

Victor of Tucson

Book 2: Chapter 3: Seeing Through

Victor screamed and kicked at the walls, his mind lost to the frenzied rage that had overcome him. Perhaps it was the combination of the vomit-inducing pain when he'd straightened his arm and the effects of the Berserk spell, but any semblance of cognition was gone.

He screamed and frothed at the mouth, kicking, clawing, and punching at the unyielding blocks. When the stone wouldn't bend to his violence, he turned to the black fungus, tearing it off the walls and clawing at the patches on the floor. In his red haze of madness, he didn't note the fine black dust billowing up into the air as he terrorized the space.

Only when he started to hack and cough, struggling to breathe, did the rage start to fade. When the madness slipped away and the constriction of his lungs really set in, he collapsed to the cold floor, writhing in torment, trying to force air through his tight windpipe.

Feeling the panic overtake his mind, Victor growled, gritting his teeth and forcing himself to be still for a moment. That's when he noticed the black dust in the air and realized that each breath he dragged through his windpipe made things worse. He reached with his right hand, ripped the sleeve away from his left arm, shook it out, and then tied it around his face, covering his mouth and nose.

Forcing himself to breathe slowly, he gently pulled a thin stream of air through the cloth into his constricted airway. When he felt that expansion of his lungs, it did wonders for his rattled mind. Before taking another breath, he looked at his Globe of Insight and concentrated, pushing a massive amount of Energy into it until it expanded to the size of a basketball and blazed like a floodlamp. To his wonder and pleasure, he saw the black spores in the air drift away from the light. They gathered in a layer of fine dust as they came to the walls and slowly sifted downward to collect in piles. *freewebnovel.com*

"Are you alright, Victor?"

"Give me a few, Gorz! I can't breathe and talk right now."

"Of course, Victor. My apologies."

While he watched the spores, Victor forced himself to very slowly, very steadily take deep breaths. When he couldn't stand it any longer, he filled his lungs to bursting, pulled away his makeshift mask, and coughed. He hacked

until he was purple in the face with spittle dripping from his lips, and finally, after several minutes, Victor felt he could breathe without constriction. He had no idea what sort of infection he might be in for with the spores that had invaded his lungs, but he hoped that his Energy levels and racial advancements would help him stave it off.

Finally able to calm down and take stock of himself, Victor looked at his arm. He was happy to see that it was straight and without pain, though his wrist was a bit thicker. When he ran his fingers over the mended bones, there were some knobby spots that should have been smooth, and Victor figured it was because the bone splinters hadn't been perfectly aligned when the Berserk spell caused him to heal. Nonetheless, it felt fine, and all of his fingers worked, so he wasn't going to complain.

Kneeling there, at the center of the stone shaft under his blazing light, Victor turned his eyes upon the shattered remnants of Lifedrinker's haft and on the axe itself. He knew the haft had been incredibly tough, so the fall must have pinned it just right under his weight when he hit the ground.

He reached over, picked up the axe, and said, "I'm sorry. We'll get you fixed up one of these days. For now, I'm going to need you to muscle through." It might have been his imagination or wishful thinking, but Victor swore he felt the axe vibrate eagerly in his hand.

"Alright, let's see here," he said, looking at the splintered end of the haft. Several long, jagged pieces were jutting forth, and he used his thumb and finger to snap them off. He wondered at that—was the magic gone now that it had broken? Would this piece of haft shatter at the first powerful strike? "Or did you just let me break those off?" He grinned and stood, then summoned his baton out of his ring and held it in his left hand.

Victor looked around at the four walls, baton in one hand, Lifedrinker in the other. He slowly spun in a circle, scrutinizing every stone block. "C'mon, I know there has to be a way. Where's your secret?" He'd already fed his Globe of Insight nearly five hundred Energy, so he was pretty sure he was getting as much benefit from it as possible as he looked for whatever secrets might be hidden.

When his careful inspection failed to reveal anything in the walls, he turned his eye to the ground, and that's when he noticed a very peculiar detail—the fungus only grew on certain blocks, never crossing the mortar.

"Gorz, can you see that fungus only grows on certain stones?"

"Victor! I'm glad you've recovered."

“Yeah, sorry, Gorz. I’ve been preoccupied as hell. The fungus?”

