

Victor BK5: Ch6

Book 5: Chapter 6: Yolotli

“Before you drink that,” Valla said, touching her fingers to the silver flask as though to keep him from immediately chugging it down, “let’s talk about what you want me to do while you’re out. We don’t have the warlord’s cultivation chamber here—you could be out for hours or days.”

“Ah, shit. You’re right.” Victor sighed and stretched his neck, suddenly feeling a lot of tension in the back of his skull. “Should I put it off?”

“Not necessarily. I can go speak to the airship captain, pay him to wait, and take us to Persi Gables when you’re ready. As for ap’Gravin, do you trust me to speak to Yunsha on your behalf should she come ‘round before you wake?”

“Yeah, of course. You know what I’m trying to find out—what did he take from the human student here? What does he know about the summoning spell? Why was his father paying Boaeagh to do the summoning? All that stuff. If I’m not awake by the time Yunsha comes, when I do wake up, the contract will be expired. Maybe remind her and the other academy authorities that if they don’t think he deserves punishment, I might decide otherwise. Shit, now that I think about it, maybe it’s best if I’m not there at first; I can already feel my blood getting hot.”

“Understood,” Valla nodded and pulled her hand back. “I’m going to write a message to Rellia. I’ll let her know we’re here and that we should soon be in Persi Gables. I’ll also ask her to get eyes on Lord ap’Gravin, in case you want to follow up with the father.”

“That’s a good idea.” Victor took a deep, steadying breath. He hadn’t been lying—his Core was roiling, and some of his rage-attuned Energy was seeping into his pathways. He firmly pushed it back, clamped down the storm at his center, and forced a smile. “Thanks, Valla.”

“You’re welcome. I’ll keep people away from here until you’re done.”

“Perfect. I think I’ll write a message to Lam before I drink this.” Victor held up the heavy flask and then turned toward the center of the room and sat down on the floor.

“That’s probably a good idea. I’m sure she’s worried, and I doubt Rellia relays every message I send her way. While I was down having breakfast, I heard some merchants speaking about the airship—it had already been sighted. I’m sure it’s arrived by now. In any case, I’ll be back to check on you soon.” Valla turned to the door and quickly stepped out.

Victor had been digging through his ring for his Farscribe book and belatedly offered her a wave, but she was gone. Lifedrinker was still at his side, and he rested a hand on her haft, “She wasn’t upset about anything, was she? Seemed like she left in a hurry.”

“I know not. I care not. Will we battle again soon?” Lifedrinker’s sharp, smoky voice filled his mind, and Victor couldn’t help smiling at her savage disregard for anything so mundane as a person’s feelings.

“Probably, beautiful, probably.” Shaking his head, he released her handle and pulled out a pen, one that he’d gotten from Thayla. “Seems like a lifetime ago,” he muttered, then opened a blank page in the Farscribe book.

Lam,

Before you read further, be certain that no one you don’t fully trust reads this message.

I hope you’re doing well. I haven’t written to you much, and I hope you haven’t been too worried. I know Rellia’s been hearing from Valla, so you must know that we aren’t dead. Hopefully, you’ve been fine, keeping yourself busy with your various industries and helping to raise the army. You’ll be glad to hear that Valla and I are back in Fanwath. We’re up in some mountains near a magical school called Fainhallow. We should be in Persi Gables soon, though—Valla’s off trying to hire an airship as I write this.

I’ve learned a lot since we last spoke in person. I mean a LOT. One thing I’ve learned, though, is that nothing beats having a good teacher, and I really enjoyed my time with Polo Vosh. Do you think he’d want to come on the expedition with us? Would you mind offering him an invitation? I need to work on my axe skill, and the most I ever learned about the axe was when I practiced with him. Tell him I’ll be happy to pay—whatever his going rate is, I’ll double it.

