

Victor BK2: Ch5

Book 2: Chapter 5: A Gauntlet of Bones

When Victor's head passed into the dark stairwell, he immediately grew uncomfortable; smooth stone walls lined the wrought iron stairway, and no matter how he craned his neck, he couldn't see an end to the narrow shaft or the stairs. What made matters worse was the uncomfortably shallow depth of the steps; he was forced to climb on his toes, most of his feet hanging off the metal steps. Victor's light globe floated just behind him, bathing the shaft in bright light, and he could only imagine how strange and uncomfortable the climb would have been without it.

After what felt like an hour of climbing, Victor couldn't take it anymore, and he leaned against the stone wall and said, "Gorz, how fucking high have we climbed?"

"We've ascended 482 meters."

"What the fuck? So we're way higher than when we fell down the trap?"

"Yes, Victor, close to 430 meters higher."

"Not the kind of progress I was hoping for," Victor muttered, but then he resumed his climb. Some time later, he noticed a change in the air; the temperature had risen to the point where he'd no longer characterize it as cold, and, more than that, there was a dry, dusty quality to it. He plodded on, and a few steps later, he stumbled onto a flat platform. He reached out to grab the iron railing and took in his surroundings.

He was still in a narrow, circular shaft, but the stairs ended with an iron platform, and a heavy, rusted, iron door sat not two feet in front of him. Victor looked up and saw the stone shaft continued well beyond where his light could reach, though he saw no easy way to continue climbing it. "Not that I want to keep climbing, I guess." He stepped up to the iron door, noting the thick layer of orange corrosion around its edges and powdering its surface. An iron ring served as the handle, and he pulled on it to see if the door was locked or latched. It didn't budge.

Victor shrugged and knocked on the door, testing to see if his ring was active yet. After his third rap, deep in the innards of the iron door, a grinding click sounded. He pulled again on the iron handle, and the door inched open this time, grinding in its metal casing. Enough space had opened for Victor to put his fingers around the edge of the door, so he did and yanked with a bit more enthusiasm. The door pulled open, leaving a trail of broken, rusted bits of iron.

Cold, gray light met his eyes, and he immediately recognized it as sunlight. Was he outside? Squinting into the glare, he saw a dusty stone passage, though this stone was different from the blocks down deep in the dungeon; it was more tan than gray, and the blocks sat upon each other with no mortar in between. The light was coming through the high ceiling, some twenty or thirty feet above, where missing stones made way for glimpses of pale gray-blue sky. Victor could see a few dozen paces down the hallway, where it widened into a much larger space, one less well-lit. Gripping Lifedrinker before him, he started forward.

When he came to the passage's end, he clung to one of the walls and crept forward to peek into the larger area. His eyes were immediately drawn to the right, where a pulsing, shimmering portal

stood. It looked remarkably like the one he and Thayla had used to enter the dungeon. He saw that it was resting upon a tan stone dais, and he let his eyes drift away to take in the rest of the room.

The space was the size of an exhibition hall, with high stone walls and massive stone arches holding up a matching ceiling. When he shifted his vision to the left, he saw blue, flaming braziers flanking a wide stairway leading into the ground. Arrayed at the head of the stairs were a dozen armored skeletons wielding wooden spears with broad, bronze, leaf-shaped blades. They stood silently facing the portal.

“Victor! I recognize this space! It’s the entrance chamber of the dungeon. At least the one where Reevus came in. He fought a similar group of skeletons and then began his descent via those stairs.”

“Oh, great,” Victor thought, “So, I could basically get the fuck out of here right now?”

“It would stand to reason that the portal would take you out, yes.”

“Well, I can’t just bail until I’ve figured out what’s going on with Thayla.”

“Very noble, Victor.”

“Thanks, Gorz.” Victor tried to inflect his mental words with sarcasm but didn’t know if he pulled it off. “Alright, let’s see here. Twelve skeletons with spears—sounds bad.”

“Reevus destroyed them with a torrent of fire.”

“Not helping, Gorz.”

