

## Victor BK5: Ch3

### Book 5: Chapter 3: Elder Magic

Not long after he'd begun working with Tes's pattern, Victor was dimly aware that someone had come to the door and delivered some blankets and pillows. Valla took them and stacked them on the foot of her bed, then busied herself with some small tasks Victor had seen her perform a hundred times. She polished her boots, went through her spare clothing, checking for stains or tears—a sign of fading enchantments, and oiled Midnight's blade and scabbard. He'd asked her before why she did it, knowing full well that Midnight would never rust, and she'd just shrugged and said it was habit.

He didn't pay too much attention to her, though—the spell was enough to keep every bit of his brain occupied. Before they'd left Zaafor, Victor had managed to copy each part of it perfectly, but never more than half all at once. He'd gained some stats since then, thanks to Karnice, and as Tes loved to say, practice and persistence made perfect. He wished she could be there if he finished; he'd love to see her reaction, and, if he were honest, he loved impressing her.

He'd made it through the first half of another written copy of the spell pattern when a knock sounded, and Valla answered the door again. Victor's nose told him what this disturbance was about; he smelled fresh bread, something savory like stew, and the unmistakable aroma of baked apples. When he looked up from his work, he saw Valla holding the door open while a young Ardeni man wearing a white apron carried in a tray heaped with food. Hot on his heels, a boy and a girl, both bearing a strong resemblance to the man, grunted and heaved as they pulled a narrow table through the doorway.

“Pardon us! We don't often have folks choosing to dine in their rooms, but I keep telling the old man he needs to put some tables in 'em. Anyway, this one'll be all right for ya, I'd wager. Set it there, twins, and then go get them stools. Hustle, now!” He chuckled as the two youngsters hurried, cheeks huffing in exertion as they set the table near the corner of the room behind Victor and hurried back through the door.

“That's nice of you. Thanks for accommodating us,” Valla said, moving closer to the door.

“Nah, 'tis a pleasure. It's a slow season for us—school's in full swing, so there aren't many parents visiting.”

Victor cleared his throat and turned further so he could look the man in his bright coppery eyes, “Speaking of visiting, do you know if any airships are coming soon? We're trying to get passage to Persi Gables soon.”

“Not off the top o' me head, but I can ask around. How about if I have an answer for you by tomorrow?”

“That would be perfect.” A clatter in the hallway, forestalling any further comment from Valla, announced the twins' return, and soon they were dragging two short, cushioned stools into the room. Victor chuckled at their efforts, then thought

about himself sitting on one of those stools, and his smile widened further. His knees would be up to his chin.

“Appreciate your efforts, youngsters. Come here before you go.” He beckoned the little ones close. As they approached, they ducked their heads, hiding behind their coppery curls, and Victor fished around in his storage rings for something he could give them, something better than a few beads. Suddenly he remembered the rings in his pocket, the ones he’d taken from Karnice, and he scooped them out, holding them in the palm of his hand. “Just a minute, you two. I’m looking for something.”

Victor picked up the first ring and sent forth a trickle of Energy, bonding with it. Nothing happened, and he chuckled, lifting it to see why Karnice might have been wearing a non-magical ring. It was a band of silvery metal but heavy and richly lustrous. “Platinum, I think,” he muttered, turning it around, admiring the nicely etched designs—it was a thick band, and all along it were alternating etchings of towers and fangs. Nothing was on the inner band. Victor liked it, but he didn’t like Karnice and didn’t want a platinum ring on his finger to remind him of the asshole.

He flicked the ring to the little boy and said, “I got that from a great warrior in another world. It’s not magical, but it’s a rich metal; maybe you can get it enchanted someday.”

“Oh!” the little boy said, snatching it out of the air. “Really?”

“That’s too fine, sir,” the man in the apron said, starting to step forward.

“Nonsense,” Victor growled, perhaps louder than he intended. “It’s nothing. Now, for you,” Victor winked at the little girl, and she giggled, further ducking her head. “Just a minute . . .” Victor tried to bond with the other ring, and sure enough, he became aware of a vast dimensional space. He sighed heavily as he began to sift through it, but his initial irritation at the tedium soon gave way to excitement; Karnice had a lot of nice things!

