

Victor BK5: Ch21

Book 5: Chapter 21: Disruptor

Victor, as usual, chose to try out his new spell pattern with inspiration-attuned Energy. He pulled seven threads of it from his Core, keeping them separate but knowing he'd have to weave each of them into the pattern at the right moment. He didn't need to check his written example to get started; the base of the spell was straightforward, and he'd written and studied it enough to begin the weave from memory. It wasn't until he'd constructed nearly the first half of the pattern that he had to look down at his notes and ensure he wasn't making any mistakes.

From then on, he was constantly glancing down, studying a portion of the spell, then closing his eyes to refocus on his pathway where he held the seven strands of Energy in an iron grip with his will. At some point, perhaps twenty minutes into the process, he thought he dimly heard a knock at his door, but he ignored it—he was too close to stop now. Sweat poured down his brow, dripping onto the page in his lap as he tried to finish the last section of the spell.

It wasn't flowing together easily, and he found he was having to force bends and twists into the lines of Energy that weren't on the paper. The truth was, he only felt like the spell he'd written would work; he was guessing at a lot of the pattern's functions, trusting his insight and experience weaving Energies and spells in the past. When it came time to take those written lines and put them into an actual Energy-based pattern, sometimes they simply wouldn't bend the way he'd written them, and he had to adjust on the fly. Nevertheless, he found ways around the odd blockages, and, in the end, he thought the pattern was better for it.

The biggest obstacles weren't even from the portions of the spell inspired by his elder magic feat and the spell he'd learned from Tes. Those all seemed to work perfectly, and he figured he had the feat itself to thank for that; where study and knowledge failed, the innate ability seemed to compensate. No, the modifications to the original System spells were causing him the most trouble. He bent, twisted, and wove his way to the end, though, and when it finally snapped into focus and pulsed with brilliant white-gold Energy, he grunted with relief and satisfaction.

The spell didn't fire right away, and Victor sat there, looking at the beautiful, complicated pattern in his pathway, wondering if he'd missed something. He froze for several heartbeats, almost afraid to breathe lest he'd ruin his work, and then he laughed when he realized what was wrong—the spell required intention. He had to think about what he was trying to summon so it could determine if he needed a Spirit Walk or not. Victor concentrated on the concept of a new spirit totem, one that could carry him as a mount. With a flaring pulse of Energy, he felt the spell pull a massive torrent from his Core, and then it ignited in his pathway.

Victor braced himself for the spell to hurl him onto the spirit plane, but as he felt it start to take hold, it seemed to halt jarringly, and then several System messages flashed before his eyes:

*****Warning! The spell being cast incorporates and alters two System-granted spells. If you complete this casting, your System-granted spells will be removed.*****

*****Warning! The spell being cast does not follow System-designed iterations and may be too powerful for you. Proceed at your own risk.*****

*****Warning! Non-System spell pattern detected! You will only receive this warning one time. Do you wish to halt this process? YES/NO *****

“So, the System reached out and paused my spell? Don’t like having the control taken out of your hands, do you?” Victor wasn’t sure why he spoke his thoughts aloud, wasn’t sure why he’d taken on something of a taunting tone, but he certainly didn’t think the System was actually listening to him. He rapidly revised that opinion, though, when he felt a blinding pain in his forehead when another message pulsed in his vision, and rather than white text on an opaque grayish background like every other System message he’d ever seen, this one flashed with red text on ominous black, obscuring half his field of view.

*****DO YOU WISH TO HALT THE PROCESS? YES/NO *****

Victor growled and mentally smashed the NO option. He saw more System messages flash before his eyes, but as the spell ignited and completed in his pathways, he was ripped away from the physical plane. The transition was abrupt and sudden, and Victor found himself reeling for balance, dropped onto the wide-open grassy plain beneath the twilight expanse of stars that always seemed to hang in the sky of the spirit plane. As he made footfall, a pulse of Energy rippled out of him, rolling like a cloud of sparkling, charged smoke, spreading in a great circle with him at its center. It was as though he’d arrived on the wings of an Energy bomb.