I could probably write for a hundred pages about all that we’ve seen and accomplished in the last couple of months, but I’m not a writer, and I’m sure you’ll hear plenty about it through Valla and, of course, from my mouth when we next speak. Let’s just say that we fought some incredible monsters, I battled my way through another arena, and we have a lot of knowledge to share—things that will make whatever society we try to build in the Untamed Marches that much stronger.

A thought occurred to me, though, and I think we should start to take precautions: some of the powerful people we met on Zaafor (the world we traveled to) seemed surprised by the lack of knowledge on Fanwath. The System stones provide for travel to other System worlds, and there should have been travelers to and from this world to other, more advanced worlds. There should be more known here by now. I’m worried that the old powers in the Empire are hoarding knowledge and that they won’t be pleased with what Valla and I have brought back.

What route are we planning to take to the Untamed Marches? Will we pass through the heart of the Empire or skirt it? It might be wise to consider a circuitous route, one that will be more difficult to predict, one where we might avoid, more easily, ambushes or other trouble. I know you and Rellia are working hard to build a strong force, but will it be enough if the Empire moves against us, even if they do it in secret?

These thoughts have been heavy in my mind as I learned more and more about the deficiencies in Valla's training and knowledge—she's Rellia's favored scion, yet she's been misled for much of her life. If that's happening to her, then how far out of the inner circle is Rellia? How far removed are the nobles in Persi Gables and Gelica from the center of the Empire, the older cities? I guess the point of my rambling here is that we should be prepared for problems coming from places other than the Untamed Marches.

Please think about these matters, and we'll speak more when I return, hopefully in a few days.

-Victor

Victor sighed heavily as he closed the book. Those thoughts had been tickling the back of his mind for a long while now, and it felt good to put them on paper, but it also worried him. Could he trust Lam? She'd helped him many times in the past, and she was "new" nobility, so he didn't think there was any chance she was in league with the old powers of the Empire. No, she was making a grab for power; if anyone had something to fear from the established nobility, it was her. He was confident she was the right person to hear his concerns.

With a final nod, as though he were assuring himself he'd done the right thing, Victor put the book away and lifted the heavy, silvery flask. "Well," he said, twisting the red-wax-sealed stopper, "here's hoping you don't knock me out for a week or two." In truth, he wouldn't be all that upset if it did—it would only mean he'd made some tremendous advancements. As he pulled the waxy, spongy stopper free, his nose was assailed by a robust citric tang. Not wanting to waste any potency, he lifted it to his mouth and began to drink.

As soon as the syrupy fluid touched his tongue, his tastebuds exploded with flavor so sickly sweet and rich that he almost gagged, almost spat out the precious liquid. With a determined effort, he stopped breathing so as to lessen the impact and choked it down, swallow after swallow of something that tasted like orange juice laden with every sweetener known to humanity. As the last drop fell into his mouth and he drank it, his mouth exploding with saliva and his stomach roiling, Victor dropped the canister and fell back, staring at the ceiling as his legs and arms splayed out.

With a visceral snap, he felt the spell he'd cast to constrain his person come apart, he grunted as the Energy he'd packed into it flooded back into his Core, and the floorboards creaked and groaned as his true mass suddenly reasserted itself. It felt good, really, like having an immensely heavy blanket he'd gotten used to suddenly pulled off his body. If it weren't for the roiling in his gut, he might have smiled, but all he managed was a piteous groan.

Victor closed his eyes and tried to focus on his Core, trying to see inward, so he could take his attention away from the discomfort in his physical body as the potent elixir began to bubble and surge in his stomach, growing hotter and hotter by the second. Victor focused on his three globes of attuned Energy, watching how his rage smoldered, his inspiration softly pulsed, and his fear glowered and lurked. As his mind began to calm, he felt the discomfort in his belly fade away, and a warm, gentle wave spread outward through his chest and out into his extremities.

