

Victor BK2: Ch7

Book 2: Chapter 7: Bloodline

“Gorz, did the dungeon put this chest here after I killed that big guy?” Victor looked at the chest, leery of touching it after all the tricks and traps he’d found in the dungeon already.

“Yes, Victor, I believe so. I ventured into several dungeons with Reevus-dak, and it was quite commonplace for the System or the spirit remnants that controlled the dungeon and its encounters to reward adventurers after difficult encounters. I believe the chest where you found your armored shirt was also such a reward.”

“Spirit remnants?”

“Beings not so different from me, though originating from a greater whole. Powerful Energy users often leave their legacies behind in dungeons, shearing off pieces of their very souls to curate those locations.”

“Legacies? Like, so people don’t forget about them?”

“That’s one motivation, but motivations are myriad. One dungeon Reevus explored was curated by a powerful summoner’s soul fragment. She’d signed a contract with one of her patrons to create the dungeon as a learning experience, of sorts.”

“So you think it’s safe to open this chest?”

“Not necessarily. Part of the challenge may be in surviving or bypassing traps.”

“Shit,” Victor sighed, squatting to look more closely at the chest. It didn’t look dangerous. It had a clasp but no lock and the silvery metal had an inner glow that wasn’t menacing at all. Not seeing any hints of danger and losing his patience, Victor stood and pulled one of the spears he’d looted from the skeletons out of his ring. He stood at the full length of the wooden shaft and used the tip to flip up the latch on the chest. Nothing happened, so he wedged the spearhead under the lid and lifted it open. He was awarded with more shimmering light from the chest’s interior but no explosions or pitfalls. “Easy, peasy,” he muttered, slipping the spear back into his ring.

He stepped forward and looked into the rectangular interior of the chest. Soft-looking, satiny material lined the silver box, but most of its contents were obscured by a floating, silvery orb flecked with black, swirling motes. It exuded a bright shimmering glow that seemed to mist away from the orb, though if it were a physical mist, it dispersed almost instantly as it radiated. “What am I looking at, Gorz?”

“Victor, that appears to be a Delving Orb! Reevus was ever in search of such items! They’re quite rare rewards designed to pull forth hidden aspects of your ancestry and advance your racial bloodline.”

“Like the fruit I ate that advanced my race?”

“Similar, but far more sophisticated. This was designed by the System, Victor, and will dig much more deeply than most natural treasures would. What’s more, in one of the texts that Reevus had me read, it’s implied that these orbs grow more powerful the longer they remain undiscovered.”

“What do I do? Pick it up?”

“Yes, it should begin its process immediately upon your touch.”

Victor looked around the room. When he ate the fruit, he remembered being completely out of it for several minutes. Would something like that happen with the orb? He lifted Lifedrinker and walked around the room's perimeter, making sure none of the dead ghouls were stirring and that there weren't any newly opened passages where further enemies might emerge. The only exits he found, though, were the one he came through, closed off by the rune-covered limestone block, and a stone door inset in the back of the alcove behind the chest.

He walked back over to the chest and sat, legs crossed, in front of it. He didn't know what to expect from the orb, but he figured he should be ready for anything. He placed Lifedrinker across his lap, and then, one hand braced against the stone floor, he reached out with the other and touched the orb. Heat instantly flooded his hand and coursed into his arm, traveling through his Energy pathways. It wasn't unpleasant—sort of like dipping your arm into a hot bath. When the sensation reached his chest, he caught his breath, and then, just an instant later, it came into his mind, and he lost himself.

Victor drifted through darkness, his mind filled with a buzzing, vibrating sensation. He felt like he was stuck in an instant and in eternity all at once, and if he ever had to explain how long he floated like that, he'd never find the words. Eventually, something resolved in his eyes—a shimmering line of yellow light, dancing and expanding in his vision, like he was hurtling toward it. As the line of yellow light grew to fill his reality, he realized he was standing in daylight between sparse trees in the warm, comfortable summer heat.