Victor stood there, slowly turning, looking out over the plains, wondering if his explosive entrance had done any harm to the realm of spirits or the beings that lived there. He didn’t see anything or anyone lingering nearby, but that wasn’t very unusual; the spirits of Fanwath had long been skittish of him. With nothing else to do about his strange entrance, and no answers forthcoming, he started walking, no particular destination in mind but a simple desire guiding his thoughts—the need for a mount.

The plains slipped by beneath his boots, and Victor occasionally looked up, always awed by the depth of the starfield visible from that realm. He found himself looking for patterns in the stars, recognizing constellations he’d seen before. He wanted to learn more about them, the ones around Fanwath, wanted to know what the people called them. There was so much he wanted to do, and so much he kept pushing aside because of the necessity to keep moving, to try to accomplish one goal or another. Wouldn’t it be nice to take a breath? Wouldn’t it be good to sit around and study some more spell patterns or learn some military history?

He paused, startled to find that he’d walked down a loose slope of scree and that a long, brush-filled canyon opened before him. “All right,” he muttered softly, gathering a deep breath and starting into the canyon, his boots grinding on loose, broken rocks and dry soil. If the temperature weren’t cool, like back on the plains, he might have thought he was in Arizona. He didn’t see any cacti, but the brush was dry, the cliffs, though bathed in the dim twilight, were ruddy in hue, and not a blade of green—or blue—grass was to be found.

Victor prowled forward, wondering why Lifedrinker wasn't with him. Had the spell specified something about not having a weapon while on the hunt for a totem? The truth was he didn't know; he probably only understood half of the pattern components built into the spell he'd just cast. Still, he pressed forward into the high-walled canyon, and when he rounded a bend, he saw that it ended ahead in a narrow box canyon probably only a few hundred yards in width. Victor paused where he stood, his eyes instantly drawn to the herd of wild horses meandering near the far canyon wall where a stream seeped out of a crevice in the cliffside, pouring into a glimmering, bright blue pool.

Victor's eyes darted over the herd, admiring the horse's proud manes, their fierce eyes, and their flashing hooves as they walked about, eating from a patch of tall grass that grew near the pool, prancing or playing with one another. There must have been nearly fifty horses there, and they were all lovely. Though they were somewhat luminous and ghostly in appearance, much the way anyone was on the spirit plane, he could plainly see their varied colors. Some were a grayish-brown dun, others were bay, and a few were paler, with lots of white hair mixed in with the brown and tan. He saw spotted horses with crazy patterns, and he thought he remembered they were called pintos.

Two of the Mustangs caught his attention, though, as they played with one another, rearing on their hind legs and dancing around some of their calmer kin. One was black as midnight, and the other was a deep chestnut red. The red was the biggest horse out there, but the black one was a close match for him and had a clever gleam in his eyes. Victor was just thinking about how to approach them, to size up and assess them better, when he heard some rocks shift behind him. He whirled, hand reaching for an axe that wasn't there, and came face to face with two very strange individuals.

"What's this then? Is it the one, Fox?" the person on the left asked. Her voice was decidedly feminine, soft, and purring. She was probably six feet tall, slender, entirely covered in an orange, brindled fur, and clothed in an outfit that looked very much like what Victor would imagine a swashbuckling pirate would wear, from short, knee-length pants to a blousy white top and a velvety black vest. She had big green eyes, pointy cat ears, and a long, feline tail swishing behind her.

"Is this the source of all the ruckus?" asked the other in a rumbling baritone. His name didn't aptly describe him, for though the first stranger looked like a cat, this man didn't look at all like a fox. He was enormous, someone who would give Victor a run for his money on a pound-for-pound basis, but most of his mass was encompassed by his gigantic belly. He looked human but with limbs too long for his body, and his thick neck was topped with a bulbous, bald head. He wore bright green robes, and golden chains hung from his neck in the dozens, covering his chest in their metallic sheen.

"Um . . ." Victor grunted.

"It speaks!" the ginger cat woman announced with a purring chuckle.

"Goodness, but it's young," Fox replied, stepping forward.

"Who the fuck are you guys?" Victor asked, lowering his center of gravity, getting ready for trouble the only way he knew how.

