

Victor BK2: Ch8

Book 2: Chapter 8: Hunting a Boss

The narrow, cramped stairwell wound upward, each step annoyingly a different height than the ones around it. When Victor finally pulled himself out of the confines of its stone walls into a small square room, barely large enough to stand in, the effects of the cramped spaces were starting to fray the edges of his sanity.

A black iron lever stuck conspicuously out of the wall to his right, and, seeing no other options in the tiny space, he pulled on it. With a loud, rumbling, controlled collapse, the wall in front of him fell into the floor, and a wider hallway was revealed.

“I recognize this location, Victor!” Gorz said.

“Alright, direct me back to that damn puzzle door, please.”

“Forward seven meters, then take a right.”

“Okay,” Victor gripped Lifedrinker’s haft, holding her crossways in front of him. The handle he’d made for her was notched, bruised, and gouged but still solid. Still, he missed her elegant, tough, cherry-wood handle and hoped he’d be able to do her justice soon. He followed Gorz’s instructions, taking two more turns and stepping over the desiccated bodies of the ghouls he and Thayla had killed on their initial exploration of the area. In just a few short minutes, he was standing before the bronze-colored puzzle door.

The square hole in the floor where he’d fallen through was still there, yawning wide as if to invite him back in, but, more surprisingly, the puzzle door was ajar. “I guess that skull really did know how to open it. Nice of them to leave it open for me,” Victor said, his voice hushed.

“I believe the skull thought you dead.”

“Yeah.” Victor walked to the right of the pitfall, where Thayla had been standing, and peeked through the door. He’d left his light back a few feet, but enough bled through the opening to reveal the strange chamber. Like the door that opened into it, the room was round. It had a convex ceiling painted pale blue, like a sky, and purple mountains were painted around the edges to give the illusion of a distant horizon. Twin suns hung in the sky, one a smoldering red orb and the other much smaller and bright white. A stone table or altar stood in the center of the room, also round, and resting at the center of the altar was a familiar yellow-white skull.

On the far side of the room, another round door stood ajar. Orange light and shadows flickered from the dark recess it revealed, but Belikot’s skull was the only object Victor could see in the room. As he watched it, peering from behind the partially open door, he saw a faint, blue flicker in its eye sockets. The straps Thayla had crafted to carry the skull were still fastened around it, and the memory of her braiding the leather cords and carefully attaching them triggered a pulse of hot rage in Victor, and he twisted his hands on Lifedrinker’s haft.

Grinding his teeth, Victor slowly channeled Energy into Lifedrinker, causing her to buzz and pulse as a red aura limned her long, bearded blade. Now was his chance. He'd shatter this fucking skull before it could protest or further influence him or, worse, Thayla. He'd worry about finding her after this asshole was out of the picture.

Victor used Sovereign Will to enhance his agility, and he hunched behind the door, veritably vibrating from the urge to jump and tumble. He took three quick breaths, then leaped through the door. Anticipating shrieking blue fireballs, he somersaulted to the left, leaped to his feet, and brought Lifedrinker up over his head in a two-handed chop. "Victor, no!" Thayla's scream seemed to echo in his head, loud enough to startle him out of his attack. He ducked to the left, circling behind the skull and looking for Thayla. He didn't see her and wondered if Belikot had tried to trick him somehow. Growling, he lifted the axe again. "Victor? Victor! Are you still here?"

"Thayla?" He called softly, turning to glance at the partially open door.

"Victor, I'm in the skull! Don't break it!" Thayla's voice sounded disembodied, almost echoing on itself as it came to him.

"What the fuck?" Victor jerked his gaze back to the skull. Licking his lips nervously, he slowly moved so that he could see the eye sockets again. He still held Lifedrinker ready, his knuckles white as he fought with the urge to smash the skull.

"Thank the Ancestors; you're alive! He tricked me, Victor!" Thayla's voice was full of despair, and the tiny blue flames in the skull's eye sockets flared briefly, then grew dim again.