“Ah,” he said, flicking his consciousness through a corner stacked high with Energy beads of all sorts, stored carefully in labeled bags—beads attuned with water Energy, beads attuned with fire Energy, beads with multiple attunements; it went on and on.

“What is it?” Valla asked, watching his face.

“Karnice was an organized guy. Like, borderline crazy organized. Hang on . . .” Victor skipped past the mass of beads, through boxes of gems and precious metals, then he skimmed through dozens and dozens of weapons, from knives to axes to bows, and then, taking up half the space in the dimensional container, quite literally, hundreds of spears. “Sir, is your daughter planning to train with any sort of weapon?”

“Well, I . . . my wife’s a guardswoman, but she used to be a huntress out near Tarn’s Crossing. You wouldn’t have heard of it—’tis a frontier town. She wants to send Beela out there to train with her grandfather. Isn’t that right, Bee?”

“That’s right, Da! I’m going to be a Huntress,” she grinned at Victor, and her sharp little teeth glinted in the glow lamps, her eyes narrowing fiercely.

“A Huntress? I’ve got just the thing.” Victor ran his mind through the ring again, over all the spears, looking for one that wasn’t nine feet long and didn’t weigh a thousand pounds. He settled on one made from a silvery wood, graceful and slender with a leaf-shaped, brassy blade. He produced it, holding it before himself, and said, “Here’s a fine spear to get her started. I’ll let you take it, sir, and pass it on when the time is right.”

“Are you . . . are you serious, m’Lord?”

“Very serious. I have plenty, don’t worry.” Suddenly Victor thought about Tes and how she’d passed up treasure after treasure on the monster hunt. She probably looked at those things the way Victor did these extra weapons. These weren’t even Karnice’s favorites—he’d taken his two best spears after the battle and doubted he’d ever use them. “This is the smallest one I could find among my things, but I think it’s just right.”

“Take it, Bee,” the man said, his voice hushed, and the little girl stepped forward and slowly reached out with a tiny blue hand. She grasped the silvery spear shaft, and her eyes widened with wonder.

“It’s full of Energy, Da!”

“Bond with it. Do you know how?” Victor pressed.

“I do!” She nodded solemnly, and then, after a couple of heartbeats, the spear flared with golden light, and she laughed. She lifted the spear, easily two and half times as tall as she, and walked backward toward her father. “It’s light as a feather, Kip!” she said to her brother, who was watching her with wonder in his eyes. Suddenly Victor felt like he’d given the boy the short end of the bargain, and he began to fish through his ring again.

“What will you be when you grow up, Kip?”

“Sir, you spoil them! Already you’ve given the lad a king’s ransom!”

“It’s true, sir,” Kip said, holding up the ring. “I’m so happy with this gift. Thank you.”

Victor frowned for a second, then nodded. “Yeah, my pleasure. Seeing some happy kids makes me feel better. Trust me; I got more in the giving than you did in the receiving. Use them well.”

“Many thanks, Lord,” the man said, grasping his kids by the shoulders and pulling them toward the door. He looked at Valla and said, “Lady.” Then he stepped into the hallway, pulled his kids through, and closed the door.

“Hah! It was like he was retreating from battle,” Victor chuckled.

“You just gave his two children more wealth than he likely has squirreled away from all his time in this job.” Valla snorted and walked over to the table, sitting on one of the stools and inspecting the food.

“If that’s true, it’s just sad. There are probably two hundred spears in this ring, and that was one of the least impressive ones.”

“Come get some food. And, yes, it’s sad, but it’s not something you should cry over. He has a happy life, working in this inn. His wife has a nice job, and they have happy children. He’s chosen this safe, stable existence in exchange for not finding treasures and gaining power. He’s probably out there trying to think of a way to talk his daughter out of using that spear, but you’ve lit a fire in those children’s hearts; they’re going to remember the visit from the strange giant for the rest of their lives.”

“Heh.” Victor stood and, leery of the close ceiling, hunched over and walked to the table where he sat on the floor again, forgoing the little stool the children had brought him. “Well, I wasn’t lying—I enjoyed it. Shit, man, I enjoyed it so much; I feel like going out to the square and giving stuff to all the little kids. Call me Santa.”

