

## Victor BK2: Ch6

### Book 2: Chapter 6: Ghoul Party

Victor wound his way down the square shaft that descended into the depths of the limestone pit. He'd made short work of the broken, weaponless skeletons up above, and though it had been an excellent outlet for his frustration, he hadn't gotten much Energy for the victory. Still, he felt good about how he'd defeated the design of the shaft entrance. The skeletons would have done a lot more damage if he hadn't run them out of arrows and changed the engagement parameters.

According to Gorz, he'd descended about seventy-five meters when the bottom of the pit came into view, and he saw four stone statues like the ones he'd destroyed above. They stood against the four walls of the shaft, each guarding a different door. He noticed the ground at the base of the stairs, where the huge statues stood guard, was covered in sand. "Looks suspicious," he muttered. He looked at the ramp he was standing on and chuckled to himself. "Why would I fight four of those guys down in the sand?"

Victor dug around in his ring for one of the rusty knives he'd scavenged earlier, and, standing on the ramp, two turns from the bottom of the shaft, he threw it as hard as he could at one of the statues. It whistled as it tumbled through the air, clinked as it hit the statue, and bounced off to skitter into the sand. Nothing happened. "Not that dumb, huh?"

Victor looked over the edge of the ramp, lining himself up with the statue guarding the wall beneath him, then he pulled a rope and piton out of his ring. He placed the piton against the marble wall of the shaft, channeled some Energy into it, and marveled as it began to glow and sink into the stone. Once it was secure, he tied his rope to it and dropped it down next to the statue. Gripping Lifedrinker in one hand, Victor looped the rope around his other wrist and walked down the side of the shaft just a few feet until he was hanging above the statue.

Victor braced his feet in a wide stance against the wall, and then hanging out, holding onto the rope, he channeled rage-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker and brought her smashing down onto the crown of the statue's head. Lifedrinker's gleaming, silvery edge didn't let him down—she bit deeply into the stone and stuck, throbbing and pulsing while she dug for Energy. However, the statue erupted into frenzied movement, and Victor yanked on her handle, saying, "Come on, not yet, let go." Lifedrinker pulled out of the split stone as the statue lurched away, and Victor tossed her onto the ramp, climbing the rope after her—he'd accomplished what he wanted.

When he regained his footing and lifted Lifedrinker, the lumbering statue was already starting its ascent onto the ramp, stomping and rumbling, its long arms and hammer fists pumping before it. None of the other statues had awoken yet, and Victor wondered if he'd broken the encounter. Grinning, he waited for the massive construct, and when it rounded the corner, he went to work. As he charged, Victor cast Sovereign Will to boost his agility, and he cast Channel Spirit to flood his arms and weapon with rage-attuned Energy. He didn't use his Berserk or Inspiring Presence because he was confident in his speed and ability to whittle down one enemy.

The fight went as expected; Victor dodged his way around the statue, using Lifedrinker to hack chunks of stone out of its knees until one of them gave way, and the entire construct toppled off the ramp to crash onto the sandy floor. Its impact gave evidence of the sand's shallow depth because it still sounded like a dump truck unloading a pile of stones onto pavement as it broke apart. The

statue's destruction must have triggered something because the other three came to life, swiveling their lumpy stone heads to find Victor and then moving together to stomp toward the stone ramp.

Victor grinned when he saw the statues couldn't quite fit side by side on the ramp, and they had to advance in a single file. He stood by his rope and hollered at the statues, "C'mon then, you big, slow dummies!" It might have been his imagination, but it seemed like the stone creatures quickened their grinding strides.

Right before they made the final turn to approach him, Victor stuffed Lifedrinker into his belt and slid down the rope. Then, he charged across the sand, pulling Lifedrinker free, and ran up the ramp. Just as he'd hoped, the statues hadn't noticed his movement, and the third one still had its back to him. Victor went to work on its right knee like a lumberjack felling a tree.

He landed three chops before the statue started to turn, and when it twisted on that leg, it crumbled. The construct collapsed onto the ramp, actually toppling into the next statue as it turned to face Victor, knocking it backward. The first statue cracked down the middle and ceased all movement. The second fell more softly, only shattering one arm, but still, it thrashed and fought to rise. Victor capitalized on the sprawled construct's state, jumping forward, nimbly hopping onto the "dead" statue's chest, and brought Lifedrinker down in a massive overhead chop to sink into the stony stomach of the thrashing statue.