"Is he in there with you?" Victor tried to imagine what could possibly be going on. Had the skull absorbed her somehow? Was Belikot torturing her?

"No! He stole my body, Victor! He swapped with me! I thought we had a contract, but he tricked me," Thayla's voice seemed to be coming from further and further away.

"Fuck, Thayla! What can I do? Where is he?"

"I don't have enough strength to keep talking for long; he's too powerful to fight, Victor. If you killed him, you'd be killing my body. You have to beat him another way. Find his phylactery—he mentioned it ..." Thayla's voice faded to a whisper, then was gone, and the lights in the skull's eye sockets faded to almost imperceptible pinpricks. Victor looked around, suddenly nervous about being jumped while trying to speak to a skull. Nothing moved around him, though, and he gingerly reached out and touched the smooth, polished bone.

"I'm sorry, Thayla. I'm sorry it took me so long to get back here," he gently patted the skull, then he had an idea. Very slowly, he extended a tiny thread of

inspiration-attuned Energy out through his pathways and into the skull. The eyes immediately blazed to life, more white than blue now, and Thayla's triumphant laugh echoed into his mind.

"Thank you, Victor! Oh, Ancestors, that feels good! Your Energy is so good!" Her voice, echoing in his head, was stronger now, and her words more sure. "Did you hear what I said about his phylactery? He tricked me into this skull, but he really did make a contract to teach me. That's why he didn't destroy me after he took my body. He talked to me a lot while he performed rituals here. He mentioned that someday he'd help me make a phylactery of my own. He said I had a lot of learning to do and that a few decades in this skull would do me good. Oh, Victor, he gripped my soul and pulled me in here, and I felt like a child trying to wrestle a grown man when I fought back!"

"Alright, Thayla. You're good now; I've got you. Did the asshole ever mention where this phylactery was? How can it help us? I've never heard of one."

"It's something he made, like a ... like a tether for his soul. It's what gives him the ability to move his consciousness around. It holds a lot of his power. If we take control of it, we can force him to get out of my body, I'm sure of it."

"Get the thing, confront the guy in your body, got it. So, where the fuck is it?"

"Belikot wasn't meant to be here, Victor. He's not part of the dungeon; he was adventuring here, trying to gain more knowledge of death magic. The lord of this dungeon beat him; only his undead status saved him, but his old body, the one carrying the phylactery, is still in the lord's lair. I don't know where that is, but I think it's in this area."

"What makes you think he didn't already go and get it?"

"He was scared! He said he had a lot of preparations to do before trying to recover it. He was very talkative after he tricked me, Victor! He gloated and gloated," she sobbed for several seconds, then continued, "he went on and on about what he was going to do with my body."

"Fucking pendejo!" Victor growled, "Alright, Thayla, so I need to get hurrying. Let's go!"

"Victor, be careful! The lord of this dungeon must be powerful, but I don't know what sort of creature it is."

"Don't worry," Victor grunted, picking up the skull and tying the cords to his belt. "I've had some practice killing undead shit since we last were together."

“You seem different; your voice is rumbling. I wish I could see normally; being in this skull is like being stuck in a tiny cell of stained glass. Everything is strange looking, and I can’t do anything!”

“Hang tight, chica; I’m not gonna let that guy get away with this.”

“Thank you, Victor! I can’t believe you’re alive! Belikot was sure he killed you.”

“Nah, you know I’m more stubborn than that.” Thayla’s disembodied laugh brought a smile to his lips, and Victor proceeded to the far door, pulling it open farther to see what hid behind it. A short hallway opened into another round room, much smaller than the previous. Victor walked into it, surveying the mess—scattered papers, broken furniture, piled bones, and smashed glass dominated the space, all illuminated by a flickering orange brazier. Hallways led away into shadows to the right and left. Before moving on, Victor rooted around in the papers for a while. He didn’t find anything that looked interesting; nearly all of them were covered with scribbles, stains, or scratched-out runes that he didn’t recognize.