“Yes, Victor, I can see the strange fungal growth pattern. It extends to the walls, as well.”

“Gorz, I have a question: how the fuck do you see anything?”

“Part of this amulet’s enchantment allows me to perceive things in sort of three-dimensional mesh.”

“Oh. For mapping, right?”

“Exactly, Victor. Speaking of which, I can see that the fungal growth only extends to about seven feet on the walls.”

“So, within reach?” Victor was starting to have an idea. He set down his weapons, picked up his ripped sleeve, shook it off, and then tied it over his nose and mouth again. Then, he took his baton and gently rubbed it through the delicate strands of black fungus sprouting on the stone. The rod scraped uniformly as he moved it up and down until he got to the center of the stone, and the baton dipped into a tiny depression. Victor traced the shape of the depression, then he took out his notebook and quill and copied it. It looked almost like a sideways S with a line through the center.

He moved to the next fungus-covered stone and repeated the process, finding a different shape in the corner of the stone. He copied the shape on his paper, keeping track of the stone’s location. Stepping back, he realized he’d need to diagram the room to keep track of all the different stones, so he did so. When he was done with that, he returned to scraping his baton through the fungus.

While he worked, copying down the different symbols he found, his mind drifted to Thayla, and he wondered if she were okay. Part of him wanted to laugh at his naivety—how could she be okay? She was alone in a dungeon full of the undead, and the last time he’d seen her, she’d been partially brainwashed by an evil undead skull. “Hopefully, that fucker can’t outright attack her.” Victor had a small hope that the skull had only dumped him into this pit because it couldn’t hurt Thayla, at least not directly. He didn’t know what kind of “contract” they’d made, but he could hope.

By the time he’d finished writing the different symbols he’d found under the fungus, Victor was already starting to guess a pattern. It began when he realized there was only one symbol shaped like a T with a small x underneath it. When he noticed that, he looked through his diagram and saw that only two stone blocks had another symbol and that three blocks held yet another. When he finished scribing the final letter or rune, or whatever they were called, he counted the various instances of each and found that not one of

them was repeated the same number of times. “Are you seeing this pattern, Gorz?”

“I believe so, Victor. Are you referring to the fact that each rune is repeated a unique number of times?”

“Yeah.” There were twenty-eight stones with fungus growing on them and seven different runes. Looking at his map, he saw that all seven runes only appeared on one of the walls and not the floor. Victor approached the stone with the single instance of the T plus a small x rune and pressed on it with his baton. Nothing happened. He tried pushing it in lots of different ways—in the corners, in the center, from the mortar lines. Nothing worked.

“Are you starting with that stone because it’s the only one with that rune?” Gorz asked.

“Yeah, but nothing’s working.”

“Perhaps you’re meant to activate it with Energy.”

“Oh, shit,” Victor slapped his head. “I’m still not used to everything being magical.” Victor carefully wormed a finger through the fungus layer, passing a trickle of Energy into the stone. With a satisfying *snick*, it sank into the wall about an inch. “Hell yes!” Victor looked at his map for the location of one of the stones with the rune that only appeared twice. The stone sank when he channeled Energy into it, just like the first one.

“Victor, how do you know you’re supposed to activate the stones in ascending order? Or that you aren’t supposed to activate only stones that appear in even or odd numbers?”

“I don’t, Gorz! I’m just trying this because it’s the most obvious.”

“Oh, I see. Well, I hope you don’t trigger another trap.”

“Dammit, Gorz!” Victor had briefly considered the idea that he was activating a trap, but he’d quickly pushed the worry aside. Now that Gorz had reinforced the concern, he felt like he had to pause and reconsider. He paced for a moment, trying to think of a clue as to which stones he might be meant to activate first or in what order, but he couldn’t think of anything. The most logical, straightforward answer was just doing it in ascending order. “I think the fall and the fungus were meant to be deadly. I don’t think activating the stones wrong was part of the trap. I don’t know, but I have to try.”

“I don’t have an alternate solution,” Gorz replied in a voice more hushed than usual. Victor moved to activate one of the stones with three repetitions of the same rune, and, again, it sank into the wall. When he repeated the process for

the fourth, fifth, and sixth runes, he stood back and considered the room one more time before activating the final one.