While Lifedrinker pulled and dug into the stone of his enemy, Victor watched the final construct manage to complete its about-face. It stood, up the ramp, blocked by the body of the thrashing statue, and seemed frozen in indecision, perhaps struggling for a way to get to Victor without trying to climb over its comrade. Meanwhile, Lifedrinker was pulling rivulets of yellow Energy into her axehead, sinking ever deeper into the stone. Victor held onto her, riding the thrashing of her victim, as he watched the final construct, ready to pull her away if it figured a way to get to him.

As it turned out, the statue never solved the puzzle of how to approach him, at least not before Lifedrinker finished pulling the Energy out of its fallen brother. When the construct stopped moving, Victor pulled Lifedrinker out, then backed down the ramp. The final stony guardian still stood behind the broken dead constructs, staring at him. It wasn't smart enough to get past the obstruction, but it wasn't stupid enough to jump off the ramp, either. Victor didn't like the idea of leaving it behind, so he crossed the sand to his rope, clambered up, and brought the fight to it. He killed it the same way he did the first—broke one of its knees and sent it toppling to the shaft's floor.

When it was all over, he received his surge of conquest Energy, retrieved his piton and rope, and made his way to the sandy bottom of the shaft. No treasure chest awaited him, but he noticed something he hadn't seen before—in the center of each of the four doors, a strange, squiggly rune was alight, blazing with a yellow glow. "Gorz, which door leads in the direction where we fell down the pit?"

"The one to your right, Victor."

"Thanks," Victor walked over to the door, and, hoping the glowing symbol meant it was unlocked now that its guardian was dead, he pulled on the handle. The heavy, carved stone slab slid roughly over the sand, revealing a dark, cramped

stone passage with a rather steep downward slope. Cobwebs clung to the corners of the hallway, and a loose, thin layer of sand coated the floor. “We’re still higher than where we lost Thayla, right?”

“Yes, by hundreds of meters.”

“Comprendo,” Victor muttered, starting into the descending passage. His globe of inspiration-attuned light still floated behind him, throwing the immediate part of the tunnel into bright light that contrasted with the deep darkness a few dozen feet further on. He walked on undisturbed dust for quite a while, nothing changing in the tunnel other than the gradual lessening of its slope. When it felt like he was walking on a flat surface again, he took a few steps, and then his light revealed the end of the tunnel and a pale, stone door.

The door appeared to open inward, but Victor couldn’t see any sort of handle or latch on it. While feeling around its edges, he had a flashback to standing in front of the puzzle door where Thayla had caused him to fall through the floor. With a sudden shiver, he backed up a few feet and looked closely at the ground in the light of his globe.

He couldn’t see anything odd about the stone flooring—the gaps between stones were tiny and filled with sand. He tapped Lifedrinker against each stone, noting the solid \*clunk\* the axehead made against the dense blocks. Feeling better, he moved forward again and studied the door more closely.

After a few minutes of feeling for seams, hidden buttons, or secret runes, Victor growled in frustration and just pushed his shoulder into the door, driving with his legs. Nothing happened at first, but then, with a slow, ponderous grinding, the heavy stone door began to slide open. When it wouldn’t move any further, Victor willed his light forward a bit to see what sort of space he’d revealed.

The first thing he realized was that the door wasn’t hinged. It was simply a foot-wide hunk of stone that had been placed against the doorway. The next thing he noticed was that the chamber he’d walked into was enormous, with black shadows obscuring the ceiling and the perimeter. Finally, he became aware of a sound—sibilant, breathy panting sounds coming from all around him. It sounded like he was surrounded by a horde of asthmatic dogs trying to recover from being too long in the sun.

Victor held Lifedrinker ready, and then he pushed his light out and up so it hung in front of him, pulsing softly. Then, he willed more and more Energy into it, so it grew and blazed brighter, revealing more and more square footage. As the light expanded out to a fifty-foot radius, it started to expose little stone slabs on which gray-skinned, black-taloned, hairless humanoids reclined, breathing fitfully in a restless slumber. “Madre,” Victor hissed when his light continued to expand, revealing row after row of the creatures. There had to be more than a hundred, and he hadn’t seen the extent of the room yet.

Victor started to turn, not keen on waking hundreds of ghouls when he felt a vibration and heard a grinding sound. The stone slab, alight with orange runes on the inner surface, was swiftly sliding back into place, sealing off the doorway.

“Oh fuck,” Victor growled, putting his back to the door. Suddenly the hissing breathing of the sleeping ghouls took on a different note, and soft growls broke out from the darkness outside his light. Claws clicked on stone, and then, with a hissing, shrieking cacophony, dozens of pale, wiry, naked creatures were racing over the stone floor toward him.

