ones he hadn't knocked over still held little pots of ink with quills sticking forth. Victor examined a couple of the parchments, but the language was indecipherable for him, and Gorz couldn't give any help. Still, he gathered them up and stuffed them into his ring. He was in the process of doing so when the surge of Energy from his kills hit him, and he paused a moment to gather himself.

He felt strong and refreshed, his previous wounds now wholly healed, reduced to white scars. "Two fights and no level. I must be close, eh, Gorz?"

"You seem to gain levels rapidly, but it requires more and more Energy to level as you advance, Victor."

"Right," Victor said with a stretch, looking at the exits to the room. Two doors led out, but he resigned himself to searching through the little robed corpses before trying them out. His job was made easier by the fact that the creatures in the doorway, all four of them, had burned up. Their robes were gone, and their flesh was nothing but blackened char. The stench was unpleasant—nothing like cooked meat. It was more like a mixture of old charcoal and a compost bin, and Victor had to hold his old sleeve-mask over his face as he poked through the remains. Some blackened knife blades were all he could find of interest, so he moved over to the casters.

He kept his nose covered as he rooted around the corpse of the creature he'd eviscerated, checking for rings or a necklace or any sort of pouch. He didn't come up with anything, not even a weapon. The final corpse held a surprise, though. Under its robe was a leather sling with built-in loops holding slender vials of green fluid. Victor wasn't about to taste green liquid found from such a dubious source, but he pulled the bandolier off the monster and stored it in his ring. Maybe he'd meet someone who could tell him what it was someday.

That done, Victor turned to the doors; they were both set into the opposite wall of the one he'd come through. He placed his ear against each door, and neither gave him any clues about what lay beyond. He tried the latch on the right-hand door, and it opened, so he pulled it an inch away from the doorjamb and peered through. A narrow corridor led into darkness. Victor softly closed the door, then tried the other one. It too opened without resistance, revealing a small closet, so he pulled the door wide and studied the contents.

A shelf in the back of the closet was stacked with sheets of blank parchment. A bucket sat in one corner with an old, dust-covered mop sitting within, and piles of rags and broken pieces of wood filled most of the space. Victor had no idea how valuable parchment was in this world, but he figured he could always use it for kindling if nothing else, so he put the stacks of thick, yellowed paper into his ring. That done, he studied the walls of the closet in the light of his Orb of Insight but couldn't find anything of interest.

"Onward," he said, moving to the other door and advancing into the dark, narrow corridor. The air was heavy with dust and chilly, and the stone held myriad

cobwebs that kept clinging to Victor's face and shoulders. He held Lifedrinker out before himself, forging a path through the clinging webs, but she couldn't catch all of them. He grew so distracted by the challenge of avoiding the tangles that he almost didn't hear the scrape and shudder of something very large moving in the space up ahead. The second time the scraping sound came to him, though, he paused and peered ahead through the gloom and obscuring webs.

It was hard to tell with his limited perspective, but it seemed like the tunnel got wider, not far from where he stood, and he could see something shifting in the darkness just beyond the reach of his light. Victor focused on his globe of light and willed it to float forward. As it softly flowed past the webs and into uncharted territory, Victor saw the reflected light from the walls grow dimmer.

At first, he thought his globe was fading, but then he realized it had advanced into a more extensive area, and its light was growing more diffuse. He started after it, but then he saw the source of the noise and motion—an enormous skeleton with a broken shackle around its ankle lurked against the chamber's far wall.

When his light fell directly on the colossal skeleton, it lurched into an upright stance, revealing long arms tipped in claws that touched the ground, and a broad skull, featuring dentition more fitting a tiger than a human. Pale blue lights shone in its eye sockets, and the massive mouth yawned open, snapping shut with a loud crack reminiscent of a firework going off.

“Fucking hell, don't let it bite me. Got it.” Victor muttered, pushing strength into his limbs with Sovereign Will, and channeling rage Energy into Lifedrinker. The massive skeleton, perhaps twelve feet tall, stomped toward him, its shackle dragging behind it with a bouncing clatter.

