

Victor BK2: Ch9

Book 2: Chapter 9: To a Tether Tied

Victor paced back and forth in front of the massive bronze doors. He knew he had to go in there. He knew he had to kill the boss, "lord," or whatever, but something kept him from lifting off that bar and pulling the doors open. He looked back down the passageway, then at Lifedrinker, then at the skull bouncing at his belt. Did he really need to go in there? He could just leave. He could just tell Thayla he couldn't do it—try to find Belikot another way. "Then what?" he asked himself. How would he get Belikot to leave Thayla's body? What if he couldn't? What if she died, trapped in that skull, unable to cope?

"Fucking hell," he said, then, dimly remembering his vision of the Quinametzin giants, he slapped himself in the face and growled. The sting and ringing in his ears stimulated something in him, and he hit himself again. This time he didn't growl; he roared. He did it again, and he screamed his roar at the door and lifted off the massive beam barring it shut. It had to weigh four hundred pounds, but he tossed it down the passageway like his old self would have thrown a two-by-four.

Victor flooded his axe with rage-attuned Energy, bolstered his strength with Sovereign Will, and yanked the right-hand door open, sending it to slam into the wall with a protesting squeal of ill-maintained hinges. Darkness rolled out of the space before him, crushing the glimmering light of his Globe of Inspiration and snuffing the spell out. Victor felt a chill enter his heart, and his skin grew cold, and then the red, flickering nimbus of Energy around Lifedrinker faded away.

A horrible hissing, wet exhalation came from deep in the chamber, and when Victor's wide eyes turned toward the sound, his breath coming fast and shallow, he saw two red lanterns gleaming in the deep darkness. Victor's heart started to hammer in his chest. His ears thundered like he was standing in a tornado, and every fiber of his being urged him to turn and run. Perhaps another person would have done just that. Maybe someone who hadn't prioritized improving their will would have crumbled and failed to mount a defense. Victor, however, didn't turn. He didn't flee, and, in fact, he forcibly steadied his breathing and growled, "You'll have to do better than that, asshole."

Victor cast Heroic Heart, and, as the hot, pleasant surge of courage-attuned Energy flooded through him, he took a step forward. When the heat spread into his head and eyes, some clinging, cloying shadows fell away, dissipating into mist, but he still couldn't see his enemy clearly. Victor concentrated on the two hovering red lights, and he cast Dauntless Radiance. A beam of golden light cut through the darkness like a spear thrown from heaven. It illuminated a wide circle in front of him, blasting the shadows away like truth exposing liars. Uncovered, the monstrous Dungeon Lord screamed and advanced.

The lord of the dungeon was not shaped like a man. Victor had imagined a terrible vampire, a powerful lich, or even some sort of super ghoul. However, the creature that stalked toward him through his light spell was shaped like a gigantic skeletal serpent with three sets of long, razor-clawed legs. Red lights shaped like dinner plates filled the black hollows of its skull, and twelve-

inch fangs dripping green, acidic venom hung from its bony jaw. Shadows roiled off the bones of its frame, only to evaporate in the light of his Dauntless Radiance.

Victor renewed his Channel Spirit spell, charging Lifedrinker with a red surge of Energy, then lunged forward to meet the serpent. The monstrous skeleton was thirty or more feet in length, and when he met its charge with a powerful overhead chop, it felt like he was trying to stop a speeding car. Lifedrinker didn't disappoint, however, smashing into its bony snout and biting deep. The concussion from the impact was enough to snap his improvised axe handle and knock Victor sprawling.

Victor rolled to his feet, already summoning his baton, ready for an attack. The serpent, however, was thrashing its long body and clawing at its snout with one of its front limbs—it was trying to dig Lifedrinker's axehead out of its skull, but she was surging and vibrating, digging herself further into the bone. "Fuck yes! Get him, chica!"