They loped on all fours, their claws clicking and scraping the stone, their hissing growls growing in urgency as they laid their black eyes on him. They were smaller but meaner looking than the ghouls he and Thayla had fought. Wide mouths filled with needle-like teeth spread in feral grins as their long, pointed red tongues darted in and out, tasting the air.

Victor didn't see a way out of this, so he braced himself for combat. He channeled inspiration-attuned Energy into Lifedrinker, saving his rage Energy for an extended Berserk—he had a feeling he'd need to let loose in here. He resolved to hold off on the madness of rage for as long as possible and cast Inspiring Presence to start the fight.

“Did I wake you up? Come on, then!” he cried as his mind filled with all the possibilities around him. The light seemed brighter, and when he backpedaled along the wall, swiping his axe to make some space, he realized a corner of the room was only a couple of dozen feet from the door. Chopping in wide arcs, he kept the ghouls back long enough to sidestep his way over to the corner.

Victor laughed as the ghouls continued to gather, a large, gray, hairless crowd of hissing, wiry bodies. They were no bigger than middle-schoolers, and, now that his back was to the corner, they could only approach from his frontal arc. His axe whistled through the air, daring the front of the mob to make the first move.

The ghouls kept darting back out of Lifedrinker's reach, and Victor felt it would have gone on like that for a long while, perhaps until he tired, but the mass of frenzied undead gathering at the rear began to push the frontline of ghouls forward, despite their attempts to scurry back out of the reach of his cleaves. When Victor finally made a solid connection, cleaving through a ghoul's ribs and arm, and black blood sprayed out on the stones, it was like a switch was flipped.

Suddenly the ghouls grew even more frenzied, and, careless for their safety, they leaped at him. Victor went to work with Lifedrinker, batting them aside, hacking through limbs, blocking claws with the haft. His arms began to rack up slashes and cuts, his legs too, but his torso was well-protected by his ringed leather shirt.

Each claw that slipped past his guard and tore into his flesh sent a burning shiver of rage through him, and Victor began to lose hold of his Core. After fighting for several minutes and almost losing his axe because his arm was bleeding so badly that his grip had grown slippery, he growled and spat, “Fucking assholes!” Then, he let go of his rage Energy, let it flow through him, and cast Berserk.

Suddenly his arms and legs weren't stinging anymore. The flayed skin was just a mild annoyance as scars grew over the missing flesh. His axe felt light in his hand, and his grip was more than strong enough to yank it back from the little creature trying to pull it away. Victor roared at it and kicked

out with a boot, knocking it back. What were all these things doing scratching at him? Didn't they know what he could do? He'd have to show them! He screamed, exulting in the frenetic need to smash his enemies.

Lifedrinker arced out, again and again, whipping through the air and gray bodies alike, hardly slowing as she snapped through bones. Black blood sprayed the air in thick gouts and fine mists, and Victor began to laugh, a terrible, guttural laugh, as he drenched himself in the blood of his enemies. He fought for several minutes, his actions more akin to a competitive tree cutter than a person on a battlefield. He strode forward into the mass of gray, naked enemies without regard for his lost defensive position.

When a ghoul leaped on his back and tried to bite into his neck, Victor's left hand snaked out, caught it by the arm, and flung it away into the crowd. Then, he whirled and leaped, hacking Lifedrinker with such force that she ravaged several ghouls at once with each swing. When he felt his red-visioned rage start to recede, Victor pumped himself with more rage-attuned Energy, extending the duration of his madness.

He fought his way across the enormous chamber, walking over the vacant slabs where the ghouls had slept, standing on them for better reach. He didn't plan to do so; it just felt good to him when he stood above the scrabbling, pestering enemies and smashed them to pieces with Lifedrinker.

How long he fought like that would never be clear to Victor. He had a lot more rage-attuned Energy than he used to. He probably pushed his body further than he should have, but by the time he finally started to think clearly, and the redness bled from his vision, he found himself standing on a stone dais on the far side of the enormous chamber, with just a few ghouls warily circling him. He was exhausted and drained of rage-attuned Energy, but his body was whole, at least as far as he could tell, under the thick, sticky coating of red-black blood and bits of viscera.

Victor used Sovereign Will to boost his agility, and then he chased down the last few ghouls, one by one, dispatching them with quick, precise cleaves to remove heads or smash skulls. His Globe of Inspiration still hung in the air, illuminating much of the hall with its radiance. Victor stood, near the rear section, partially cloaked in shadow, observing the trail of broken gray bodies and black smears of gore that painted a grisly picture of the path he'd taken through the room while under the influence of his Berserk ability.

