

Victor of Tucson

Book 2: Chapter 2: Courage and Trust

“Not like that, Victor! You have to build the weave completely in your pathways before letting any of the Energy bleed out.”

“I’m trying, Gorz! It keeps coming apart at the start by the time I get to the end, and then I lose track of it while I rush to fix it!”

“I understand, Victor, and I know it’s made more complex because I can only describe the weave to you. I think we’ll have more luck if you practice writing it a few more times. Ask your friend’s skull if you can use some of its parchment.”

“I’m not asking that fucking skull anything. Hang on.” Victor turned to Thayla, who sat quietly communing with the skull, which was supposedly teaching her a spell that would utilize her death-attuned Energy. “Thayla! Can I use that blank journal? I’m sorry, I need more than just this page.” Victor held up the page where he’d already written one rough draft of the Energy weave Gorz was trying to teach him.

“Yes, of course,” Thayla replied, throwing the leather-bound sheaf of papers to him. He caught the flapping pages deftly and grunted his thanks. He’d kept one of the enchanted quills they’d found in the skull’s trunks, so he set to work on a blank sheet of paper, drawing the weave of Energies again.

“Victor, make them smaller so that you can write more on the same paper.”

“Right, right,” Victor muttered, concentrating on the drawing. Gorz had explained how he’d come up with the weave through trial and error using the available patterns in his memory. He’d described the rage-attuned Energy as a bold, aggressive Energy requiring a twisting, twinned strand of Energy in a weave. Then he’d said that inspiration-attuned Energy would have to temper the rage, folding back and amplifying at least one of the strands. He’d said that of the forty-seven possible weaves, he’d narrowed it down to three, and the one he was teaching Victor had the best symmetry.

“Good! Do you see how the Inspiration folds between the rage strands? Do you see how it turns it back and amplifies it? That is much like a weave between fury and hope, a weave that gave me great insight into what you’re attempting.”

“Mmmhmm, you already told me that.” Victor tuned out Gorz and concentrated, drawing the weave over and over. After a few minutes, he looked at his paper

and the twenty perfect copies of the weave. He'd used a dashed line for the rage-attuned Energy and a solid line for the inspiration. The complicated loops and folds were pretty damn impressive to look at. "If I do say so myself! You know, I'm a way better damn artist than I was back on Earth. Is it my dexterity?"

"I'd say it's a combination of your dexterity and intelligence, Victor."

"Alright, I'm going to try again. I'm a lot faster at drawing this weave now." Victor turned his mind inward, looking to the twin stars of his Core, the pulsing, glowering red rage-attuned orb and its white-gold steadily radiating counterpart of pure inspiration Energy. Focusing his will, he teased out a strand of each type of Energy and brought them together in his broadest pathway near his Core.

Now that he had the two strands of his different Energies ready, working as quickly as he could, he began to weave the two threads together in the pattern that Gorz had taught him and that he'd just practiced on the paper. He almost got to the end before the starting point began to unravel, and he growled, "Fuck!" Victor released the threads and took several calming breaths, shaking out his hands as though he were weaving with his fingers.

"I almost got it," he said, closing his eyes and refocusing on his Core.

"Victor! Be sure to have a spell in mind to push the completed weave into," Gorz said shrilly. Victor grunted in reply, but the spirit had a point; he mentally readied himself to cast his light orb spell and then grabbed up his threads of Energy. He took three quick breaths like he'd do while waiting for the buzzer to start a match, and then he launched into the weave, pulling and tugging the threads into the pattern. When he finished, he knew he'd done it right because the twisted threads flared for a moment, and then the red and white-gold energies combined to form a warm, red-gold Energy strand.

Victor immediately cast his light spell, clamping down on his Core and pushing the thread of new Energy into the spell's pattern. Suddenly a warm golden ray of light shone down from the ceiling, illuminating the area where Victor and Thayla sat. It held a deep, rich undertone of red, and as it flared brightly and the light fell upon him, the doubts in Victor's heart and mind fled, and he felt sure and confident, ready to challenge whatever came next.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Dauntless Radiance - Basic.