Victor ran forward, boosting his strength so that his shoulders swelled, and his arms felt like tree trunks. When he got near the thrashing, kicking monstrosity, he began to lay into it with his baton. Each blow was like a gunshot going off—bones chipped and cracked, and the enchanted baton proved its worth by withstanding tremendous forces. He began to do so much damage that the distracted horror stopped clawing at its nose and turned its baleful gaze upon him. Meanwhile, Lifedrinker sank a little deeper, and Victor could see streams of red-black Energy coursing through the bone into her.

"You're fucked, asshole! She won't let go until you're done!" Like a launched torpedo, the bone serpent answered his taunt by striking out at him. If Victor had been bolstering his agility, he might have dodged, but as it was, the massive head smashed into him, driving him back until he crashed into something heavy built from stone. Victor wrestled with the horror, one fist clutching his baton and thrusting it into its mouth, the other hand pushing down on the jaw, trying to keep it from clamping onto him. Meanwhile, the six huge legs scrabbled against stone driving him into the hard surface until he felt sharp pains along his ribs as they began to crack.

His baton suddenly slipped off whatever edge of bone it was pushing against, and his arm shot forward into the creature's maw. He managed to muscle down on its lower jaw to keep it from clamping on his arm, but he still felt a terrible searing rip along his forearm as one of the snake's fangs dug a tunnel through his flesh.

It felt like someone had taken a welding torch to his arm, blasting through his flesh and bone. Victor screamed, and with a panicked surge of adrenaline, he threw the snake to the side. He glanced at his forearm and felt the blood drain from his face, and a chill entered his heart when he saw the long, jagged wound slowly expanding from the acidic venom.

Victor backed up, holding his baton ready in his right hand; his other arm hung by his side, twitching. He needed to heal, or at least resist the venom better, so Victor switched his Sovereign Will boost to vitality. He immediately felt better as his attribute jumped from ninety to over a hundred and fifty. His heart rate slowed, his breathing settled, and the pain in his arm grew less

sharp. He could feel his flesh fighting the venom and saw the green fluid bubbling and dripping out of the wound as though it couldn't find purchase.

The dungeon boss had grown distracted by the terrible thorn Lifedrinker had become in its head. She was drawing more and more Energy from the creature, and it desperately clawed at itself with its two front legs, completely ignoring Victor. Victor cast Channel Spirit, flooding his baton with hundreds of points worth of rage-attuned Energy, and then he leaped at the rear left side of the monster, smashing the baton down on its long, winding spine.

With a tremendous crack, the massive vertebrae split with shards of bone exploding away from the enchanted baton's impact. Amazingly, the monster's limbs adhered to the rules of physiology, and the skeleton's rear two legs and tail fell limp. Its collapsing weight pulled the skeleton snake toward the stone floor. It stopped scratching at its snout long enough to whirl and try to snap at Victor, but its damaged spine tripped it up, and Victor hopped back out of striking distance.

Victor circled back to his stationary light, standing in its bright glow. He watched as the snake-like skeleton scabbled along the floor toward him, but before it could get halfway, it stopped to start digging at the axe buried in its snout. Victor watched as the black and red Energy lines continued to flow toward Lifedrinker and then looked at his arm. The flesh had stopped dissolving, and the bleeding nearly stopped, so he switched his boost back to strength, renewed his Channel Spirit into his baton, and charged forward, aiming at the long bone coming out of the monster's left shoulder; he wanted to deprive it of one of its scratching limbs.

He closed the distance, the skeleton either unaware or uncaring of his intent, and his baton smashed into the bone with an echoing snap, completely shattering it. As its left forelimb fell away, the monster toppled toward him, using its working set of legs to try to bowl him over. Victor tried to roll out, but he was so close, and the creature lurched so suddenly that it fell upon him, and one of its long fangs sank into his right thigh. Once again, blazing pain shot through Victor like a lightning bolt, and he roared and screamed as he thrashed in a panic.

The monster worried and pulled at his leg, whatever semblance of cunning it once had, long destroyed by the maddening torture Lifedrinker was inflicting. Victor fought against the snake's movements, flexing his leg and pushing with his hands, fighting to keep the mouth parted. The fang kept slipping partly out of his leg, distributing more and more venom into the flesh, and as it tore into his skin and muscle and bone, a red haze descended on Victor's mind, and he let go of every impulse save one: rage.