Victor cast Inspiring Presence as he came into the larger room, and the shadows grew dim in the bright light of his orb. The skeleton was big but slow, and the swipe it was winding up was horribly projected. Victor slipped under the blow, sidestepping the monstrosity and carving a plate-sized hunk of bone out of the creature's hip with Lifedrinker. She peeled away the bone like a sharp knife whittling balsa wood. The monster spun surprisingly quickly, raking its other long arm in a whistling swipe, but Victor saw it coming and drove Lifedrinker's axehead into the blow, letting the powerful swipe push him back and away from the skeleton.

Suddenly the skeleton dropped to all fours and lunged, driving its enormous maw forward and snapping at Victor's face. He grunted, ripping Lifedrinker up so her axehead's heavy, blunt end smashed into its bony chin. Victor's muscles were surging with swollen strength Energy and Lifedrinker was pulsing with rage; the blow sounded like a car crash as bones snapped and teeth were knocked out by the impact. Victor rolled with the energy of the skeleton's charge, pulling Lifedrinker along with him, as he went over his left shoulder and sprang up five feet away out of the somersault.

“Come on, asshole,” Victor growled, passing around the skeleton as it struggled back to its feet. When it whirled to face him, its lower jaw hung unhinged on one side, and Victor barked a short laugh when he saw the gaps in its broken and missing teeth. He lowered his center, ready for a charge, and braced Lifedrinker.

The skeleton's eyes blazed with fury, and it lifted a hooked, clawed hand, signaling its intent from a mile away. It stomped forward, arm up, ready to swing, and, had Victor been stupid or uninspired, he might have focused on that arm and missed the other arm snaking up and clawing at his guts.

Victor saw it coming, though, and Lifedrinker's gleaming edge bit into the bones of the swiping claw, severing digits and cracking bones. Her blade bit deeply, and he could feel her pulling into the cut, eager for Energy, and had to wrestle her away, "Not yet, chica!"

He barely jumped aside, dodging the other swiping blow as he broke Lifedrinker away. Just as the claw swiped by in front of him, he switched his Sovereign Will boost to agility, and with the added speed and his state of inspiration, he deftly dodged around the skeleton, circling around its back. "Now!" he hollered, lifting Lifedrinker into an overhead chop and smashing her down, whooshing through the air into the monster's spine.

This time when Lifedrinker bucked and pulled into the cut, he gave her what she wanted, pushing with his arms and legs, driving the axe into the bone. The skeleton's spine was as thick around as a small tree, and she bit into it about halfway.

Victor again swapped his Sovereign Will boost to strength and pushed with everything he had, driving the massive construct over the ground and into the stone wall. All the while, Lifedrinker surged and shuddered, pulling thick rivulets of black-tinged blue Energy into her blade. The skeleton shook and thrashed, flailing its arms against the stone wall, but it seemed to be growing sluggish. "Drink it up, lady! Drink that fucking Energy!" Victor growled, straining against the skeleton's death throes.

After several moments, Victor felt the skeleton's spasms settle, and it grew still, slumping to the ground against the wall. Lifedrinker stopped surging and shaking, signifying the completion of her meal, so Victor took a step back, pulling the axe out of the skeleton's spine, noting how the bone crumbled and powdered away from her blade. He lifted Lifedrinker up into a heavy chop and hacked into the skeleton's neck. It took him three chops, but the head finally rolled free to clatter and bounce onto the hard stone floor. A moment later, large dense motes of Energy gathered around the bony corpse and flowed into Victor, bringing him, no doubt, even closer to his next level.

For the first time, Victor could freely examine the larger room where he'd fought the skeleton. There weren't any doors, but, in one corner, a spiral, iron stairway disappeared through the ceiling into darkness. Sitting at the foot of the stairway was a matching black iron chest. "Gorz, did you notice if that chest and stairway were there the whole time? I feel like I would have noticed it."