***Dauntless Radiance - Basic: You create a ray of courage-attuned Energy that will help those within its radiance ignore their fears and doubts, finding the

bravery to face what challenges them. Energy cost: 100 Cooldown: minimal.***

As Energy surged into Victor, his reward from the System for creating a new spell, Thayla exclaimed, “Victor, that’s amazing! I was so worried about this new affinity, but I can see how silly I was being—this is truly a great opportunity!”

“You did it, Victor! What Energy-attunement is this? I can read hints of your inspiration and rage affinities in it, but it’s a wholly different signature.” Gorz’s strange, hollow, tinny voice was squealing with excitement.

“According to the spell description, it’s courage-attuned Energy.” Victor looked at the beam of light, wondering if it was coming out of the stone or just originating near it. Why was it a different shape than the other light spells? Was it moveable? He stood up and tried to will the beam to move, but it wouldn’t budge. “Gorz, why’s it shaped differently than the other light spells? I can’t move it.”

“Most likely because it was cast with a weave of Energy, thereby altering the spell’s pattern. I imagine other spells you cast with this weave will be functionally different as well.”

“Huh,” Victor grunted, looking at Thayla and her blue-flame-eyed skull. “What about you? That thing teach you anything?” free(w)ebnov(e)l

“I’m learning some basics; he says it’ll be a while before I’m ready for a full spell pattern.”

“Maybe I can help,” Victor said, casting Globe of Insight and charging the bright, white-gold light until the shadows in the room were banished. He noticed that his Dauntless Radiance spell faded away nearly as soon as his other light was fully formed. He felt his doubts return and even a niggling fear that he’d almost tricked himself into ignoring—a worry that Thayla was being corrupted. With that realization came another: he’d cast such a bright Globe of Insight in the hopes that it would irritate her skull.

“What’s his name again?” He gestured to the yellowed skull sitting on her lap.

“Belikot.”

“Right. Why doesn’t he teach you one of the spells in that book we found?”

“He says he will. I’m just not ready yet.”

“Alright, but remember: he’s not in charge. You are.”

Thayla gave him a long, searching look, her black eyes squinting in the bright light. “You really hate that I wanted to keep him, don’t you?”

“I’m just worried about you.” Victor huffed out his air and plopped back down, sitting in front of Thayla. “I think I’m struggling with the idea that some fucking skull that was shooting fireballs at us became your loyal tutor the second I had my axe ready to strike. Promise me you will be cautious with him.”

“I promise, Victor. Now, come on, let it go. If this skull tells me to kill you in your sleep, I’ll ignore it, alright?”

“What the fuck? I hadn’t even thought of that!” Thayla laughed at Victor’s outrage, and he had to admit, the laugh, with a tinge of wickedness, sounded good—like her old self.

“So that light you made, it was courage? I heard you talking to your necklace.”

“Yeah, I guess so. I don’t really get it. Well, I take that back, I get it, but it’s strange to me that I can make another attuned Energy, even though I don’t have that affinity. I wonder if someone could have just a normal courage affinity, with courage Energy in their Core.”

“I wonder,” Thayla squinted her eyes, thinking.

“It’s possible, Victor. It may be possible for you to gain this affinity as well, though I’m not versed in the methods. As with everything I don’t have direct experience with, though, I’m not certain—I don’t have an exhaustive list of spirit affinities, and my library on the subject of spirit Cores is quite limited.”

“Gorz doesn’t know,” Victor said to Thayla.

“That’s funny; Belikot was just telling me that your affinities were a good counter to some of the undead creatures in this dungeon. He says he hasn’t met a ‘spirit caster’ with an aura as strong as yours.”

“Tell him flattery won’t win me over.” Victor frowned at the skull.

“He can hear you.” Thayla shrugged and stood up, tying the cord she’d hung around the skull to her belt. “Ready to get moving?”

“Yeah, I want to try this new Energy with other spells, but I’m not sure this is a good place to try it with Berserk, and to be honest, I’m nervous about sitting in one place too long while we’re in here.” He stood up and picked up Lifedrinker from where he’d left her leaning against the wall. “So, we’re going through the other door?”