Victor didn't remember casting Berserk, but something must have triggered it because deep in his chest, his mighty heart started to quicken and thump, and red, scalding Energy flooded his pathways. Victor's arms suddenly steadied, holding onto the two halves of the giant snake skeleton's jaws. He thrust them apart with a furious roar, ripping the fang from his leg. Victor stood, still holding onto the snake's jaws, and suddenly it didn't seem so large. He loomed over the twisted, flailing monster and screamed into its dimming red eyes, wrenching with titanic strength. The snake's jaws cracked and tore, and then he pulled the lower half off and threw it, whirling into the darkness. Then Victor, in a mad, psychotic rampage, began to rip the skeleton apart, bone by bone.

Long after the skeleton stopped thrashing and fighting back, the fury started to fade, and Victor's vision returned to normal, and he found himself holding onto a huge rib bone that refused to break away in his hands. He shook his head wearily and let go of the bone. He stepped back to see the half-dismantled skeleton lying in the faint gray light that suffused the room. The cloying unnatural shadows were gone, and diffuse light seeped between loose stones in the high ceiling of the chamber.

He limped back another step as hundreds of purple-tinged golden orbs of Energy began to gather on the ruined creature. Victor stood straight, breathing deeply, heavy with relief at being done with the fight. The Energy gathered and coursed into him, and Victor was lifted from his feet, immobilized by the flood of euphoria, healing, and Energy pouring into his Core. When he fell to the ground, he was bombarded by System messages:

Congratulations! You've achieved level 28 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

Congratulations! You've learned the skill: Grappling - Advanced.

Congratulations! You've gained a new feat: Titanic Rage

Titanic Rage: In your veins flows the blood of Giantkind, and your struggles have unlocked some of its potential. Abilities that cause you to Berserk will unleash your giantish heritage, doubling the usual strength benefit and enlarging your physical form for the duration.

“Ungh,” Victor grunted as he read the notifications, “well, that’s pretty badass.” Suddenly he remembered Lifedrinker, and he walked around to the snake’s head, or what was left of it, and there she was, lying on the stone next to the broken skull. Either she’d come loose when he was destroying the skeleton or worked herself free when the thing died. Only an inch or two of haft jutted out from beneath her black metal, and Victor noticed that the veins of heartsilver running from her edge had grown thicker and had more branches. “Great damn work, beautiful! I’m going to get you a fantastic new handle. I promise.”

He tucked her into his belt, then Victor summoned his Globe of Inspiration, brightening the space and shedding light on the darker corners. Statues abounded in the high, square hall. Broken and whole, they sat at odd angles to each other—leering, monstrous faces gazing around the lair. It was against one of the statues that Victor had been pinned, breaking his ribs.

Victor stretched and twisted, ensuring that the Energy he’d absorbed had repaired the bones, and they felt fine. He lifted his left arm and rubbed at the dark, jagged scar that ran from his wrist to his elbow; the venom-ruined flesh had healed, but not without leaving a souvenir. He was sure his thigh would be similarly scarred, but his pants had already mended themselves, and he didn’t feel like dropping his drawers just then.

Victor started walking around the statues, peering into the shadows, looking for treasure, lurking enemies, or something that looked like a phylactery. Some statues were broken, and hunks of marble carved into monstrous faces or taloned limbs were scattered here and there between their pedestals. More than that, bits of rubble, apparently fallen from the roof, and broken timbers created more obstacles to circumnavigate and search beneath. He found several corpses—desiccated,

stripped bare, and missing body parts. Bones clattered as he kicked his way further into the lair, and then he saw the pile.

Behind a statue of a two-headed cat-lizard, Victor spotted a large faintly glimmering chest and, piled around it, various objects of questionable value. As he approached, he saw rusty weapons, packs, piles of dented or broken armor, silverware of all types, and even a few cups that seemed to be made of gold.