He gripped the hard wooden handle of his macuahuitl, the long, flat blade edged with razor-sharp obsidian that he'd cut for himself to craft the weapon. His brothers and sisters were lined up with him, shoulder to shoulder. He looked up and down the line, pride filling his heart at their mighty host, and then his sisters began their ululating war song, and he knew it was time to drive the invaders from their land. He screamed and stomped his feet, exulting in the strength of his blood. He and his Quinametzin brethren would push the little people from their shores.

Victor, no, not Victor—Tenecoalt drew his macuahuitl over his chest, painting a deep red line that flowed down over his belly, and he screamed, shaking the leaves of the forest, and the host charged. The line of Quinametzin, a hundred strong, broke from the trees, loping down the grassy slope to crash into the army of little invaders. He screamed and swung his weapon, cleaving through the little people, shattering skulls, bones, and severing limbs.

His enemies had crafted similar weapons, trying to mimic his great people. Still, their tiny blades served only to anger Tenecoalt and his people, and the rampage continued until thousands of little corpses fed the grass. Tenecoalt knelt next to one of the last thrashing invaders and gripped its small head in his hand. Pulling it close, he said, "What do you call yourselves, little man?"

"Aztec," the small one coughed, then fell silent as Tenecoalt twisted his head, pulling it away from the body, trailing a spinal root. He held the head high over his head and screamed his victory to the sun, and his brethren screamed with him. Not one of his mighty people had fallen to the invaders.

Darkness fell over Victor's vision, and once again, he drifted. He was aware of his body, aware of the buzzing, tingling sensation traversing through his every nerve and cell, but he wasn't able to feel time, and his thoughts were just as amorphous. This time, the darkness wasn't broken by a line of light or any sort of vision. Instead, he opened his eyes and was aware of heavy, cloying air filled with the thick, damp scent of decay. A faint shimmer of silvery light was in the periphery of his vision, and he turned toward it, recognizing the chest.

Victor grunted and sat up, stiff, hungry, and with a mouth utterly devoid of fluid. He tried to lick his lips, but it was like running a rubber eraser over cotton. "Victor!" He recognized Gorz's voice and tried to answer but only managed to grunt. With his mind a bit foggy, it took him a moment to think of his ring, but when he did, Victor summoned a wine bottle filled with cool river water and carefully sipped at it until things started to work correctly in his mouth.

"Gorz," he croaked, "what's happened?"

"Victor! You were unconscious for eleven days and four hours."

"Madre!" Victor hissed. "Let's put some light on the subject," he said, concentrating and summoning his Globe of Inspiration. The previous light must have faded while he lay unconscious.

The first thing Victor noticed as the light took shape was that his boots were lying discarded a few feet away like he'd yanked them off in his sleep. He glanced at the rest of his body, and everything seemed to be in order. While he looked at his forearms and flexed his hands open and closed, he noticed that his myriad scars were gone. Every single white line from healed wounds caused by claws, knives, spears, and everything in between had faded away.

He called up his status sheet and looked at his racial information:

Race:

Human (Quinametzin Bloodline) - Improved 1

When he saw that word, Quinametzin, his mind filled with the memory of his vision, and his heart started to race. "Gorz, how fucking tall am I?"

"Just under 2.1 meters."

"Meters? What is that, about eighty-two inches? Fucking six-ten? A little under... How tall was I before I touched that thing?"

“Approximately 1.9 meters.”

“Damn, man! Well, at least I didn’t grow as big as those things in my vision—they were, like, twice as tall as the Aztecs.”

“Did you have a bloodline vision, Victor? The text I studied mentioned that it’s possible.”

“I think so. It was like I was in another person’s body, but he wasn’t exactly a person, more like a pinche giant. I mean, he was tough as hell, but I don’t want to be twelve feet tall.”

“Your bloodline might not manifest into a full physical representation, even as you continue to delve into your racial advancements.”

“May not?”

“Correct. There are many recorded instances of people manifesting the full physical characteristics of their bloodline.”

“Shit, Gorz! Well, maybe I’ll lay off the racial advancements if I get a chance at another. I’m already at ‘improved 1,’ whatever that means.”