“Yes, Belikot doesn’t know any other parts of the dungeon, but he knows there are ghouls, like we fought in the secret room, a short way up that passage. He

says that if he didn't keep the door closed, they'd wander in here from time to time."

"Oh really?" Victor looked at the large, heavy iron door. "Shall we open it and wait for some to wander in? It might make our next encounter more manageable."

"Yes!" Thayla grinned, gripping her spear and nodding to the door. Victor smiled and motioned to one side of the door; Thayla got the hint and moved to stand there, back to the wall, spear ready. Then, he unlatched the door and swung it wide, the thick iron hinges grinding and squealing. When it was resting against the stone wall, Victor stood with his shoulder to it, facing the opening, with Lifedrinker ready to swing.

At first, nothing happened, but Victor held still, figuring everything within a few hundred yards had to have heard that door opening. Surely the ghouls down that dark hallway would want to check it out. His Globe of Insight hung in the center of the room, brightly shining, and he wondered if the ghouls would be drawn to it to investigate or reluctant to enter its radiance. After several more heartbeats, he heard a scuffling sound coming from the hallway, and then the strange hissing sound of ghouls communicating. Suddenly Thayla held up a hand with four fingers splayed out and pointed to her skull. So, Belikot was telling her there were four ghouls?

Victor cast Sovereign Will, boosting his strength, remembering how strong the ghouls' bones were, and the surge of Energy entering his muscles made him feel swollen; he yearned for an outlet. Just as he heard the scrapes reach the threshold, he also cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with rage-attuned Energy, and then, as the first ghoul showed itself, he stepped and swung for the fences. Lifedrinker arced through the air in a red streak, and when her edge bit into the bridge of the ghoul's nose, she drove through, shaving the top third of the monster's head off in a spray of black gore. It fell, utterly destroyed, and then Victor backed up, waiting for the others to charge.

Thanks to how he greeted the first one, Victor knew he had the ghouls' attention, so he used that to give Thayla an opening, drawing the crowd of hissing, clawing, pale-skinned, naked creatures forward into the room. He swung Lifedrinker in broad, cleaving arcs, keeping them at bay, and when he saw Thayla getting ready to pounce, he cast Inspiring Presence. Thayla's dark eyes sparkled in the light as she spread her lips into a hungry grin, and then she sprang to attack, driving her spear through the back of one of the ghoul's necks, perfectly severing its spinal column. The creature collapsed, drawing her spear down with it, and while she worked to free it, Victor deftly side-stepped a claw, cleaving another ghoul's head from its shoulders.

The monsters were probably only around a hundred pounds each, thin and short but very wiry and quick. Victor couldn't help himself, distracted by his dislike of Thayla's skull, and shouted, "There were fucking five of them!"

"He was guessing based on their hissing! He's not psychic!" Thayla said, jerking her spear and stumbling back a few paces.

As the final two tried to flank him, pushing him back with their wild claw swipes, Victor switched his Sovereign Will's boost to his agility, and with Inspiration flooding his mind, he began to weave a dance between the hacking claws. He thrust Lifedrinker through openings, severing muscles and tendons, crunching partially through a knee, and, all the while, he blocked their jagged claws with her haft and axehead.

As he backed away from the two ghouls, leaving a wake of black blood and hunks of flesh, Thayla came in from behind again and drove her spear into one of the monsters, pushing it against a wall and pinning it. No longer having to worry about two fronts, Victor went on the offensive, and soon Lifedrinker was crunching through the skull of his final assailant. Wrenching the axe free, he turned to Thayla's pinned target and cleaved into its head, grinding through the bone and spraying the wall with black gore.

After they'd received their flood of Energy from the conquest, Victor smiled at Thayla and said, "Let's go see where these creeps came from?"

"Yes," she said with a quick nod.

"You alright?"

"Yes, sorry. I'm just preoccupied because Belikot is talking to me. He's trying to explain how the death Energy suffusing these creatures worked."