He opened his eyes or thought he did, but Victor was still engulfed in blackness, and, if he could control his face, he might have smiled—he knew he was going on a trip when stars began to blur past, nebulae and galaxies swirling away, in his passage. Unlike before, though, he didn't find himself immediately sucked down into a vision; instead, his strange journey through the universe halted, and he remained bodiless, floating in a rainbow-tinted cloud.

Pulsing colors and bubbles shimmered and flowed around him, and Victor tried to shift his perspective, but he was without agency, simply a presence in that weird, brightly-colored expanse. Since he couldn't look any other way, he studied what was in front of him, trying to see a clue as to what was happening. Still, nothing changed other than the weird shifting color streaks and the even weirder bubbles of color that seemed to float up in front of him, only to pass away beyond his field of view.

He tried to utter a curse or a question, but nothing came out of his mouth. Unable to do anything else, his mind began to wander. Whatever was happening would happen, and he'd either wake up or not—he wouldn't mentally flail about, worrying. His mind drifted to other concerns, such as what he'd do when he got to Persi Gables. He wanted to meet Olivia and hoped she'd still be around, but that was a minor thing, which he supposed was strange. Shouldn't he be more focused on learning about this mysterious human relative?

No matter how he looked at it, though, he couldn't get too worked up about the idea of meeting her. He'd spent too much time focusing on, worrying about, and planning for what Rellia needed. Namely, he was stressed about having to lead an army. He'd never led a group bigger than two into any kind of battle, so how was he supposed to manage thousands? He hoped there would be a lot of delegating and plenty of guidance, but then he also hoped he'd learned enough not to let people shove him around; he didn't want to be a figurehead or a puppet.

As his thoughts drifted that way, Victor noticed a change in his surroundings—the colors began to swirl, and he was pulled into a tightly spiraling funnel toward a distant, bright light. He started moving slowly, but his speed seemed to compound exponentially, and suddenly the bright light shone into his eyes, and he felt the heat of a sweltering, steamy summer day on his face.

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Yolotli shaded her eyes from the sun, looking down the long grassy slope at the little people gathered and waiting for her. Olmecs, they called themselves, and long had they worked to earn an audience. They knelt in the grass, heads down, the blood of their offerings pooled in the glade below, the pyre of their victims burning beside it, the smoke giving the pale blue sky a yellow-brown haze. She supposed she should be honored by their obsequious sacrifice, but it wasn't something she relished, unlike her more war-hungry kin.

She progressed down the slope, and when she was ten long strides from the first of the little folk, their garments bedecked with bird feathers and their macuahuitls in the grass before them, she paused and waited. Which of their people was their leader? Ichtaca had approached her, but Yolotli didn't see her there. "Well?" she asked, growing impatient. "You learn well from your encounters with us—I see sturdy macuahuitls and deep respect. Who will speak for you that I might resist the urge to smear your juices into the grass with the soles of my feet?"

"Mighty Yolotli!" one of the Olmecs cried, lifting his feather-bedecked head. "We have heard tale of your kindness toward our kind, your desire to speak rather than kill! Please hear us now!"

"Are you yet dead? No? Then speak, and tell me your name, insolent one!"
Yolotli was toying with the man; she had no desire to squish the little thing, but it

didn't hurt to keep these people respectful lest they utter a rude word in the presence of her more violent brothers and sisters.

"Praise you, Yolotli! I am Toltecatl, the leader of these people! We've slain a thousand of our foes there in honor of you and your people!" He gestured down the slope into the vale where the pyre smoldered.

"And what do you seek, Toltecatl? You've learned the art of the macuahuitl. You bear the feathers of serpents and birds. You've gained respect and humility. What more will you learn from the Quinametzin?"

"We seek your leadership, great Yolotli! We are beset by strange people and beings. They destroy our temples, destroy our cities and vanish our people! We cannot stand before them, but surely you can! Surely one such as you can take the battle to them and vanquish them from our lands. Surely you don't want them to sully the fields here around your jungles and mountains! Thus far, every battle we've fought has been lost! I am the seventh ruler of my people in as many years, and our numbers dwindle, thousands lost every season!"