“Apologies, Victor.” Victor tried to mentally shrug but mostly tuned Gorz out. He knew he was more than a match for a skeleton or ten, but these were all wearing matching bronze armor and had spears, and their appearance gave him pause. Looking at them more closely, though, he saw that their armor mostly hung loose on their bony frames, and there were many gaps between the various pieces. Lifedrinker would have a field day with that shitty coverage. He could imagine someone with a spear, sword, or dagger struggling against such enemies, but Lifedrinker hit like a wrecking ball and would smash their bones even through those bronze breastplates and flimsy helmets.

The spears are what gave him second thoughts, though. If he used Berserk, he’d be able to heal from all but fatal stabs, but could he brute force his way past a dozen spears? Inspiring Presence and extreme agility might be a better way to go; he’d see gaps in their line and be able to capitalize. Victor stood and watched them for a few more minutes, vacillating on the best strategy to take. He considered luring them to the narrow tunnel at one point but quickly scrapped the idea when he imagined their long spears stabbing at him while he struggled to swing Lifedrinker in the confined space.

Finally, it was frustration at his indecision that pushed him forward. Impulsively, he growled, stepping out of the hallway and using Channel Spirit to flood his pathways and Lifedrinker with inspiration-attuned Energy. Then he used Sovereign Will to boost his agility, and, as the skeletons noticed his approach and, as one, turned to face him with spears lowered, he cast Berserk.

He'd never used Channel Spirit to push inspiration-attuned Energy into his weapon or pathways during combat. Even in his red-eyed state of rage, he exulted in how he seemed to anticipate the stabs and maneuvers of his enemies. His face reflected his maniacal thirst for violence—mouth open in a leering grin, saliva flaking his lips as he laughed and roared. He dove between stabs, rolling up behind or beside skeletons, smashing Lifedrinker expertly between armor pieces, shattering spines, knees, necks, and skulls.

He suffered many glancing blows and a few direct stabs from the spears, but most of them slid off the black-lacquered rings of his armor. A few tore into his thighs or hamstrings, but those painful barbs only served to enrage Victor further, and he shattered spears and cleaved skeletons in response. As the skeletons fell, it only became easier for Victor to use the expansive space to his advantage. He'd drive madly into a skeleton, batting its spear aside and smashing it to bits with his axe, all the while pushing forward, forcing the monsters to break their formation to follow him.

The combat was over as abruptly as it began, and Victor found himself standing over a widely scattered field of bones, armor, and spears. He was panting, and his arms were slick with blood from a dozen healed slashes or stabs, but he felt nothing other than triumph, looking around. "That's the way to do it, Gorz!" he grunted.

"Well done, Victor! Though I must say, Reevus-dak's spell destroyed the pack of skeletons far more efficiently."

"Gorz, you realize I can't cast any sort of fiery torrent, right?"

"Oh yes, Victor. The way you use the tools at your disposal is commendable."

"Nevermind," Victor said, but before he could say more, a flood of Energy surged into him.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 26 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

As the euphoria of the Energy faded and Victor recovered his senses, he stretched and, once again, looked around the battle scene. He decided to collect all the unbroken spears, coming away with nine intact, sharp, bronze-tipped weapons, many of which were coated in his blood. Then he started sifting through the armor.

None of it looked comfortable; the linings of the helmets were all but gone, the breastplates couldn't hold a candle to his ringed shirt, and the other bits and pieces were bent, missing straps, or simply the wrong size for him. Still, Victor collected all the bronze armor, putting it into the storage pouch he'd taken from the cultist. "Alright. Going down," he said to no one and marched toward the steps. "At least we know where we are now and can hopefully get back here after we find Thayla."

"Excellent outlook!" Gorz said with an appropriately cheerful, tinny inflection.

The stone of the steps was less weathered than the structure outside and seemed paler. Victor wondered if it was limestone, but he didn't know enough about the subject to be sure. He paused at the top step to consider his attributes.

He'd been getting better and better at swapping his boost from Sovereign Will during combat, and so far, it hadn't done him wrong. It seemed clear to him that he had a unique, or at the very least very uncommon, advantage with that ability, and it made sense to capitalize on it. "I'll keep going to two hundred, then give it another consideration, eh, Gorz?"

"Pardon, Victor?"

"My will. I think I'll keep boosting it until I break two hundred. Is that high for an attribute, or am I still a small fry in the big picture?"

"No! Two hundred is an admirable number. I'll caution you to be aware that your leveling pace is far from common. Some people have lived their whole lives on Reevus's homeworld, never to reach the second tier."