"Oh really? Is that why they're so fucking hard to kill?"

"Not exactly—they aren't really alive. You know what undead means, right?"

"Yeah, zombies and shit."

"Not just what creatures are undead, but what it actually means?"

"Not alive, not dead?" Victor shrugged.

"Good enough, I guess. Anyway, these creatures were warped by death Energy to the point where they'd be dead without it, but they aren't completely alive even with it. Their hearts and blood don't do anything, but they still need brains to function. If you destroy the brain or its connection to the greater whole, the death Energy will dissipate, and the monster will 'die.'"

“So is that what Belikot’s teaching you? To make things like this?” Victor gestured with Lifedrinker.

“No, not yet. He’s trying to teach me to control death-attuned Energy so that I can disrupt it in monsters like this.”

“Fair enough. If you ever did make a monster like this, would you be able to control it?”

“I think...” her face grew slack, and she stared into the distance for a moment, then Thayla continued, “He says I will eventually. Creatures that are autonomous and strong like these are far beyond my skill, but he says their creation would have been trivial for him when he was alive.”

“What the hell? He used to be alive?”

“What did you think? He wasn’t born as a skull.”

“Yeah, but he’s a fucking monster. In a dungeon. I don’t know what I thought, but I never considered all these things came from out there,” he gestured vaguely to indicate outside the dungeon, “How long has he been trapped in here?”

“He wasn’t trapped. The System offered him quests and rewards for inhabiting this place.”

“I...” Victor shook his head, lost for words. He hadn’t had much to do with the System other than his skills and levels, but it seemed to him that it was playing people against each other. “Well, maybe not people,” he amended, shaking his head at the skull swinging from Thayla’s belt.

“Huh?”

“Just thinking aloud.” He gestured to the door, “Let’s go.”

Thayla nodded, and together they explored down the open corridor. They ended up fighting another handful of ghouls in a small chamber, and then, after opening another door, they cleared several more short hallways of the creatures. He hadn’t leveled again yet, but Victor knew he was coming close. After killing a final trio of ghouls at the end of their fourth long hallway, they arrived at something different: an enormous, round, bronze door with ornately inscribed runes around its perimeter and a strange set of dials at its center.

“Gorz, can you read that?” Victor softly asked, looking at the thousands of tiny carved symbols. The dials looked like they were used to unlock the door—like an elaborate combination lock.

“No, Victor, it’s not a language I’m familiar with.”

"He said no. What about you guys?" Victor asked Thayla, glancing at the skull on her belt. She got quiet for a moment, and Victor assumed she was talking to Belikot.

"Belikot says he knows how to open it. We need to channel Energy into the dials and turn them until the correct runes are ignited."

"You trust it?" Victor looked at the skull again, remembering how it had hurled balls of blue Energy at them.

"Him. I don't exactly trust him, but do we have another option?"

"I don't know." Victor reached forward and tried to spin one of the dials; it didn't move.

"He says it requires death-attuned Energy."

"Seems kind of convenient," Victor grouched, looking around. He felt like something was creeping up on him, but the hallway was empty, and the three dead ghouls were still broken and headless.

"Well, do I try it?" Thayla raised an eyebrow at him, her dark, bottomless eyes boring into his.

"I guess," Victor said, shrugging and gripping Lifedrinker more tightly. Thayla nodded and stretched out a hand, lightly placing her long red fingers around one of the dials. Victor noticed her other hand resting on the skull hanging by her belt, and then the door took his attention.

With a loud click, the dial started to turn, and he saw runes along the edge start to glow with blue, wispy light. As Thayla spun the dial, different runes lit up. After a few spins, she moved to the next dial, and again, the dial clicked, and some runes closer to the center of the door began to glow. She spun it for a few moments, then seemingly satisfied, she moved to the last dial.

Victor watched as the last dial clicked, and Thayla spun it, igniting a third row of runes. She slowly turned the dial, and, with each click, different runes lit up, until with a satisfying *thunk* all the lit runes flashed red. Victor opened his mouth to ask if it was unlocked when the floor fell away beneath him.