“What were you before, Victor?”

“Um, ‘base 4,’ I think.”

“Six ranks is an excellent gain, Victor! This orb must have lain undiscovered for a very long time. You should be happy to have reached such a milestone; most races require an improved status to reach tier-four.”

“Well, that’s great, but my feet are too big for my boots,” Victor said, holding the sole of one of his boots against the bottom of his foot—they were definitely a couple of sizes too small.”

“Ahh, a one-time sizing enchantment? Your artificer must have been parsimonious.”

“I bought them from the Contribution Store in the mine.”

“Yes, items procured in such a way are often looked down upon by discriminating individuals.”

“Whatever,” Victor said as he stood up, lifting Lifedrinker from where she’d fallen by the chest. He really didn’t feel much different, other than a sense of well-being and strength that eclipsed even his prior feelings of wellness when he’d gained his levels and improved his attributes. He felt like his body was full of potential. Which begged the question; why wasn’t he in worse shape?

How long could a person go without food or water? He must have been in some kind of comatose state, or, on the other hand, it may have to do with his racial advancements and level. His body relied more and more on Energy and required less sleep and food than it used to. Victor shrugged, retrieved a couple of sausages from his storage ring, wolfed them down, then turned back to the chest.

He pulled his light over to shine directly into it and saw that there were other items visible within, now that the glowing silver orb was gone. He saw the glint of a glass bottle and a loop of folded leather. He reached in and lifted out the bottle. It was filled with dark red or black fluid and about twelve ounces in size. A cork stoppered the top, but no label gave hints about its contents. Victor pulled out the cork and sniffed; coppery blood tickled his nostrils, and he jerked it away, stuffing the cork back down.

He put the bottle away in his ring, hoping that someday he'd have someone tell him whether it was worth saving. He picked up the loop of leather and, as he'd suspected, found that it was a nicely crafted belt with a simple bronze buckle. He wondered if it was magical, so he trickled some Energy into it and was rewarded with a System message:

Belt of Solid Foundations: Artificed item. Enchantments: 1. Solid footing - The wearer of this belt is difficult to knock down.

"That's pretty cool," he said, slipping it through the loops on his black pants. His pants and armored shirt had adjusted nicely to his increased size, so he took a moment to be thankful that he was only shoeless and not completely naked. He briefly considered cutting away part of the tops of his boots but dismissed the idea—he wasn't a cobbler, and he was sure whatever he came up with would make it hard to move with any agility.

"Gorz, I'm worried about Thayla. Eleven days, plus the time I was in the pit—I'm afraid she's either dead or in a bad way."

"It's true, Victor, you've been apart for a lengthy time, but anything is possible. Take heart that you're stronger now and more able to help her."

"Oh, thanks for the reminder! I still have some points to spend." Victor looked at his attributes:

Energy Affinity:

3.1, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4

Energy:

1891/1891

Strength:

106

Vitality:

90

Dexterity:

40

Agility:

48

Intelligence:

32

Will:

183

Points Available:

10

He had intended to keep putting points into will, but his regular level-up points would take it over two hundred, and Victor didn't like how his strength was so far outstripping his agility and dexterity. More so, he worried about his agility; he'd never noticed a problem with dexterity while fighting, and he felt like it was high enough for axe work. Maybe he'd learn differently someday, but he wanted to put more points into agility for now. The fight with the ghoul champion had shown him what it was like to face a truly fast enemy, and he knew there were probably plenty of enemies a lot faster than that ghoul.

Decided, he put ten points into agility, and then, hefting Lifedrinker, he moved past the chest to inspect the stone door. There weren't any handles or hinges, and he felt like it might be another stone he'd have to slide, so he put his shoulder against the hard surface and drove forward, pushing into the cold floor with his bare feet. It slid surprisingly easily, grinding along the floor, and when Victor got a face full of cool, clean air, he expanded his lungs hugely, glad to be out of the stinky, corpse-filled vault where he'd lain for almost two weeks.

His light revealed a short hallway that ended in a set of steep limestone steps leading downward. "We're still above where we lost Thayla, right?"