"Really? Because of a low affinity?"

"That, and their reluctance to engage in physical conflict. Attaining levels through non-violent means is possible, though immensely slower. When you consider your leveling speed and the generous attribute points granted by your class, you're in an excellent position, Victor."

"Good," Victor said. He was glad that he was growing more powerful at an accelerated pace—in the short time he'd lived on Fanwath, he'd racked up a significant number of enemies, and he didn't intend to let them ever take him again, not without extracting a heavy fucking toll. He pushed ten more points into will and then started down the steps.

The steps were wide enough that twenty people could walk down them side by side, and they descended for about twenty feet before opening into a long, straight corridor. The corridor had a high ceiling, and everything was constructed of that same pale stone, large square blocks stacked and fitted together expertly, with no mortar in sight. In this new hallway, every twenty paces or so, the space was illuminated by braziers holding red-orange flickering flames that gave off no smoke.

About fifty paces from the foot of the stairs, Victor saw a cluster of objects, almost like a display: on either side of the hallway stood two hulking statues made of yellow-pink stone, and between them rested a stone sarcophagus. The statues depicted humanoid shapes but were built more like gorillas than humans, with faces only featuring wide, open mouths and inset eye sockets. Victor approached cautiously, Lifedrinker held ready.

When he came to the tunnel section with the sarcophagus and statues, he settled his breathing and moved ever so slowly and quietly around the stone coffin, something in his mind screaming at him to be careful. The top of the sarcophagus was carved with unfamiliar letters and symbols, and Victor warred with the part of him that wanted to open it and see what was inside. His better judgment prevailed, and he continued past it. He was two steps beyond the left-hand statue when, with a

grinding rumble, the floor ahead of him suddenly rose up, forming a stony wall that impeded his path. Victor grunted in surprise and turned to see a similar wall rising to block his way back toward the stairs.

With a sinking feeling, Victor backed toward the new wall, Lifedrinker in front of him, and he watched the stone coffin, priming his spells for action. He was so intent on the sarcophagus that he almost didn't notice the statues coming to life. They moved with rigid precision, straightening up, taking marching-style steps forward, and then pivoting to face Victor. "Oh, come on!" he growled, flooding his weapon with rage-attuned Energy and boosting his strength. The two statues were each more than ten feet tall and had to weigh thousands of pounds; Victor didn't think he should hold back, so he also cast Inspiring Presence.

Rather than give the statues a chance to double-team him, Victor charged toward the right-hand one, watching as it lifted an arm and swung it with predictable stiffness toward him. He ducked under the blow, flanking the slow automaton. "Sorry, chica!" he said, bringing Lifedrinker down in a sideways hack at the statue's knee.

He didn't know how effective the axe would be against stone, and he figured he might have to swap to his baton, but he wanted to give her a chance first. To his surprise, Lifedrinker sank at least two inches into the stone, bucking and pulling, as she hunted for Energy to draw. Victor wanted to give her free rein, but the statue was already pivoting to swing at him again, and he was helpless to hold the axe under the relentless pull of the giant's slow step.

Victor twisted Lifedrinker free, chipping away some stone, and then hopped back to avoid a lumbering stomp. The other statue was working its way around the sarcophagus, so Victor ducked and jumped under another swipe and chopped the same knee with Lifedrinker. She smashed loose another big chunk of stone, and now Victor could see the deep V where he'd started cutting into the limb. He pushed even more Energy with Channel Spirit into Lifedrinker, and, as the statue worked to pivot again, he blasted another powerful chop into the knee.

With a surging flash of red Energy, Lifedrinker cleaved the rest of the way through the thick limb, and, for just a moment, the statue hung in the air, its arms flailing backward, and then it toppled. When it struck the hard stone floor, the entire statue crumbled, pieces of pink and yellow stone scattering all over the ground in piles.

Victor was so surprised by his victory that he almost let the other construct catch up to him. As it approached, though, Victor sprinted around the sarcophagus and came up behind the statue, lifting Lifedrinker high over his head and bringing her down directly in the middle of the statue's back. She bit deeply and immediately pulsed and vibrated, digging for what she wanted. Victor held on, spinning with the statue's movements, easily staying behind it.