He set Lifedrinker down, bracing her against the stone floor while he leaned into her handle, breathing deeply and waiting for the surge of Energy that would replenish his stores. It didn't come, however, but a grinding sound behind him heralded something else. Victor straightened and wearily lifted Lifedrinker, turning to face the sound. Another stone slab, like the one blocking the corridor he came through, was alight with orange runes and sliding open. When it had slid forward and to the side, revealing a dark recess, the runes faded away.

Victor breathed deeply and quickly glanced inward at his Core. There, the two suns of his Energy pulsed and blazed, though the red heart of his rage-attuned Energy was dim and shrunken. Victor knew he didn't have what it would take to cast Berserk again, not without resting or a System infusion from his victory. Still, his inspiration-attuned Energy was pulsing brightly and not even half-depleted. He quickly looked up when he heard metal scraping on stone.

A shadowy figure stood in the opened alcove, and it stepped forward, dragging something long and metallic behind it. Victor backed up toward his light and watched as the tall, lean figure approached. It took slow, deliberate steps, all the while dragging that metal object along the stone.

When it came out of the shadows enough for Victor to discern its details, he gripped Lifedrinker more fiercely and took a deep breath to steady his nerves. The monster was like a ghoul on steroids or growth hormones. It stood a few inches taller than Victor, had sinewy ropes of corded muscle bulging around its torso and limbs, and wore a pair of ragged leather pants. The item the creature was dragging turned out to be a long-handled curved sword or something like a sword, but the blade was nearly round, so severe was its curve.

As the creature drew nearer, it lifted the weapon into a two-handed grip and smiled, narrowing its baleful red eyes to glare at Victor. Its rubbery gray lips peeled back from rows of needle teeth, and a wet, gurgling laugh rolled up out of its throat. Victor scowled and twisted his white-knuckled grip on Lifedrinker, saying, “You laughing, fucker? Think all your buddies are laughing?” He jerked his head, indicating the scene of his earlier slaughter. The ghoul boss didn’t answer; it just lifted its weapon and jumped, bringing it down like it was trying to split a massive log.

Victor knew an attack was coming, so he wasn’t caught flat-footed. Still, the speed of the big creature was surprising, and he barely hopped away from the chop in time. He didn’t try to block it; he wasn’t confident in Lifedrinker’s improvised handle when it came to parrying a blade like that. As he backpedaled to get some room, Victor made sure he was still infusing his agility with Sovereign Will, and then he cast Inspiring Presence, glad that his extended rage had given the ability time to cool down.

In the light of inspiration, the ghoul champion or boss didn’t seem so terrible. Sure, it was big and had a massive, sharp sword-sickle thing, but it was only one enemy, and Victor could see it wasn’t the most intelligent of creatures. He started to circle the lanky creature, watching it move, and when it came at him with a sideways slash, Victor pushed Lifedrinker’s axehead against the curved blade, shoving it down, and then he stepped into the ghoul’s reach and smashed the butt of his axe haft into its chin.

The sudden move caught the monster by surprise, and it stumbled back, losing grip with one of its hands on its oversized, curved sword. Victor pressed the attack, continuing his forward momentum, stepping wide with his left foot, then lifting Lifedrinker and pivoting on that forward foot so that he swung her in a huge, whistling arc. The ghoul managed to raise its curved weapon in time to intercept her blade, but Lifedrinker wasn’t going to be denied—she bit into the sword’s edge, and Victor roared, shifting his Sovereign Will boost to strength and driving her further.

The ghoul was forced to step back, but Victor drove on, and metal screamed as Lifedrinker dug into the sword. Backpedaling, the ghoul champion caught its heel on one of the sleeping platforms and stumbled, and Victor jerked Lifedrinker to the side, yanking the sword from its flailing hand. The long, curved weapon clattered over the stone floor, and Victor grinned savagely at the ghoul as it scurried away from him on all fours. Not wanting it to regain its weapon, Victor circled to the side, keeping the monster in view, and when he got to the blade, he crouched to touch it, slipping it into his storage ring.

“Come on, then,” he said, watching the gray, wiry monster as it circled him, moving about on its knuckles like an enormous, evil chimpanzee. Then it flashed forward, and its left-hand claws flashed out in a blur of black shadow, ripping into Victor’s thigh. He’d seen the attack coming and tried to block or counterattack, but the monster had been too fast. He stumbled from the blow, finding that his leg couldn’t take his full weight. The claws had ripped his thigh to the bone. The monster was circling him again, and Victor quickly shifted his Sovereign Will boost back to agility and lifted Lifedrinker into a cross-body guard.