Victor decided to deal with the loose pile of stuff before messing with the chest, so he picked up one of the backpacks. It was old and dusty, the canvas material stiff and unyielding. He pulled it open to find a blanket, some stained clothing, a cloth napkin wrapped around a petrified loaf of bread, and some other camping supplies, including a spark striker. He tossed most of it aside but kept some of the camping gear.

The next pack he searched gave up even less of value, but the third, a supple leather satchel still slick from the wax its owner had rubbed it with, contained something very interesting, indeed. “Victor! I sense a powerful death aura from that object, and I can see its tether winding away like a thread! Can you hold me closer?” Gorz was talking about a metal cylinder about the size of a very skinny wine bottle. When Victor lifted it out of the satchel, he was surprised by its weight and density; was that metal pewter? Hundreds or thousands of runes were carved into its surface and filled with shiny gold-colored metal. Was it gold?

Victor lifted Gorz from behind his black ringmail vest and held the cylinder close to him. “Yes! This is the phylactery, I’m certain. Its aura resonates with the same pattern as Belikot’s. Victor, I believe I could follow that tether to him. Imagine you saw a bright string leading through a room. That’s what it’s like for me!”

“That’s great, Gorz. I’ll give Thayla the good news in a few minutes. Let me keep going through this shit. But, Gorz, if you see any sign that Belikot is listening or coming back toward us, speak up, eh?”

“Of course, Victor.”

Victor slung the satchel over his shoulder after dumping out some old clothes, a shaving kit, and a pair of boots that wouldn’t have fit him anytime after seventh grade. Then he grabbed one of the discarded cloaks and wrapped it around the phylactery, stuffing it into the satchel. Victor stowed away all the silverware and the gold cups in his ring. Digging through the other packs, he found a few pouches of Energy beads and added them to his other plundered beads. Finally, he picked out a baker’s dozen swords and knives that looked halfway decent and put them into the dimensional container. Done with the piled loot, Victor turned to the chest and stood before it. It reminded him a lot of the shimmering silver chest he’d gotten after killing the ghoulish champion. This one was a little bigger and had a slightly brighter tint to its shimmer.

The other chests in the dungeon hadn’t been trapped, but he figured he shouldn’t take chances, so Victor pulled one of his spears from his ring and used it the same way he had before. Again, nothing back happened when he flipped the chest open, and a shimmering glow erupted from within, so Victor stowed the spear and looked inside at his haul.

The light was coming from a pale blue crystal necklace. It was shaped almost like a choker, and the seven crystals evenly spaced around its silver frame pulsed with a soft, pale light. Victor reached in and picked it up, noting the cold that bled into his fingers from the sharp facets. When he held it up at eye level, he could see that each crystal was shaped into a rune. Unable to read it, Victor decided to put it away for now; he'd try to find someone who could inspect it without risking an evil spirit possession.

Once he'd put the necklace away, his globe shed light on the other objects in the chest—a hunk of shimmering orange-silver metal that reminded Victor of what gold ingots looked like in VR games and a pale white dagger with a silver hilt. When Victor picked it up, he saw a drop of green liquid glinting at its tip, and he realized it wasn't a dagger but a fang, like those on the monster he'd fought. He shuddered, remembering the acid's bite, and slipped the fang-dagger into his ring. Finally, Victor picked up the ingot, marveling at its weight and the deep resonance of Energy within it. "Gorz, any idea what kind of metal this is?"

"It appears to be very pure amber ore, Victor. Reevus would have been quite pleased with such a find."

"Alright, now another question, Gorz: should I wake up Thayla and tell her about the phylactery, or should we hunt down that asshole before waking her, just in case he's using her somehow?"

"Oh, dear. I'm not qualified for such decisions, Victor. I know I cautioned you about Thayla's motives, but I don't know what state she's in. Perhaps languishing without Energy is causing her harm."

"I didn't think of that. Alright, I'll wake her up for a bit and see what's up. Keep an eye on her Energy and on that tether."

"I will!"

Victor touched a hand to the smooth skull hanging from his belt and channeled a tiny amount of inspiration-attuned Energy into it. "Victor! Are you still with me? Oh, of course you are; your Energy is unmistakable. Thank you, Victor."