Meanwhile, Lifedrinker bucked and throbbed, pulling pulsing, surging streams of green-yellow Energy through the stone and into her blade. "That's it! Fuck yes!" Victor cheered her on, jumping and scrambling as the statue tried to pivot and turn to get at him.

Luckily, while massive, rugged, and strong, the construct was not very intelligent—it never thought to try to back him into a corner and smash him. It simply turned, waving its arms, constantly trying to get at whatever was hurting its back but never able to find it. Slowly, the streams of Energy flowing into Lifedrinker grew thin, then faint, then ceased, and the construct stopped moving mid-turn, utterly inert.

Victor yanked Lifedrinker out of the stone, pulling chips of pink rock out with the blade. He examined her edge, and it still looked razor-sharp. “Nice work, lovely,” he said, rubbing some stone chips off the side of her blade. Just then, another grinding sound erupted in the room, and Victor had two thoughts simultaneously: a statue was coming back to life, or the walls were lowering. He was wrong on both counts—the stone sarcophagus was sliding open. Victor backed up a step to better view what was happening, and then he saw a wave of darkness start to roll like fog out of the coffin.

“Hell no,” he said, casting Heroic Heart. To his relief, the darkness faded away as the warmth flooding out of his chest reached his head, and he took a deep, steadying breath. Just as his hands steadied on Lifedrinker’s haft, with a screaming cackle, a skeleton burst from the sarcophagus. It was clothed in tattered strips of cloth, perhaps once upon a time a robe, and it wore an elaborate headdress. Victor had a hard time looking at its clothes, though, for its eyes were difficult to avoid; flaming red points of light bored into him while that disembodied cackling laugh echoed off the stone walls.

Victor lifted Lifedrinker to attack, and the skeleton held out a hand, firing a bolt of crackling lightning right into Victor’s chest. It arced around his ringed shirt, jolting through him. Victor shook like he was strapped to a jackhammer, and all thoughts fled his mind, replaced by pain and white light exploding in his vision.

As the arc of lightning finally passed through him, he found himself stumbling backward, literal smoke rising from his chest where the bolt had entered his body. His thoughts came to him sluggishly at first, and he almost was blasted again, but a fortuitous stumble on a piece of broken statue sent him tumbling to his butt while the skeleton scorched a black mark into the wall above his head.

Victor grunted, rolling to his left, trying to put the inert construct between him and the skeleton. As he crouched behind it, his mind started to clear, and he re-established the boost to his agility with Sovereign Will and began to use Channel Spirit to charge Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy. He could hear the skeleton clattering as it climbed out of the coffin, and he took that opportunity to charge around the statue, leaping and gliding over the floor with superhuman grace. He slid alongside the stone coffin and ripped Lifedrinker in a sideways hack that caught the skeleton’s spine just above its pelvis, cleaving it in twain.

At the end of his slide, Victor leaped to his feet and darted around the sarcophagus, anticipating the bolt of lightning that smashed into the dust where he’d been standing. The monster was down and legless, but it was still dangerous. He could hear it scrabbling over the ground, pulling itself after him. Once again, Victor used the sarcophagus for positioning. Running around it, he saw the tail of the skeleton’s spine as it turned the corner, chasing after him. Victor grinned, took two leaping steps, and, as he rounded the corner, he smashed his axe into the base of its skull, causing the headdress head to pop off. Suddenly, the echoing cackle ceased.

Victor stood, shaking from adrenaline and, probably, from the electricity that had coursed through him, and looked around. He finally began to relax when large golden motes, some tinged with purple, began to coalesce on the skeleton and around the statues, then flooded into him. As the surge

faded, he was relieved to see that his scorched chest had healed, and his body felt fine. He'd never had a shock like that, and he'd love to avoid it ever happening again.

"Gorz, is this area familiar?"

"No, Victor, when Reevus descended the stairs, they were steeper and opened into a large square room, not a long hallway."

"Good, because I was about to bitch you out for not warning me about this fucking encounter."

"I'll be sure to speak up if I see something familiar, Victor."

"Thanks. I guess I figured you would."

Victor stepped over to the sarcophagus and looked inside. Glittering metals and gems met his eyes, and his irritation turned to pleasure as he took the sight. "Not too bad!" He picked up a handful of heavy gold coins. "Gorz, do people use gold for money in this world?"