The ghoul stepped back, its smile widening, and licked its bloody claws. Victor growled and stepped toward it but nearly stumbled on his wounded leg. His pant leg was soaked with blood, and he felt it running down his calf to pool into his boot. He was thinking about trying to Berserk to see if he’d regained enough Energy when the ghoul launched into another attack. This time Victor was ready, and he was just fast enough to pivot on his good leg and put Lifedrinker’s edge in the path of the swiping claws. It all happened in a fraction of a second, but when the ghoul scampered past him, it left behind three long, clawed fingers. “That’s gotta hurt, eh, fucker?”

The ghoul whirled and hissed at him as it finished its pass. Victor sidestepped, favoring his hurt leg, blood squelching in his boot. The ghoul circled him, and he had to pivot on his good leg, keeping it in view. Suddenly, it burst into motion, circling him, and Victor stumbled slightly, trying to spin to keep it in sight.

The ghoul capitalized and launched another rushing pass, raking its claws along Victor’s back. His armor held, and the claws rang as they slid over the metal, but at the tail end of its swipe, they caught Victor’s left forearm, and two of them slid through his flesh, grinding against the bone from his elbow to his wrist.

Victor screamed in agony, and, as a thick ribbon of his flesh fell away in a shower of bloody droplets, he let go of Lifedrinker and cradled the wounded limb to his stomach. He lifted Lifedrinker in his right hand, holding her up and out and watching the ghoul as he pressed his ripped arm against himself. He knew he was losing blood and couldn’t afford to fight like this much longer. He tried to activate Berserk, but it wouldn’t take, and he knew he still didn’t have the Energy for it.

In his desperation, a thought occurred to Victor, and while he watched the ghoul warily, he switched his Sovereign Will boost to vitality. As nearly sixty points of vitality flooded his body, Victor felt his weakened, tired muscles pulse with renewed vigor. He felt the searing pain of his wounds start to fade to a dull ache as the vessels scabbed over, and with a grunt of pain, he lifted his wounded arm back to his axe haft. “C’mon, girl, we gotta finish this.” He pushed what little rage-attuned Energy he could muster into the axe, causing her to flicker with a baleful red glow, and then, just as he saw the ghoul shifting to attack again, he swapped his boost back to agility.

Victor had braced himself for it, but the renewed pain in his deprived body was nearly enough to throw off his concentration. Still, he held on, and with the boost to his agility and using his full range of movement, he was able to see the ghoul’s attack coming, and he stepped out just enough to avoid the worst of the claws, only catching three shallow gouges along his left hip. Meanwhile, he’d brought Lifedrinker down in a savage, lightning-fast cleave that buried her gleaming edge into the

monster's forehead. The undead creature, amazingly, continued to struggle. It thrashed and flopped, and Victor held on to Lifedrinker, urging her to dig deeper for the Energy she craved.

He held the ghoul pinned to the stone while it kicked its clawed legs in the air, and Lifedrinker pulled black veins of dark Energy through its pale skin and into her shimmering edge. "Yes! Finish this pinche cabron muerto!" As Lifedrinker shuddered and dug into the creature, its legs stopped kicking and finally flopped to the stone. It lay utterly still, and Victor jerked Lifedrinker out of its skull and glared around, fearing more attackers, but hoping he was finally done with fighting.

Soft golden light started to fill the chamber, and he wondered if he'd triggered something else, but then he realized it was Energy coalescing on all the corpses. Even some purple-tinged motes were forming on the ghoul boss. After a few heartbeats, the glittering mist began to flow toward him, and he welcomed it, desperately anticipating the healing of his aching arm and leg. The Energy surged into him, and as the euphoria filled him, he felt his wounds closing up and his Core burning hot and full once again.

\*\*\*Congratulations! You've achieved level 27 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.\*\*\*

When the high began to fade, and Victor could think clearly again, he wasn't surprised that such a massive battle had leveled him. "I might be close to the next one too, don't you think, Gorz?"

"Close to Thayla?"

"No, my next level."

"Perhaps, though, remember, it does get slower. I'm noticing a new object, Victor. Is that a chest over by the alcove where the huge ghoul emerged?"

Victor pulled his globe of light closer and walked toward where he'd first seen the ghoul champion. Sure enough, sitting right in the center of the stone alcove was a softly shimmering silvery chest about as big as his tio's mechanic's toolbox.