Of all the walls, the one he was looking at was the only one with one occurrence of each rune. The floor only had three runes, one of them appearing four times. The other walls' runes were similarly arrayed. Nodding to himself, Victor stepped up to the last fungus-covered tile on the wall he'd been working with and activated it.

With another *snick*, the block sank in, and then a deeper rumble started to vibrate the room, and dust and mortar began to fall away from the wall. Victor watched, braced for anything, as the wall sank into the floor. When it was halfway down, and Victor saw a larger space beyond it, he grabbed up his weapons and stood ready.

As the wall settled into the floor and the rumbling stopped, Victor peered into the long, dusty hallway that had opened up. His light revealed a good twenty paces before shadows encroached, but all Victor saw were stone walls and dust. Hefting his weapons, he willed his light to follow him, and he started forward. He'd taken one step over the sunken wall when a terrible clatter erupted down the hallway, and a mob of skeletons came charging toward him.

Though their skulls differed from humans', the creatures were humanoid in shape. They wielded rusty swords, broken spears, knives, and all sorts of clubs. Some of them wore pieces of armor—a helmet here, a breastplate there, some old boots or belts. Unable to count them in such a mass, Victor knew it was more than he could easily handle, so he quickly cast Channel Spirit, flooding his weapons with rage-attuned Energy, and then he cast Berserk.

Savagely roaring, Victor dove into the throng of skeletons, swinging his baton and Lifedrinker in a frenzy of smashing chops. If he were cognizant enough to think about it, Victor would have found it amusing that in this case, the old adage, "The best defense is a good offense," held true. His offensive was so overwhelming and his weapons so perfectly suited for destroying skeletons, the creatures hardly scored any hits, even though they outnumbered him fifteen to one.

The few cuts and stabs that made it to him were quickly healed by his berserking Energy, and he smashed and shattered his way through line after line of the creatures. By the time his rage wore off, Victor was standing over piles of scattered, broken bones, none of the skeletons still standing. He'd just barely noticed that he was at the end of the hallway, standing next to a

sizeable, dusty trunk with an iron door to his left, when golden Energy motes gathered around the bones and surged into him.

Congratulations! You've achieved level 25 Herald of Carnage. You have gained 10 will, 8 strength, and have 10 attribute points to allocate.

As good as it felt to dominate his enemies so thoroughly, Victor wondered about it—these skeletons had been much easier to kill than the ghouls he and Thayla had been fighting. Was he in an easier part of the dungeon, or were the monsters just randomly placed? Victor knew he couldn't answer the question yet; he'd need to do some more exploring. For now, he turned to the large, dusty trunk.

His experiences so far in this dungeon made him leery of traps, so he carefully paced around the wooden box, looking for any hint that it might hold some danger. The dust was uniformly thick around it, and he couldn't see any strings or mechanisms around the clasp or hinges. "Nothing. You see anything, Gorz?"

"No, Victor. It appears to be mundane."

"Right," Victor muttered. He held his baton out and carefully flipped up the iron latch. Nothing happened, so he used the baton's tip to lift the wooden top of the trunk. It fell back on its hinges with a clatter and a shower of dust. Victor stepped forward and inspected the contents.

Amid cobwebs and more dust, he saw the gleam of shiny metal. Victor reached into the trunk and lifted out a silver plate, tarnished on much of its surface but still gleaming in spots. "Huh," he said, digging through the trunk's contents. It was full of dusty, tarnished silver plates, cups, and bowls, even a set of knives, forks, and spoons. The silverware was ornate with intricate carvings on the handles and around the edges of the plates. Deciding he could sort it later, Victor simply stored the entire trunk in his ring.

Victor examined the destroyed skeletons and found that none of the armor looked any good. It certainly hadn't protected them from his weapons. Everything was rusty or bent, threadbare or torn. He collected some of the rusty knives, thinking he could polish them up and use them for cutting food or other small tasks. That got him thinking, and he sifted through the clubs and axes, looking for a handle that might suit Lifedrinker.

Most of the wood was dry, cracked, and not in any way better than the remnant of Lifetaker's haft, but one cumbersome ball mace had a long, stout, and quite heavy handle. It was round and straight, not elegantly shaped like Lifedrinker's old haft, but it would do for now if he could think of a way to

properly fit it to her axehead. He could see that it sat tightly into the hole at the center of the ball mace and that a large metal pin had been hammered into it to hold it in place. Looking at Lifedrinker, he could see where her old haft was fitted similarly but with a wider, open-center pin.