He noticed that Thayla had grown quiet in his mind, and he glanced down at the skull and saw that the eyes were very dim again. He channeled more Energy into it, and they flared bright again.

“Thank you, Victor. I’m not sure what I’m doing to expend Energy, but when it fades, it’s like my mind drifts, and I start to dream, living in my memories. Just now, I was having a picnic with my baby girl. Oh, Ancestors, why did I say that? Victor, I’m not myself in here!”

“Chill, it’s okay. I’m not judging. Alright, I need to concentrate, though—let’s find this fucking boss.” Victor went with his gut and started down the left-hand passage. It was identical to all the other stone corridors in this area, and he knew he’d be lost if he didn’t have Gorz to guide him.

He explored dozens of passageways, carefully searching behind the doors he found. He never ran into enemies more dangerous than a few random packs of ghouls and skeletons, and he and Lifedrinker made short work of them. Nor did he find any worthwhile treasure or clues as to where the “dungeon lord” was. After several hours and at Gorz’s insistence that he was starting to backtrack, Victor returned to the round room and tried the other passageway.

He immediately noted a downward slope to the hallway and a deeper chill in the air. He advanced more carefully, channeling Energy into Lifedrinker and padding softly near one wall, clinging to the shadows, his light well behind him. The passage started to curve, and then the slope grew steeper, and Victor found himself creeping down toward an opening illuminated by silvery-blue, flickering light. He stopped the movement of his own globe of light and continued to pad toward the larger space.

When Victor came to the end of the slope and could see clearly ahead of himself, he saw a substantial domed chamber in which a humanoid being paced, limned in a ghostly, silvery-blue

light. The figure was holding a flickering, bright sword with a blade more like a cleaver than what Victor imagined a sword blade should look like.

Victor bolstered his agility and prepared to cast Inspiring Presence, and, with Lifedrinker humming and pulsing with rage Energy, he stepped into the room. When the figure whirled to face him, holding its gleaming, flickering sword-cleaver high, Victor said, “Hey, what’s up?”

If he were hoping for a conversation instead of a fight, he was quickly disappointed—the specter-like humanoid leaped through the air, covering twenty feet, and chopping down with the blade of its weapon right at Victor’s skull. Victor, for his part, didn’t stand still; he darted to the side, completely dodging the ghostly hack, and whipped Lifedrinker out in a blur of black metal with a silvery, streaking edge, and she tore through the spectral creature as it landed. Bits of glowing, misty goo flew through the air in her wake, and the figure made its first sound, a wailing shriek that rippled through the air and echoed off the walls.

When the sound bounced around and rang in his ears, Victor felt his arms going slack, and he stumbled back. He shook his head, shrugging off the soporific effect, and cast Inspiring Presence. The shadows retreated, and the creature’s movements seemed predictable, and Victor laughed at the notion that he’d almost put Lifedrinker down. “Sorry, my friend, but she’s thirsty!” He chuckled again, circling the spirit, waiting for it to perform another obvious attack.

He couldn’t see many details on his opponent’s face, but the slightly darker line of its mouth turned down in a frown, and the pinpoint of bright blue light that were its eyes blazed more intensely. It lifted its sword and darted to the right, bringing the blade down and to the left, trying to cleave Victor in twain. Victor saw the move like it was being performed by a lousy stage actor and sidestepped, putting Lifedrinker’s edge in the path of the cleaving weapon. When the two edges met, there was a flash of light, and then the top half of the cleaver-sword flopped away through the air, dissipating into a shimmering mist before it hit the ground.

Victor pushed even more rage Energy into Lifedrinker, then went on an offensive rampage, hacking in a series of wild-seeming chops that proved too fast and too well-timed for the spirit figure to avoid. He tore huge chunks of its strange jelly-like flesh away with each cleave, and, when he had it backed into a wall and cowering, he buried Lifedrinker into the crook of its neck and let her drink her fill. As she throbbed and pulsed, pulling thick streams of bright, mercurial Energy into her blade, the figure dimmed and shrank, and by the time Lifedrinker relented, there was just a puddle of faintly shimmery matter at his feet.