As he tumbled into darkness, he heard Thayla shout, "What? No!" Then, she was gone, and Victor was speeding through thick black air, his Globe of Insight snuffed out by his sudden departure. Just as Victor's reeling mind started to put together what happened, and he began to concentrate on calling up a new light, he smashed into a hard surface with a terrible crack, and his consciousness slipped away.

Victor woke in utter darkness, in air thick, moist, and frigid. When he tried to shift his weight to feel his surroundings, he was stunned to breathlessness by a blinding pain coming from his left arm, which was pinned beneath him. He panted for a few seconds, holding completely still, and when the pain faded to a horrible ache, he took long, deep breaths and listened. Somewhere not far away, he heard a drip, a slow, steady drip that was as regular as his racing heartbeat: *thump*, *thump*, *thump*, *thump*, *drip*; *thump*, *thump*, *thump*, *thump*, *drip*.

He didn't hear another sound, so he decided to risk some light. He closed his eyes and cast Globe of Insight, just trickling the smallest possible amount of Energy into it. His right arm was splayed out in front of him, and that's where the little golfball-sized ball of Energy coalesced—over his outstretched hand. The light flared to life, and in its warm white-gold glow, he felt his heartbeat slow and his racing mind start to calm.

Blinking, he took in his surroundings; he was lying on a stone floor, one sheeted in ice with strange black fungus growing in mottled patches. Not four feet from his head and to his left were two stone walls also sheeted in fungus-patched ice. Victor craned his neck, trying not to move his body, to look down toward his feet, and he saw a rose-red piece of splintered wood next to his belt, his left elbow jutting out and up, and his feet, nearly touching a third wall. "Oh fuck, Lifedrinker," he groaned as he realized the origin of the wood.

"Victor! I'm glad to hear your voice," Gorz said, his tinny voice sending sharp pangs through Victor's aching head.

"Thank you, Gorz."

"You fell nearly fifty meters, Victor. I was fearing the worst." Victor thought about that. Fifty meters was a long way to fall onto a stone floor—he really was lucky to be alive, though he figured he was a hell of a lot more durable than the average human. His vitality and racial enhancements had to have played a factor. Still, something was very wrong with his arm.

"Time to yank off the bandaid," Victor grunted, bracing the palm of his right hand on the stone near his head, then he pushed himself up to a sitting position. Again, he was nearly blinded by the white flare of pain that shot from his arm, and when he steeled himself to look at the limb, he felt nausea roil in his gut. His two wrist bones were both broken, with sharp shards of splintered bone piercing out of his skin. His hand was bent at a crazy angle, and the whole limb was swollen and purple. "Oh, fuck me. Goddammit, Thayla!"

Victor looked up, not because he expected to see her coming down to help him, but because when he thought of her, he remembered how he'd fallen.

There was no square of light above him—whatever trap he'd fallen through had closed. Before he confronted himself with his mangled arm again, he finished his survey of his surroundings. There, lying against the fourth wall of his prison, was what was left of Lifedrinker. Her proud, bearded axehead was still intact, with about a foot of polished haft jutting out, ending in jagged splinters. "Did I fall on you, beautiful? I'm sorry."

Victor carefully scooted his knees underneath himself, trying to jostle his arm as little as possible, then he stood up. A wave of blackness rolled over his vision but quickly passed, leaving tiny winking stars in its wake. He shook his head, then leaned back against one of the stone walls, the icy surface radiating into his shoulders. "It's fucking freezing in here, Gorz."

"I'm not able to discern temperature. I'm sorry, Victor."

"Gorz, I'm about to do something a little nuts. Now's your chance to talk me out of it."

"Don't you think I should know more about your plan in order to develop a proper argument?"

"No, Gorz. I don't want to think about this more than I have to."

"Then I'm afraid I cannot talk you out of it."

"Perfect," Victor grunted, then he used his right hand to yank his left wrist straight, pulling the bones into alignment. At the same time, he cast Berserk, and the blinding pain gave way to the red of primal rage.