Victor pulled out one of the pitons and the hammer that Captain Lam had given him, and he went to work, chipping away the wood around the pin in the mace. When he got it free, he was able to twist the mace head around until it slipped off the handle. He'd made a mess of the wood, so he set it on the ground, held it in place with his foot, then hacked off the mangled end with Lifedrinker. She tore through the wood like a cleaver cutting a carrot.

"Alright, now I have to remove your old haft. Think I can do that without pissing you off?" To Victor's astonishment, the axehead began to vibrate. At first, he thought Lifedrinker was just agreeing with him, or maybe disagreeing, but she kept shaking, more and more rapidly, and then he saw that the axehead was slowly inching up off the haft. She was working her way free of the old broken handle! "Hell yes! I knew you were listening to me all those times!"

Soon the axehead was free, and he was left holding the old broken haft in one hand and Lifedrinker in the other. He held the new handle up to the hole in the axehead and saw that he'd need to shave it down a bit to fit. He put the handle against the ground, holding it with his knees, and then he carved the section that would fit into the axehead, pushing Lifedrinker downward against the wood, planing off curls of wood with each stroke. He managed to carve it down to fit snugly within the hole in Lifedrinker's axehead, stopping to check his progress after each cut.

Victor used a knife he'd scavenged to dig and wriggle the roll pin out of Lifedrinker's old, broken haft. Then, he hammered it into her new haft with his baton. He gave her a few practice swings and was pleased with the results, "That's right, chica. We're going to absolutely mangle some skeletons now!" She pulsed and jerked in his hand, and he couldn't help laughing at her enthusiasm.

He stowed Lifedrinker's old haft into his ring; Victor had no idea what kind of wood it was and figured he might want to find out when he had a proper handle made for her. He also put away his baton; it was a nice backup weapon, but it couldn't hold a candle to Lifedrinker. Satisfied with his work, Victor turned to his attributes, once again putting his extra points into will. With Sovereign Will, he could now boost his physical attributes by more than fifty points.

Victor approached the door, noting the lack of a handle. It was heavy iron and only slightly rusted around the edges. He figured he could break it open with his tools, given enough time, but he knew it would make a terrible racket. Had it been a day since he used his ring? He pulled out his pocket watch and checked the time; it said it was a bit past midday or midnight. What time did he last use his ring? He chuckled, realizing he had no idea or even how many days he'd lain unconscious.

He decided to give it a try and knocked. Nothing happened, and he backed up, looking around and wondering if there was another way through the door. He was just about to try jerking on it to see how solid it felt when he heard a scrabbling, clicking sound from the other side.

An unmistakable *click* sounded a moment later, and Victor knew the door had been unlocked. He took a step back, hefted Lifedrinker, and cast Sovereign Will, boosting his agility. Then he cast Channel Spirit, flooding Lifedrinker with rage Energy. A moment later, with a terrible creaking sound, the door began to swing open toward him, and a wave of palpable darkness surged through the opening, pushing back the light from Victor's globe.

When the darkness touched Victor, he was filled with dread, and sweat sprang out on his palms. He felt like he'd just stepped into a room with a firing squad pointing their guns at him, and every instinct in his body screamed at him to turn and run. Suddenly his concentration wavered, and the Energy filling his limbs, granting him extra agility, drifted away. Lifedrinker trembled in his hands, and the blazing red aura around her started to flicker. Victor took a nervous step back, then two, and the blackness flooded into the hallway, completely engulfing his light, reducing it to a pale glow.

Victor saw the light fade and felt the effects of the darkness on his body, and a part of his mind rebelled. Was he scared of some darkness? Was he scared of some fucking creepy undead monster? He'd killed dozens of the things. Trying to rally himself, he screamed and swung Lifedrinker in a wild cleave through the blackness. The axe didn't connect with anything, but the action served to free up some portion of his panicking mind, and he remembered his other light spell. He took a step back and cast Dauntless Radiance.