"Yes, Victor."

"Alright, going down." Victor advanced on the steps and started padding down them, rather pleased by how quiet he was in his bare feet. The stairwell was narrow, and the steps steep, and Victor descended for several minutes until he saw a faint, blue flickering light below. He continued, boosting his agility with Sovereign Will to help his reaction time and flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy with Channel Spirit. She pulsed and throbbed with a red luminescence, and he knew she was ready to feast.

Victor stopped his light following him, letting it hang back while he continued down toward the blue glow. When he cleared a dozen more steps, he saw movement in the space at the foot of the stairs, and he realized it was a skeleton wearing tattered robes, much like the one that had blasted him with lightning. He didn't want to give it a chance to react first, so he quickly padded down the

steps as it passed by, and when he burst out of the stairwell into the room, he saw the back of the skeleton just a few feet away.

Victor leaped and brought Lifedrinker down on the skeleton's skull, shattering it like an egg, and sending its bones clattering over the floor. It happened so quickly, Lifedrinker didn't even get a chance to pull any Energy. Victor glanced around and saw the light coming from a metal brazier in the center of the room that flickered with blue flames. Dusty candelabra flanked a wooden table on the far side of the room. The table was strewn with bits of broken pottery, some bones, and a plethora of cobwebs. A wooden door stood to the left of the stairway, and, with nothing left to fight, Victor stalked toward it.

A thin stream of golden Energy flowed into him from the downed skeleton as he reached to open the door. "This is the correct direction, Victor," Gorz said, startling him.

"Right, thanks, Gorz," Victor whispered, tugging on the iron handle of the door and sliding it with soft scrapes over the stone floor. The stones here were darker, more gray than white, and Victor recognized them from when he'd first arrived in the dungeon with Thayla. It seemed like he'd found his way back to the part of the dungeon where they'd met Belikot, and so Victor began to feel some anticipation and a little hope about finding his friend.

The hallway was long and lined with side passages, and Victor began to methodically explore. He ran into many skeletons over the next hour or two. They were standard skeletons with weapons and sometimes broken rusty armor. Victor easily dispatched them with Lifedrinker; they broke and shattered before his mighty, Energy-charged blows, and his bulk and power made it hard for them to get close enough to retaliate. Even the spear-wielding skeletons were easy for him—they couldn't match his agility, and he'd bat aside their weapons, slipping inside their reach and shattering them with his axe.

He ran into a couple more of the spellcasting wizard-skeletons, one of which he caught by surprise and killed before it had a chance to throw a spell. The second managed to cast a ball of fiery blue Energy at him, but Victor slid under the projectile and smashed it before it could begin another spell.

Meanwhile, thanks to Gorz, Victor mapped out the hallways, discerning their pattern and realizing that they all funneled in one direction. Once he saw the design, Victor stopped searching side passages and worked his way toward the corner of the dungeon where all the winding paths seemed to converge. He found a very wide hallway with a low ceiling and started down it.

A dozen steps into the hallway, he saw that it had a precipitous slope just a few paces ahead, and, as he started down it, with a liquid hiss, black sludge began to seep from the ceiling, splattering upon the gray stones. It ran in viscous rivulets toward Victor, and he immediately realized he'd lose his footing if the stones grew slick. Rather than wait for the liquid to get to him and cause him to slip into the darkness, he strode ahead of the slime, hoping to see a safe place to leap.

As he descended the steep, sloping hallway, black slime creeping after him, Victor saw that it ended in darkness just a dozen feet ahead. He crept to the edge, trying to keep ahead of the black fluid, and couldn't see anything else; the tunnel seemed to open into a black abyss. "Fuck this," Victor said and reached into his ring, pulling out one of his pitons and the rope. He quickly used Energy to sink

the piton into the stone of the hallway. Then, after securing the rope, he tossed it into the darkness. He tucked Lifedrinker through his belt, and, with her axehead bumping against his hip, Victor grabbed the rope and started to climb down.