“Well-fought, Victor. I think—it’s hard to see details from this skull, and my view keeps jumping around. Did you tie me to your belt?”

“Yeah, and thanks.” Victor smiled as he saw the golden motes starting to form over the puddle; they were tinged with purple, which meant the thing was a higher level than some of the other undead creatures he’d fought in the dungeon, but it hadn’t been much of a challenge. Maybe he actually would stand a chance against the boss.

Victor took in the surge of Energy, feeling recharged, and looked around the room. Heavy bronze-colored double doors sat closed on the far side of the room. The shadows were deep in the corners, so he pulled his globe of inspiration-attuned light closer and walked around, kicking through the

piles of strange junk. Again, there were plenty of broken glass objects, torn papers, and little bits of damaged, bent metal. “It’s like it used to be a place for crafting, but either that guy I fought or someone else broke everything.”

“Maybe Belikot.”

“But why?”

“I don’t know, but I heard him smashing things in the room behind where you found me. Maybe he doesn’t want others to learn what he found here?”

“Don’t things change in dungeons? Like, just because he destroyed this shit, does that mean it will stay destroyed?”

“It depends on how the dungeon is curated. It might regenerate over time or completely change, but it could take years or decades. I really don’t know, Victor; I’m just guessing.” Thayla’s voice was quiet and soft, and he wondered how long she could hold together, living in a disembodied skull.

“Victor, I’ve grown used to you talking to yourself, but your conversation has grown very one-sided, and I’m having trouble following what you mean,” Gorz said, his tinny voice echoing in his mind. Victor slapped his forehead.

“Shit, Gorz! I’m sorry—I should have told you Thayla’s spirit is in the skull. Belikot tricked her and took her body.”

“Oh, I see. She’s been speaking to you in your mind?”

“Right, which begs the question of why I didn’t ask you about any of this. Sorry, Gorz. By the way, what do you know about phylacteries?”

“Let me think,” Gorz said and paused for a moment, “I have a text in my memory that mentions the use of phylacteries in rituals to master various undead states of existence.”

“Nothing specific?”

“I’m afraid it wasn’t one of Reevus’s areas of interest, Victor. The text mentions phylacteries in the context of slaying a Lich—you must destroy the phylactery before you can kill the physical manifestation of the creature.”

“Right, so, if we get the phylactery, we should have a pretty good bargaining chip, right?”

“I would think so, yes.”

“Thanks, Gorz.”

“Victor, might I ask a rather ... intrusive question? Please answer me using only your mind.”

“What is it?”

“Have you considered that Thayla might still be acting on behalf of Belikot? Are you sure she or he or both of them are not using you to retrieve the phylactery for his benefit?”

“No, I didn’t think of that, Gorz! Fuck! I ... I guess I just want to trust her.”

“Understandable, Victor—she’s your friend. Still, I would caution you to be wary; a creature capable of creating a phylactery and using it to alter their nature is likely to be quite crafty and duplicitous.”

“You can read Energy signatures, Gorz. What are you picking up from the skull?”

“It’s definitely different from when you first encountered it, Victor. I believe Thayla is within, but that doesn’t mean Belikot doesn’t lurk nearby.”

“Alright, thanks. I’ll keep my eyes open.” Victor sighed heavily, wishing he could just take things at face value for a change, then he walked toward the bronze doors. They were large, each wide enough to allow four or five people to walk through side by side. Strangely they were barred from this side, with a heavy bronze-tipped wooden beam sitting sideways on thick metal brackets. Victor lifted the beam and tossed it to clatter against the wall to his left. He was tired of sneaking around, and the idea that Thayla might still be deceiving him had put him into a foul mood. If something lurked behind these doors, then it better get ready for a face full of axe.