Yolotli frowned. Had another people come to their shores? Had it not been enough that her kin had smashed the great, scaled serpents? Was it not enough that they'd driven the strange winged men with their metal armor back over the seas? "Since your kind learned to respect my people, we've had no quarrel, but why should I crush this enemy of yours? Tell me about them."

"They have tails like monkeys but scales rather than fur! They bear horns and have eyes that blaze like embers in the dark! They are tall and strong, flinging my people about with their clawed hands. They are savage and cruel, eating the flesh of our women and babes while they yet live! As we kill one, four more spring from chasms in the earth, great fiery pits that blaze with strange magic and reveal weird worlds beyond their flickering flames. They speak in clicks and hisses, words that make no sense to our ears, and refuse any sort of parlay. We seek your aid, great Yolotli; only the Quinametzin can crush these devils!"

"Devils? An apt designation. Again, I ask, why would we help you? Did your people not attack us once, thinking we were too few to stand against your verminous numbers?"

"A lesson we learned much from, Mighty One!" Toltecatl fell to his face in the grass, his hands in the air, and wailed, "Please! Please help us! Even now, a band of the devils approaches one of our cities!"

"A band? Do they not send an army?"

"They don't need an army so savage are they! For every devil, we lose a hundred fierce Olmec warriors!"

“And who were these,” Yolotli gestured to the blood and the pyre beyond it.

“Invaders from the north! We captured them as an offer to your glory!”

“If you truly wished to honor me, why not bring me one of these devils you so fear?”

“Great Yolotli! Every battle we fight with the devils brings us great loss! Any offering of their kind would be pitiful. Surely, this great sacrifice is a better honor!”

“How many warriors have you here? I do not wish to count your tiny bodies.”

“Before you are one hundred warriors! The greatest of my people!”

“Very well. I will take you and this one hundred, and we will meet this band of devils. Stand up, small ones.”

“Oh!” Toltecatl’s voice wavered, and Yolotli heard the gasps of his people, his “greatest” warriors. “But, great Yolotli, we are not a match for the devils. Surely you should get more of your kin and crush them! Send them back to the realm from which they crawled.”

Yolotli might have been patient for her kind, she may even have had a bit of a warm spot in her heart for these little people, but this chieftain was beginning to wear on her nerves. She took two steps forward and snatched him up, gripping one of his scrawny arms and lifting him so she could look into his war-painted face. “You will never grow strong if you do not fight for yourselves. I will guide and help you, but if you wish to throw these devils out of your lands, you will bleed in the battles to come.”

“Yes,” he whined, grimacing as the tendons in his shoulder strained. Yolotli dropped him and then turned to the kneeling Olmecs. She unleashed her aura, shaping it to grant boons to these little folk, wrapping it around them, giving them courage and strength. At the same time, she let it ripple out around the clearing, relieved to let it hang heavy in the air around her. Any enemy that came near would feel it and beware.

The Olmecs howled in delight and fervor, standing up and grasping their macuahuitls, lifting them into the air. They began to chant some rhyme about killing and ravaging their enemies, and Yolotli smiled; they were like children, but they had an enthusiasm that warmed her heart. “Are you pleased, children? Do you feel my might, my bravery? I share it with you that we might smite your foes and drive them from these lands. Remember this great honor, and always respect my people—few are as kind and would just as soon squash as help you.”

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Victor’s eyes snapped open, and he felt extremely disoriented momentarily as he stared at the wooden planks above his head. He licked his lips, dry as sandpaper, and coughed, trying to circulate

some saliva around in his mouth. He saw System messages waiting for his attention, but his eyes felt blurry.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Valla said from somewhere to his right. He blinked several times as she continued, “You were only out for three days, though I’ve never seen someone so still; I barely could tell you were breathing.”

“I,” Victor croaked. He licked his lips and swallowed again. Finally feeling some moisture on his tongue, he tried again, “I saw a different ancestor.”