“I smell something old mixed with its young blood.” The cat woman stalked to the side, her movements lithe and graceful, soundless and quick. Victor didn’t like the idea that she was flanking him, so he took a step back.

“Young indeed, Three. I fear we’ve come to this meal ‘fore the egg’s ready to scramble.” Fox ambled forward, the stones clicking and sliding beneath his enormous sandaled feet. “What’s your name, young disrupter?”

“Disrupter?”

“Doesn’t it know what it’s done, Fox?” Three, if that was her name, asked, still trying to circle Victor, who continued to backpedal and move to the side, trying to keep both strangers in his view.

“Disrupter, rebel, anarchist, radical, malcontent—surely you get the meaning? The System hasn’t abandoned you, has it? You still have your language skill?”

“I’m feeling a bit lost here,” Victor growled, the rage in his Core beginning to seep into his pathways.

“It channels Energy, Fox!”

“Yes, Three, I can feel it. Well? Your name?”

“I’m Victor.”

“Portentous!” Fox howled, slapping his massive palms together, eliciting a crack not unlike thunder that shook through the canyon and agitated the distant Mustangs.

“Is it jesting, Fox?”

“No, Three, I believe it speaks true.”

“Who are you payasos?”

“It thinks we jest?” Three had stopped trying to circle Victor. Instead, she crouched low to the ground, her black-clawed, ginger fingers idly scratching patterns in the dirt.

“Perhaps, perhaps. It has a serious disposition. We’ll toss this one back into the great ocean, Three. It has much growing to do before we can get a meal out of it.”

“Can you please explain what the fu . . .”

“It speaks with impudence, though!” Three growled in her throaty, weird, cat voice.

“A lesson before we go?” Fox raised one bald eyebrow, which lifted his heavy thick eyelid enough for Victor to see that his eyes smoldered like orange coals deep in the folds of his pudgy eye sockets.

“A lesson! But sweet or harsh? My mother would say harsh, but my father would say sweet. What say you, Fox?”

Victor could feel cold sweat breaking out on his neck and knew very well that he might be in some serious trouble. He wasn't a dummy. He could read between the lines. These people were referring to him as though he was a microwave dinner that hadn't quite finished cooking. It reminded him of how the warlord in Coloss had behaved, and though he hadn't felt the weight of these individuals' auras, he had a disturbing feeling that they were something altogether worse than the warlord. He decided to try being less belligerent, “I'm sorry for my confusion, but I'm truly at a loss here. Can I help you with anything?”

“It offers us aid, Three!” Fox said, reaching up to rub a wide, meaty hand over the top of his golden-brown dome of a head. “Perhaps a sweet lesson, then?”

“Oh, but Fox! Maybe it would make a good pet! Perhaps we could feed it sweetmeats and tender cuts, make it big and ever so delectable!”

“And if you grow too fond of it? No, Three, we'd better not walk down that road again.”

“Oh, bother! You be sweet to it, then!” With that, Three collapsed to her side dramatically, stirring up dust. Then she commenced licking the short fur on the back of her ginger paw.

“Well, young rebel? What have you to say for yourself?” Fox stepped closer, and as the short distance between them disappeared, Victor realized his earlier perception of the man's size was somehow skewed. He felt like Fox was growing ever larger, looming over him, like Jupiter bearing down on Earth. The stranger must have seen Victor's thoughts written across his face, for he chuckled and said, “Perceptions are funny things, aren't they? Especially in this realm.”

“Are you, um . . .” Victor shook his head. “You guys aren't from this part of the spirit plane, are you?”

“Hah! No, Victor,” the man said, using his name for the first time. “We felt you. Felt that big shockwave of Energy. You cast elder magic in such a flaunting, noisy way! We thought sure to find something juicier here. Gods, but the System must be cross with you, eh?”

“Cross?”

“Is it daft, Fox?” Three asked, still licking her paw.

“I think just young. Do you remember being young, Three?”

“Not in the least.” She sniffed at her furry wrist and then sneezed loudly. “I’m bored! Let’s eat it or depart this dull spot.”