When his light followed him out over the edge, he saw that the tunnel mouth opened into the side of an enormous, cliff-like stone wall. He tried pushing his light out into the darkness, but the space was too large, and when he felt himself losing connection to the globe, he pulled it back. The black slime dripped out of the tunnel mouth and down the stones of the massive wall, but only for a few feet. Victor had outpaced it, and, as he descended, he lost sight of the tunnel altogether.

When he reached the end of his rope, Victor was still hanging in the darkness. “Gorz, can you sense the bottom of this fucking wall?”

“Yes, Victor, it's only another six meters or so. I'm surprised you can't see it.”

“I think this darkness is unnatural.” Victor gripped the rope tightly with his left hand, then he lifted Lifedrinker out of his belt with his right hand. He took three quick breaths and let go, falling through the black shadows. His globe of light streaked after him, and when his feet thudded into cold, hard stone, Victor bent his knees to catch his momentum. He looked around, noting scattered bones on gray stonework, and then he heard the scrabbling clicking of claws on stone and the growls of hungry creatures.

Victor cast Inspiring Presence because he was still weirded out by the darkness and didn't know what to expect. At the same time, he charged Lifedrinker with Channel Energy and bolstered his agility with Sovereign Will. Moments later, four red-eyed hounds tore out of the darkness at him. They were huge, probably approaching two hundred pounds, covered in sleek, black fur, and sporting razored bone spurs all along their spines. Dagger-like teeth hung from their upper jaws, and saliva dripped from their lolling black tongues to sizzle and spurt against the stone flooring.

Victor hopped back, putting his shoulders to the wall, and waited for them to charge. They paced back and forth in front of him, growling and gnashing their huge teeth. “Come on!” Victor roared, admiring the new, deep rumble in his voice. One of the hounds leaped at him, and Lifedrinker licked out like a terrible serpent's tongue, ripping three inches of gleaming, silvery death through the beast's neck. It gurgled and sprayed hot blood, falling short of its target. It tried to backpedal, scrabbling its weakened, flailing legs. Victor brought Lifedrinker back around and crunched her through the monstrous hound's skull.

The other three hounds charged, then, and Victor kicked out and punched with his left hand while he wrestled to bring Lifedrinker back into play. He jerked her handle back and forth twice, finally wrenching her from the skull. After he threw off another leaping hound, he grabbed the handle with his left hand and took a step, swinging her like he was trying to knock down a building. She ripped through the air in a shrieking arc, cleaving a deep runnel through two of the hounds' chests. They yelped, turning and circling away from him, erupting in cries of despair and growls of agony.

The hound he'd thrown warily stalked toward him, and Victor didn't wait for it—he charged, bringing Lifedrinker up under its chin with an underhanded diagonal slash. After that, it was a matter of putting the beasts out of their misery. When he finished, Victor sighed heavily and looked around. The darkness still clung, crowding at the edges of his globe's light. Holding Lifedrinker

ready, he explored the boundaries of the room. He was half done when the Energy influx from the hounds caught up to him, and Victor paused to enjoy the euphoria for a moment before continuing his inspection of the room.

Following the walls with his light, Victor found that he was in a rectangular chamber about a hundred feet by twenty, and there was a rusty iron door midway through the long wall opposite where he'd descended on his rope. He didn't find any treasure in the room and was rather eager to be away from the cloying darkness, so he tried the door. It was locked or stuck, so Victor decided to use his ring. He gently knocked on the metal, and, with a grinding click and a shower of rust particles, the door popped open a quarter inch. Victor pulled on the door, and, hinges squealing, it revealed another low-roofed, very narrow stone passage.

Victor moved into the cramped tunnel, padding through the darkness with his light trailing behind, and, after just a few dozen steps, he came to an equally narrow, cramped stairwell. "Are we anywhere near where we lost Thayla?" he asked Gorz.

"We're quite close, Victor. This stair appears to lead to an area just 23 meters west of where the puzzle door was."

"Alright, buckle up, Gorz."

"Pardon?"

"Get ready!" Victor said and grinned as Gorz protested his inability to do anything, let alone get ready. Then, he started up the steps.