He pulled at one of the big doors, and it opened with a creaking groan, releasing a heavy waft of stale, cold air. A stone ramp led away from the doors into a dusty, stone passage. It was just like any other stone corridors in this part of the dungeon but broader with a high ceiling. Victor started up the ramp, his agility boosted, Lifedrinker in front of him, and anticipating anything and everything.

He saw a wider part of the corridor about twenty meters ahead, and when he drew near, he saw that the broader, square section was lined with standing marble sarcophagi. When he stepped into the space between the first two sarcophagi, he wasn’t really surprised when the lids fell toward him, crashing against the stones and revealing their inhabitants—tall, emaciated ghoul-like corpses with leering, tooth-filled mouths and long, razor-edged black claws extending from their elongated fingers. In a domino-like fashion, the other sarcophagi started to open, their lids crashing to the ground, and before he knew it, Victor was surrounded by a throng of twenty hissing, snapping ghouls.

These creatures moved with more grace and intelligence than the horde he’d killed in the other part of the dungeon, and Victor clenched his jaw, backing up to keep them from surrounding him. He was frustrated, but not really because yet another group of monsters was challenging him. He was

pissed off that Gorz had pointed out that he couldn't trust Thayla, even in her seemingly desperate state. He wouldn't feel good about her until she was back in her own body and Belikot was dead—really dead. The more he thought about it, watching the creatures slowly advance toward him, the more pissed he became, and he found it felt good just to be mad for a change. He allowed his teeth to show, bringing his lips back in a low growl that hinted at red, murderous violence.

Victor let go of his hold on his Core and flooded his pathways with rage-attuned Energy. He found that, with his much more powerful will, he didn't immediately start to lose control of himself as he did way back in the days of the Wagon Wheel when he'd first tried to channel his Energy. No, he felt the fury and saw the red in his vision, but he was still too much in control. He didn't want to be in control; he wanted the release of madness.

He growled again, hunching his broad shoulders, Lifedrinker held crossways in front of him, and used Sovereign Will to boost his strength. He swelled visibly, and a deep, angry laugh started to burble up from his throat as he cast Berserk. In the red haze of madness, Victor exulted in the release of pent-up aggression. He launched himself into the pack of tall, vicious ghouls, and Lifedrinker carved a silvery-edged blur of red destruction among the creatures.

Sometime later, Victor came back to himself. He was sitting on the stone floor, his back to the wall between two of the empty marble coffins. Hunks of gray fleshed ghoul parts were arrayed before him in a crazy scatter of gore and destruction. Lifedrinker was lying on the stone next to his leg, her haft scarred, battered, and drenched with black-red gore but still whole. He picked her up, dragging her toward him, the metal of her axehead grinding along the stone. Victor grunted as he hefted her up, and his eyes widened when he realized she'd changed.

Before, she'd been a large axe with a long beard, larger than you might use to chop a tree, but not much more so. Now, she was decidedly more warlike in appearance, still bearded, still not ridiculously large, but heavier, and her blunt end had grown to look more like a hammerhead than just the back of an axe. What's more, extending back from her bright heartsilver edge, gleaming, silvery veins flowed like a permanent lightning strike through the black metal.

“Look at you, beautiful! Did you level up?” The axe vibrated in his hands, and he knew she was talking to him. With a wide grin, Victor stood up and rested her against his shoulder. “Don't worry, gorgeous; I've got plans to get you plenty more to drink.”

Victor walked back to the center of the passageway, surveying his destruction. Ghoul corpses in various states of dismemberment littered the area. Some were smashed partway into the open sarcophagi. Some were piled up like he'd stopped moving for a while and simply hacked them apart as they came upon him. Tired of breathing the wet, putrid stench, Victor looked away and started walking along the corridor again. A short while later, he came upon another set of doors. These were also barred from the near side.

When he drew near, Gorz spoke up in his mind, “Victor! I sense a powerful death-Energy source behind those doors. It's stronger even than the ghoul champion you faced.”