“Forgive my hungry friend, Victor.” His cheeks jiggled as his thick red lips pulled into a broad smile, revealing flat, chisel-like teeth. “Ah, but I’m growing to like that name! In any event, we’ll get gone. Be a little more careful using magic like that. Realms like this,” he gestured around the spirit plane, “are bridges to many, many worlds. Tossing out such interesting spells in this place will get you noticed. Good luck with the System!”

“Oh, thanks for the advice . . .”

“True!” Three said, leaping to her feet. She landed so gently that Victor doubted she disturbed a single grain of sand. “You aided it, Fox! I’ll take a payment!”

“No . . .” Fox started to say, but it was too late. Quicker than thought, Three snapped out one of her claws and sliced a four-inch gash in Victor’s left forearm. Before he could so much as register the attack, she was ten yards away, standing with Fox and sniffing the hooked, razor-sharp nail she’d cut him with.

“So we can find him someday.” She grinned, revealing canines that would put a tiger to shame.

“Hey . . .” Victor started, but the duo flickered and shifted toward the horizon, gone before he could finish protesting. “That’s just great,” he sighed, rubbing at his forearm where the cut had already begun to scab. He thought about what the big man had said about unleashing elder magic in a realm like this. It had to have something to do with the fact that he’d cast the spell for the first time.

A few factors might play into his noisy entrance, he reasoned. The System had warned him about it writing over his other spells, and it had seemed angry and impatient with him. Had it purposefully made his arrival so violent? “It could just be my fault,” he muttered. Victor hadn’t done anything to try to limit the Energy he was putting into the spell, and he imagined that could be why such a shockwave had followed him into the spirit plane. He’d taken out any governing factors, after all. “I’ll have to be more careful, I guess.”

The idea that some bloodthirsty cat lady who kept referring to him as an “it” had his blood was a troubling enough thought, but it also sounded like the System wasn’t happy with him. “Great,” he said again. A soft chuffing sounded from behind him, and Victor whirled, once again reaching for a missing axe. His stressed fighting stance relaxed, though, when he saw the big, dark-red bay Mustang standing close by, its eyes watching him intently. “¡Que guapo!”

Victor held out his hand, forgetting that he’d been rubbing at his cut. The Mustang shied at first, dancing back, its big glossy hooves kicking up a little

dust. Victor persisted, though, holding his hand out, holding his breath, trying to look relaxed. The Mustang snorted and shook its head up and down, causing its dark mane to dance. Victor said, “Come here, guapo,” taking a slow step forward. The horse snorted again and stepped forward, ducking its head, lifting Victor’s hand with its muzzle. Victor laughed, and the horse blew hot breath into his face, sniffing and nickering softly.

“You’re a good boy, aren’t you?” Victor gently rubbed the velvety fur on the top of his muzzle, reaching up to scratch him between the eyes. The horse watched him, intelligence evident in the big eye he turned toward Victor, and just as Victor was starting to enjoy the attention from his new totem, his spell recognized its success, and the spirit plane faded away.

In a flash of white-gold Energy, Victor found himself back in his room in the command fort, but he wasn’t alone. Rearing up before him, the enormous bay Mustang pounded its great hooves on the wooden planks, trumpeting its arrival with a loud whinny. “Ah!” Victor laughed, backing up a step. “That’s why they probably don’t combine the totem-finding spell with the totem-summoning spell!” As he laughed and listened to pounding feet approaching down the hallway, he looked at the pile of System messages that had been waiting for his return.

*****You have discovered a new spell: Wild Totem – Advanced*****

*****Your new spell renders System-granted spells obsolete. Removing.*****

*****You have lost the spell: Shape Spirit – Improved.*****

*****You have lost the spell: Manifest Spirit – Improved.*****

*****Wild Totem – Advanced: You have begun to master the complicated process of finding and forming fragments of your spirit to use as totems outside the plane of spirits. By carefully formulating your intention prior to casting this spell, you can search your spirit for a totem appropriate to your need. Time spent hunting for your totem will be reflected outside the spirit realm. Totems previously discovered can be summoned instantly. Energy expended will be used to quicken your hunt and/or increase the power of your totem. Energy Cost: Variable.*****

*****Warning! This spell is not a System-designed spell! Use it with caution—there are no safeguards in place. This is the only time you will receive this warning!*****