He felt the spell's pattern draw forth some of both types of his Energy and instantly twist them into a weave. Courage-attuned Energy flooded into the spell, and a golden crack formed in the darkness spilling red-gold light around Victor in a wide pool. The shadows seethed and hissed as they were pushed back. "Come on!" Victor yelled, suddenly more in control of himself. He felt his grip steady and his shaking muscles calm, and he stared into the darkness outside his ring of golden light.

"A strong will, has this one," a raspy, shrill voice said from the darkness, and Victor whirled, trying to place its location.

"Indeed, sister," said another, smoother voice, seemingly echoing from several directions at once.

"Put out your light, child," said the first voice. "Come into our embrace; we'll show you secrets you couldn't have imagined."

"Fuck off, and I won't cut you to pieces," Victor growled.

"Feisty! But why would you cut us? Wouldn't you rather embrace us?" Suddenly a patch of darkness swirled away, giving Victor a glimpse of pale skin, smooth curves, and a seductive, red-lipped smile. He stepped toward it, but the shadows swirled again, and the vision was gone. He took a swing anyway, cutting through the shadows with Lifedrinker, only to have her slice through the air without resistance. Shrill laughter echoed around him. He started to say something, but then a flash of pain erupted from his left hamstring, and he slapped a hand there, feeling a deep, bloody gash.

"Come, sister," said the smooth voice, "let's soften him up. He'll comply more readily once we've taken some of his blood. Won't you, lover?"

Victor didn't answer as he put his hand, now sticky with blood, back on Lifedrinker's haft. He had to do something. His light wasn't enough to reveal them, to drive the shadows entirely away. He thought about casting Berserk, but what if they continued to evade him? They'd just wait out the spell and bleed him dry. Maybe he just had to get lucky. Now that he was in his light, he could concentrate, so he recast Sovereign Will, boosting his agility. Then, he started jumping around in his golden island of radiance, slashing Lifedrinker into the shadows randomly.

His efforts were met with more laughter, and several more gashes appeared on his back and on the backs of his legs. He started leaving large droplets and smears of blood on the ground, and his breathing grew ragged with his exertions. The cuts were painful and deep, and Victor felt his mind starting to fray. He wanted to scream and hurl his axe, feeling like the creatures were just outside his reach. Distantly he was aware of Gorz trying to speak to him, but he couldn't concentrate, and he felt like his sanity was on the verge of snapping.

Finally, he stopped swinging his axe and stood at the center of the pool of light, panting and sweating and drizzling blood down into a puddle. In the moment of calm, Gorz's voice broke through, and he paid attention, "Victor! Use the weave! Cast Inspiring Presence or Berserk with the weave!" Victor's

first thought was to wonder why he hadn't cast Inspiring Presence already. His second thought was to ask himself if he could concentrate enough to create the weave of Energy for courage.

"I think he's grown tired, sister. Do you think he's ready to come to us?" Again the shadows swirled, and Victor saw heavy breasts, a seductive smile with a tongue curling along the lips. Then the shadows were back, and the vision was gone. Victor lowered his axehead to the ground and leaned against the handle. He took a long, shuddering breath and stared into the darkness.

"If I come to you, will you stop cutting me up?"

"Of course, lover; we only want to teach you our secrets!"

Victor truly was exhausted, but he was only buying time. He leaned into his axe, feigning resignation, and then he closed his eyes, turning his attention to his Core. He took three quick breaths, and then he yanked two threads of Energy from each of his attunements and built the weave for courage. The instant he saw the threads pulse with a red-gold hue, he cast Berserk and fed the new Energy to it.

A burning heat spread out from Victor's heart into his limbs and up to his eyes. He stood straight, no longer troubled, and looked into the darkness, laughing as the shadows fell away from his gaze.

Congratulations! You've learned the spell: Heroic Heart - Basic

Heroic Heart - Basic: Your ability to manifest courage-attuned Energy has allowed you to infuse yourself with its benefits for a short time. While this spell is active, you are immune to fear effects, can shrug off confusion, and cannot be mind-controlled. Energy Cost: 400. Cooldown: Long.

Victor saw two gray-skinned hags slinking about near the open iron door. Both had long, greasy white hair, wide, fang-filled mouths, and pupilless white orbs for eyes. They were completely naked, though they each wielded long razor-edged knives. "Hello, ladies," Victor growled, lifting Lifedrinker and stalking forward.