"Not commonly on System worlds, though there are people who buy it for jewelry, artificing, and ornamental crafting."

"Good!" Victor scooped the gold and silver coins into his ring, figuring there were several dozen of each, then he collected the gems, coming up with more than twenty of various types. He wasn't an expert on gemstones, but he thought he had some impressive specimens.

At one end of the sarcophagus, a metal rod stuck up from the stone about six inches. At its base, Victor could see a small hinge. "A lever," he softly said. Then he reached out and pulled it. A moment later, with a deep rumble, the walls that had risen to trap him receded back into the stone floor of the hallway.

Victor continued down the wide hallway, able to see quite a distance thanks to the regular red, flickering braziers. He didn't encounter any more statues or sarcophagi, but after a hundred meters or so, he saw a well-lit square room ahead, and at its center, a massive pit with a ramp descending around its rim. Victor was still a few dozen paces away from the room, looking down through the hallway, and he paused to observe for a few minutes to see if anything moved or changed.

The pit with the stone ramp going down into it reminded Victor a bit of the "well" back in the mines, though on a much smaller scale. He watched, waiting patiently for several long minutes, but his diligence didn't pay off—he never saw anything move or change. Sighing heavily, he stood from the shadow he'd been crouching near and continued forward.

When he got to the mouth of the hallway, he saw that the room didn't just contain the pit. It also had a massively vaulted ceiling, with a dozen or more platforms built into the high walls where, if Victor could believe his eyes, bow-wielding skeletons stood, gazing into the depths. Victor backed up into the tunnel and contemplated.

He could still see a couple of platforms on the far wall from where he stood. Extrapolating their size and position on the wall, he estimated there were eighteen archer skeletons in that room, waiting for him to try to descend into the pit along the ramp. "They'll fucking make a pincushion out of me."

He stared at one of the two skeletons he could see from where he stood. It was naked but for the quiver on its belt and the wooden bow held upright in two bony hands. Victor recognized that it was very large and probably meant to shoot long distances. “Gorz, those skeletons have quivers of arrows. Do you think they’re magical? Do you think they’d run out of arrows, or do they have, like, unlimited arrows?”

“It’s hard to know, Victor. There are artificed quivers that can contain a nearly limitless supply of arrows, but many lower-tier archers don’t have such things.”

“These skeletons don’t seem like elite enemies to me; I’d be pretty damn surprised if they all had magical quivers.” Victor backed up and then turned up the tunnel, breaking into a run. In a matter of moments, he was back at the site of his battle with the skeleton and statues. He walked up to the stone sarcophagus lid and hefted it up in front of him. It had to weigh more than a couple hundred pounds, but he could lift it—awkwardly and with strain, but he could do it. He slipped it into his storage ring, and then he jogged back to the skeleton archers.

Victor boosted his strength, then he stepped into the square pit room and shouted, “Hey assholes! Take a shot!” As soon as he saw the skeletons start to move, lifting their bows, he called the sarcophagus lid out of his storage ring, stood it in front of him, and then crouched behind it, letting it lean into him. Seconds later, a rain of arrows started to click and skitter against the stone lid.

Clearly not terribly intelligent creatures, the skeletons continued to fire, even though their arrows simply bounced and clattered off the stone barrier. Victor crouched in the lee of the lid, grinning madly, wondering if they’d run out of ammunition. He didn’t have to wait too long to find out; after a dozen or so volleys, the number of arrows in the next wave fell off precipitously, and then after two more rounds, no more missiles came. Victor stood and slipped the sarcophagus lid back into his ring. Standing there in the open, he waved to the encircling skeletons, and, to his glee, they began to step off their platforms.

The skeletons on the lower platforms mostly survived their fall unscathed, and they lurched to their feet, awkwardly clattering around the pit’s perimeter to get at Victor. The other skeletons from higher platforms broke limbs or completely shattered as they smashed into the stone. Some survived with missing parts and struggled to charge into battle, scrabbling along, limping, or dragging themselves toward him. Victor laughed, lifting Lifedrinker and flooding her with rage-attuned Energy; smashing skeletons that couldn’t stab him or shoot lightning bolts was just what the doctor ordered.