“Hmm?” Valla asked, dishing two bowls full of rich, meaty stew.

“Nothing. I’m just punch drunk from staring at the spell and all the other stuff we’ve been through lately.” He took the bowl Valla passed him and leaned back against the wall, holding it before himself as he spooned a big bite into his mouth. “That’s good stuff.” It was peppery and thick with the rendered fat of the meat, and he wolfed it down, enjoying the vegetables as much as the meat. He swallowed his fourth or fifth bite and said, “What about you?”

“Hmm?” Valla asked again, taking a pull from a frosty glass of ale.

“Well, I’m not the only person with feelings around here. How are you holding up when you’re not worried about me falling apart?”

“I’m . . . good, Victor. Truly! I hate how we left things in Coloss, but it felt wonderful to beat that bitch, and I did it easily. The run through town, your fight with Karnice—they’re a blur. We’ve only been here half a day, and I’m wondering what to report to Rellia in the book. You should think about that, too, what you’re going to say to Lam, I mean. Most of all, I’m just happy for the things we learned,

for my time with Tes, and for our friendship.” As she finished speaking, Valla nodded and took another drink of ale.

“That was a long speech for you, Valla!” He laughed as her cheeks darkened and reached for the glass of ale she’d poured him. “Nice! It’s icy. I was getting tired of wine, but it seemed like everyone liked it more in Coloss.”

“We had some good mead and a few ales . . .”

“Yeah, I know, I know.”

Valla continued eating, so Victor followed suit, leaving her alone while they devoured the food. Between the two of them, not a scrap was left over, not even any of the butter in the little crock nestled beneath the loaf of fresh bread, and definitely not a crumb of the apple crisp they found for dessert. With a full stomach and a warm feeling in his chest, Victor pushed himself away from the little table, scooted himself back over to his spell pattern, and got back to work.

“How many times have you written the whole thing now?”

“Twice, but I’ve done each section a lot more than that.”

“Why don’t you just try casting it, then? Are you afraid it will go wrong if you make a mistake? Usually, a spell won’t finish forming if it’s off.”

“I don’t know . . . I guess it’s because that’s how Gorz taught me my first few patterns; practice writing it out ‘til you get it perfect and then try forming it in your pathways.”

“But your will is so high; you probably can form the spell with Energy lines more easily than you can draw it!”

Victor thought about her words, and he shook his head in wonderment. Was he really that dumb? Writing the spell used his intelligence and dexterity, but forming it with Energy in his pathways used his intelligence and will. His dexterity wasn’t even a fifth of his will. “Uh,” he said, dropping his pen. “I think you’re right. Shit!” He laughed, then sat back on his elbows, blowing out a deep breath, trying to relax.

“Anyway, I hope you’re right. This might take me a few minutes.” He gestured to the pages and pages of spell notes arrayed before him. “As you can see, the pattern is rather lengthy. Please don’t let anyone interrupt me.”

“Wait!” Valla said. “Cast your orb!”

“Holy . . .” Victor slapped himself on the head. “Why didn’t . . . my mind’s a mess right now. Thanks, Valla.” He quickly formed the pattern for Globe of Insight, and, as the inspiration-attuned Energy bathed the room in its bright, revealing glow, he laughed and cast Inspiring Presence as well. “Might as well go all out!”

“I was wondering why I hadn’t felt that yet.” Valla nodded approvingly, letting out a soft sigh as she reclined, apparently intent on observing him.

“I’m serious, though,” he said, shifting a little, strangely unnerved by her staring at him. “This could take a while. Like hours.”

“I’m just relaxing, Victor. If I get bored, I’ll do some cultivating or something, don’t worry.”

“Speaking of that—how’s it coming with your affinity? I know Tes taught you a new cultivation method that could increase your . . .”

“It’s coming along well! I’ve made some gains but still have much work to do. It’s wonderful to know it’s possible, though.”

“Are you going to share your knowledge with people here?” Victor sat back, suddenly eager to distract himself from the task at hand. The room was warm, the sounds from the tavern growing louder as the evening lengthened, and he could hear music coming from the square outside their window. Why was he in such a hurry to get back to work . . .