"Victor, my initial map of this space did not include a stairway. Perhaps killing the bone colossus was key to revealing the path forward."

"Bone colossus?"

"A name Reevus-dak gave a similar creature that he slew."

"Huh, I guess it fits." Victor approached the stairway and chest. The stairway wasn't very large; perhaps two people could mount it at once, but it would be

uncomfortable. The chest was about the size of a big shoebox like you might get with a pair of hiking boots. He knelt before it, running his eyes over it in the light of his globe. He didn't see anything strange or suspicious about the black wrought iron. No runes were etched or painted onto the metal, and the clasp was a simple loop hung over an iron peg. He could see where a lock might be placed, but there wasn't one.

Victor stood and walked over to the unmoving bone colossus. He'd noticed that the bones had sagged, their unnatural vigor leaving them when the creature died its true death. Victor grabbed hold of one long femur and yanked on it, bracing his foot on the lower leg. The bone yanked free, and he took the four-foot bone back over to the chest.

He wanted to use the bone to lift the lid open, but the knobby end was too clumsy to lift the latch, so he held it down with his foot and used Lifedrinker to shave a point onto one end. That done, he extended the bone from an outstretched hand and flipped the little catch up. Nothing happened, so he used the bone to flip the lid of the chest open. Again, after the lid flapped and clattered open, nothing else happened.

“Better safe than sorry, I guess,” Victor shrugged and stowed the long, sharp bone into his ring. When he looked into the chest, he saw what looked like a folded black metal mesh cloth that winked with a soft luster in the light of his globe. He reached in a hand and felt the black rings of metal, noting their smooth polish—these weren't wrought iron.

He lifted the garment, startled by its dense heaviness. It unfurled as he pulled it from the chest, and he saw that it was a shirt of black, glimmering rings, sewn to a soft, fur-lined leather vest, also stained black. “Nice,” Victor said in a hushed voice.

“What did you find, Victor? It seems to be a garment?”

“Yeah, it's some armor. Seems way too big for me, though.”

“Bond with it, Victor.”

“Ahh, good idea, Gorz.” Victor pulled off his torn, stained shirt, laughing at the shredded state of the back, then he shrugged into the heavy, ring-covered leather shirt. It felt like the weighted vest the dentist puts on you when they take x-rays, but the leather lining was soft and comfortable.

Victor looked at the oversized, hanging piece of armor and then at the skeleton, a thought crossing his mind. “Nah, couldn't be; even this big shirt wouldn't fit that thing.” He touched a hand to the softly gleaming metal links and channeled some Energy into the shirt. It rustled and clinked as it softly shuddered, shrinking to fit his torso perfectly.

Ringed Shirt of the Gloom Warden: Artificed armor. Enchantments: 1. Hardened black lacquer - greatly enhances the durability of natural steel. 2. Form-fitting, self-repairing, self-cleaning.

“Hell yes. Some nice armor, Gorz, and best of all, it's self-cleaning.”

“Congratulations, Victor!”

“Thanks,” Victor stood and flexed his torso and arms about. The sleeves of the chain shirt only fell to his elbows, and his arms moved easily within them. Overall, he was very comfortable and felt much more protected than he ever had in the cheap leather armor he’d bought from the mine’s Contribution Store.

Victor looked at the iron stairway and said, “Gorz, this stairway is going up, and we had to kill a big tough guy to reveal it. Do you think we, like, fell to the bottom of the dungeon and need to work our way back up to get to Thayla and maybe the exit?”

“I’m afraid it’s all speculation at this point, Victor. We have no idea what that door, where Thayla betrayed you, led to.”

“Okay, but she didn’t betray me. That fucking skull tricked her.”

“Noted, Victor.”

Victor hefted Lifedrinker and stepped onto the stairway, slowly making his way upward, accompanied by the creaking joints of the narrow, wrought-iron stairway.