"You're welcome, Thayla. Hey, are you doing okay? Do you suffer when your Energy runs low? Am I going to lose you?"

"No, I don't think so, Victor. When I don't do anything, my own Energy slowly builds up. After a few days or weeks, I'd be able to speak again for a little while. When it's low, I just live in my memories."

"Oh, well, that's a relief. Alright, any idea what Belikot's phylactery looks like?"

"No, I'm sorry. Did you kill the Dungeon Lord?"

“Yep! I’ll hunt for the phylactery, then work on tracking Belikot and your body, okay? I’ll wake you if there are any developments.” Victor had already moved his hand away, and Thayla’s voice grew fainter with each passing second.

“I can help, Victor—let me help you look for the phylactery. Could you point the skull around so I can see better?”

“You’ll be alright, Thayla. Just go back to sleep for a little while; I’m going to find that guy, I promise.”

“Victor? Are you shutting me out? I know I messed up with Belikot, but you can still trust me!” Thayla’s voice sounded increasingly desperate as it grew fainter and fainter.

“I know, chica. I know you’re still you. I’m going to make sure that fucker doesn’t use you somehow, though. Just go to sleep, and next thing you know, you’re going to be back in your own skin.” Her reply came to him as a faint whispery breath—no words he could make out. “Gorz,” he thought, just in case Thayla could still hear him, “anything happen with the tether or the phylactery?”

“I sensed a faint pulse along the tether while you were talking to Thayla, Victor. It came from far away, though, not from Thayla. If Belikot is linked to her somehow, I don’t think she knows it.”

“Alright, thanks. Let’s follow it, Gorz; lead me to that asshole.”

Victor followed Gorz’s directions back out the way he’d come and then through passage after passage that he frequently recognized as having been through before. After a long while, he came to the round rooms behind the bronze puzzle door. When Victor opened the puzzle door and moved out of the room, Gorz spoke up again, “Victor! The tether goes down the pit where you fell!”

“Oh? That’s pretty damn strange.” Victor retrieved a piton from his pack along with his last length of rope. He sank the piton in the stone next to the pitfall, tied off the rope, and dropped into the shaft, falling very differently from his first visit. He descended the shaft, feet bouncing off the sheer stone walls. When he reached the rope’s end, he dropped the last dozen feet or so to land in the cold fungus-covered pit. Victor was glad to see the secret door was still open, so he followed the passageway to the site of his battle with the skeletons and hags. Gorz guided him, saying the tether still ran far into the distance, so he needn’t fear ambush.

Victor stalked over his old footsteps, padding lightly on the cold stone with his baton clenched in his right fist. It wasn’t long before he found himself standing over the bones of the skeletal colossus he’d slain so long ago. Gorz said the tether ran up the steps, so, once again, Victor began the seemingly interminable climb up the uncomfortable, cramped shaft. “It’s leading us to the entrance, Gorz.”

“Yes, I concur.”

“Did that fucker leave the dungeon? Without his phylactery? How long ago?”

“He could be waiting above, Victor, and I’m sorry, but I don’t have a way of measuring the time since he passed.”

“Right,” Victor grumbled, tired of the annoying, shallow steps. After a seeming eternity, Victor finally exited the stairwell into the high, bright corridor of pale limestone and followed it to the entrance room of the dungeon. The skeletons still lay smashed around the room, exactly as he’d left them, and the portal still spun and pulsed on the far end.

“I’m afraid the tether leads directly into the portal, Victor. He’s left the dungeon.”

“Awe, man! Why can’t anything ever be easy?” Victor strode through the vast entrance hall of the dungeon to the portal, looking around and furiously thinking. Had he done everything he needed to in the dungeon? Was he being an idiot following Belikot out? Should he wake up Thayla and ask her what she thought? What if Belikot was linked to her and could hear her thoughts or something? He growled and shook his head in frustration. He was sick of this dungeon, and Thayla needed her body—that meant it was time to leave.