Valla seemed to sense what he was thinking, though, and, as any good friend might, she helped to steer him back on course, “Let’s talk about me and my cultivation later. Am I really distracting you? I could leave.”

“No, no. It’s fine. You’re right.” Victor waved his hands in surrender, then sat up and tried to refocus. He closed his eyes and turned to his Core, observing his three roiling, dense pools of Energy. He stared at them for a long time, using their shifting, pulsing light to center himself, then let his perception expand until he could observe his pathways and his tightly constrained aura, held in place by a nearly subconscious effort of will. He took deep breaths for several minutes, focusing on how the air entered his body, expanded his lungs, and slowly flowed out as he exhaled.

When he felt calm, centered, and ready, Victor turned his gaze to his most expansive pathway, just outside his Core leading upward toward his heart and head. It was there that he began painstakingly building the pattern for Tes’s spell. He’d memorized most of it, but this part, the initial base, was firm in his memory, and he managed to put it together in just a handful of minutes. He built it by pulling forth a fat ribbon of inspiration-attuned Energy, one that he had to strip into a hundred tiny threads, all meant to be woven into the strange, multi-dimensional pattern he’d learned.

As he’d hoped, his will was far more nimble with the Energy in his pathways than his hand was with any sort of writing instrument. He pulled and stretched the Energy threads, weaving, bending, curling, and winding them into the pattern, and when he’d finished the first section, he knew it was right, could feel it resonate in his very being. Encouraged, Victor began the next section, carefully clamping his will around his progress as he occasionally opened his eyes to glance at his notes.

As he’d predicted, this went on for hours, and he was so focused on the task that he completely lost track of Valla, forgot about his nervousness, and lost himself in the process. Each time he reached a milestone in the pattern, he could feel it deep in his bones. When he was on the last stretch, the

final, complicated weave at the end of the pattern, he could feel the spell's potential reverberating in his pathway, ready to launch into something far beyond any magic he'd ever cast.

As he began to draw the final threads together, the culminating flourish on a wild, surging masterpiece of design, Victor began to fear his pathway was too narrow; already, the pattern strained against the sides of it, forcing him to realize, for the first time, the exact shape and extent of those Energy-carrying tunnels. Would it burst him apart when it was finished, and he released the spell's pent-up designs?

The disturbing thought only furthered his determination, and Victor buckled down, pulling those dozens of branches toward the spell's climax, checking his notes a final time before he began to tie them all off. A strange grin twisted his lips, an absurd thought running through his mind, some old quote one of his coaches had been fond of—something about if a person didn't risk going too far, they'd never know how far they could go.

With a final surge of his will, he wrapped the last loose threads together, completing the pattern, and then, unable to contain the bucking, thrashing spell, he let it go and felt it surge with life, bursting into a work of magic almost too wild to manage or grasp onto as it poured through his pathways, spread into his body and began to change him.

The spell was hungry, pulling at his Core, draining his inspiration-attuned Energy. Victor, desperate not to lose all of it or let the magic starve out in its infancy, began pushing some of his rage-attuned Energy into it, feeding it with that hot, potent brew. The spell surged anew, spreading through his body, wrapping around each of his trillions of cells, engulfing them, and constricting them, following the intent Victor had built into the spell's weave—make him smaller.

In seconds, his rage-attuned Energy was drawn down to less than half, and Victor, not wanting to be left with nothing but fear-attuned Energy in his Core, tapered down the flow and pushed that dark, purple-black pool toward the pattern. He opened the floodgates again, allowing the magic to feed from his third affinity. Victor could feel the spell working, felt it altering him, not just in size, but in density, the potent Energy sinking into his titan-enhanced cells, and he knew, had he been a simple human, he would have torn himself to shreds.

He was enhanced, though, far from his roots back on Earth. His body was a hundred or thousand times more durable, his bones and flesh solid and dense, capable of absorbing far more Energy than a simple mortal's. To compare Victor's physical form to a natural human's would be like comparing a thin sheet of tin foil to a brick of gold. And so, the spell did its work, pulled his Energy until his third affinity was nearly drained, and then Victor realized he could stop it anytime—the more he fed it, the further it would do its job, but it could be “done” whenever he decided.

Rather than dump more Energy into it, he tapered off the flow until, like his first two affinities, only a tiny thread attached the spell, woven through his every cell, to his Core, maintaining it and keeping it active. When he felt the magic settle and cease its alterations, he smiled. He still felt very much like himself and was quite at peace. His Core equalized, and he saw his three orbs of Energy gradually swell until they each pulsed with light, less than half their original size—the spell was hungry and seemed to require a lot of Energy to maintain.

When Victor opened his eyes, ready to observe his handiwork, a System message took up his attention:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have earned a new spell: Alter Self - Basic.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Alter Self - Basic: You have mastered the magic necessary to change an aspect of yourself, reducing your physical size and mass. This spell will last as long as you supply it with Energy, though it will reduce your maximum Energy pool so long as it is in effect. Due to the spell's reduction of your Core's potential, you'll find that your other abilities and spells are similarly reduced in efficacy. Energy Cost: Variable - 5000 minimum. Cooldown: Long.\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have gained a new feat: Elder Magic\*\*\***

**\*\*\*Elder Magic: You've gained an understanding of spell weaving beyond those designed and granted by the System. Your ability to grasp and manipulate the threads of Energy in yourself and the world around you is enhanced. Beware the freedom this ability affords—great harm walks hand in hand with great potential.\*\*\***

“Nice!” Victor said and was momentarily confused by a certain lack of timbre in his voice.

“It worked!” Valla said, and Victor looked up at her. She was no longer sitting on the bed but standing before him, and he quickly stood, hoping to use her size as a measurement for how much he'd changed. He felt a bit woozy for a second, his vision darkening at the edges. When he recovered, he looked down at Valla and smiled. He was still taller than she, but nothing like before. He held a hand up and touched the ceiling—where before the top of his head had brushed the planks, he now felt the gap between the top of his head and the wood and estimated he'd shaved something like a foot and a half off his height.

“You're around the size you were when we first met, I think,” Valla said, exposing her sharp teeth in a grin as she clapped him on the shoulder.

Victor quickly glanced at his status sheet, looking to see how his attributes and Energy had changed:

**Energy Affinity:**

**3.1, Fear 9.4, Rage 9.1, Inspiration 7.4**

**Energy:**

**9274/9274 (4274/4274)**

**Strength:**

**202 (93)**

**Vitality:**

**302 (153)**

**Dexterity:**

**82 (38)**

**Agility:**

**105 (48)**

**Intelligence:**

**74 (34)**

**Will:**

**455 (209)**

“Holy shit! It worked, but my attributes are all diminished. It seems proportionate to the amount of Energy being sapped from my Core. Mierda! Can you imagine Tes’s stats when she’s not shrunk down to our size?”

“It would depend on her true size, I suppose . . .” Valla frowned, contemplating.

Victor laughed, suddenly feeling a wave of relief and pride—he’d done something incredible, worked some magic beyond what the System usually granted, and managed to solve a problem that had been gnawing at the back of his mind for months. “Thank you, Tes!” he said, pumping his fist, unable to stop smiling. Suddenly he saw something strange in the air around him, a dozen little bright motes of light, sparkling like iridescent pearls, shimmering with a rainbow sheen.

“Are those Energy motes?” Valla asked, taking a step back. “I’ve never seen them look that way . . . they’re growing!”

She was right—the tiny pearls grew to baseball-sized bubbles of Energy, their weird, colorful sheen pulsing and throbbing, reminding Victor very much of soap bubbles in sunlight. They shimmered and bobbed and gradually floated toward him, and he stood still until they each sank into him, soaking through his clothes and flesh and then exploding into his pathways. The surge of Energy poleaxed him just as much as when he’d helped to kill the wyrm in the wastes. Those pearly bubbles were far more potent than the golden or purple motes he’d experienced before.

When his paroxysms of euphoria faded, and Victor found himself standing, dazed and flushed, before Valla, he had another message from the System waiting for his attention:

**\*\*\*Congratulations! You have achieved level 49 Titanic Herald, gained 12 strength, 22 vitality, 12 dexterity, 12 agility, 12 intelligence, and 12 will.\*\*\***