

“Well, this road wasn’t like this before.”

On the southern outskirts of Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr, Ilyshn’ish and her companions stood on an orange clay road abruptly cut short by a small lake. The road re-emerged on the opposite shore roughly a hundred metres away. On either side, a small crowd of Beastman stood about as they waited for a pair of boats that were ferrying people and their cargo back and forth.

“Should we swim?” Pebble asked.

“I’m not sure that’s such a good idea,” Ilyshn’ish said. “This river is connected to that lake…”

While she was swimming around, exploring the lake beside Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr, she encountered several fish that were as large as her Dragon self. Despite them not being big enough to swallow her whole, they tried nonetheless.

“Let’s walk upstream,” Ilyshn’ish said. “By the looks of it, we won’t need to go more than a few kilometres before it can be crossed normally.”

Vltava hopped off of her shoulder as they went, occasionally stopping to sniff at the ground and scan the flooded terrain. What was once a sprawl of humble homes had turned into piles of debris washing up on the rising shores.

“This would explain why the clans south of here had so many hunters patrolling their territory,” Pebble said. “They must have suffered many incursions since we left the city.”

“The young Ocelo Lord has a great trial ahead of her,” Pinecone agreed. “Many millions dwell in the lowlands.”

“This flooding is unnatural,” Vltava bleated. “The valley tells no tales of a time when the waters rose to this extent.”

“Maybe an earthquake changed the course of the river,” Ilyshn’ish offered. “Or a glacial lake in the Worldspine mountains was unleashed.”

“If so,” Vltava said, “it must have happened far away. The effects of the flooding here are too gradual.”

They found a shallow ford three kilometres upstream and crossed straight into one of the wealthier areas of the city. The residents that she spotted, however, were decidedly *not* wealthy going by their appearance. Ilyshn’ish grew nervous as several started stalking after them. When the group of stalkers grew into a small crowd, a number of Beastmen came to bar their path.

“Stop right there!” A grey-furred Lup called out.

Ilyshn’ish stopped. Vltava didn’t. She scooped him up into her paws before he could start obliterating their surroundings.

“Yes?” She replied, “What can we do for you?”

“I’ve never seen your kind before,” the Lup said. “What are you doing here in our city?”

“We’re returning from a trip to the south,” Ilyshn’ish replied. “We departed from this city not two weeks ago.”

“They’re outsiders who’ve angered VÍla!” An unseen speaker cried.

“You fool!” Someone else said, “They left when the flooding started! Clearly, we must keep them in the city to appease the lake god!”

The crowd divided itself into three sides: one that wanted to drive them away, one that wanted to imprison them, and one that simply watched. Ilyshn’ish pondered her options, but she had never been in a similar situation before.

“If you wish to have your way,” Vltava said, “you must first defeat us!”

Ilyshn’ish clapped a paw over the murdersheep’s maw.

“What did he say?!”

“N-Nothing!” Ilyshn’ish replied, “Can we go, no—ow!”

Vltava dropped to the ground and immediately charged the Lup blocking their way.

“*RUN!*” Ilyshn’ish cried, “Save yourselves!”

“Huh? What are you—”

The two-and-a-half-metre-tall Lup was sent flying by Vltava’s head butt. The fluffy little avatar of violence knocked down five more Beastmen before the others started to flee. Vltava disappeared behind a huge tree trunk, his teeth camped onto a Nar’s tail.

“Are the people here really that stupid?” Ilyshn’ish shook her head sadly, “Who in their right mind would anger such a dangerous creature?”

She walked under branches weighed down with terrified Beastmen as she looked for Vltava. Eventually, she found him in front of the largest estate, sniffing around its yard. Several Nar fearfully peeked at him from between the blinds of the building’s windows.

“What in the world are you doing?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

Vltava hopped back onto her shoulder.

“These dwellings no longer house their lords,” he said.

“I could have told you that,” Ilyshn’ish replied as she led them north out of the grove. “The lords here don’t rule the city – they just lord over it. They’ve probably gone home with all the problems piling up in Rol’en’gorek.”

Much like the Human Lords of the Sorcerous Kingdom and the Empire, the Lords of Rol’en’gorek only came to the capital to attend to their own business, playing politics, conducting trade deals with other clans, and making sure they looked important while doing it. Now that there seemed to be more trouble in the city than their business was worth, they had prudently withdrawn to their respective seats of power in the jungle basin.

That’s what she would do, at any rate. Most beings were no different in her recollection. If things became unsafe, one retreated to the safety of their home.

As they made their way through the city, they skirted the glades and clanholds formerly occupied by the elites of Rol’en’gorek. It seemed like all of them had been taken over by citizens displaced by the flooding. Much like the first they had gone through, the organisation of each population was at best a collective security arrangement. They had nothing but raw numbers, but that was effective enough if everyone was in the same situation.

“I wonder if more lords like Xoc will show up,” Pebble said. “This city is rapidly splitting up into new tribes.”

“They will begin fighting over herds and grazing areas soon,” Pinecone said. “The resulting trials may very well give rise to new leaders.”

Ilyshn’ish watched a set of Gao ranchers escort a small herd of Nug through the trees. There were more ranchers than usual and each one seemed to be warier than they needed to be.

“Hullo!” She called out to them, “There are as many ranchers as Nug here. What’s going on?”

The ranchers froze at the sound of her voice. A set of distrustful growls filled the air. She wondered if they would have chased her off if she wasn’t so much larger than they were. After several moments one of the ranchers stepped forward to reply.

“What’s it to you?” She asked.

“We were just in the city two weeks ago,” Ilyshn’ish answered. “Much seems to have changed.”

“The slums got flooded,” the rancher replied. “People are wandering all over the place. Last week, our neighbours were raided. Lost five of their animals.”

“Raided?” Ilyshn’ish twitched her tail curiously, “Do you mean to say that your fellow citizens are stealing from you?”

“That’s exactly what I’m saying. If you don’t have herds and the ranges for them, it’s best that you leave the city. Everything’s going to shit.”

Ilyshn’ish thanked the ranchers for their time and they continued on their way. She couldn’t help but notice that many of the people tending to their animals seemed to have hired the biggest, meanest-looking help possible.

“So it has already begun,” Vltava said.

“What has?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“Their society is disintegrating,” Vltava said. “Each race is reverting to their respective natures. The Gao and Lup instinctively form packs while the other races exhibit the mostly solitary nature of their kind. That is why you now see Gao and Lup occupying the places of power with only the occasional Nar and Urmah to help defend their new territory.”

“Are you sure it’s going to ‘disintegrate’?”

“It isn’t a guarantee,” Pinecone said. “But the population is clearly stressed. Our own society is in no small part structured as it is due to this. Short of extinction, the Krkonoše can weather any calamity.”

She flicked her ear in agreement. It only made sense. Her father had tried to build a new society for his brood and the ultimate result was that the Sorcerer King subjugated them in one fell swoop. If they had kept to their nature, it wouldn't have happened so easily. A few might have been caught, but the rest would have fled across the ocean.

They eventually arrived at the Cuorocos Cliffs, where ocelo Pa'chan was – for better or worse – not disintegrating. If anything, they had made steady progress with growth and development since she last saw them. After ascending the clanhold, they found Xoc hosting a meal in the court with a mix of Beastmen and Humans. The young Ocelo Lord turned to greet them with a wave of her paw

“Winter Moon,” she said. “Welcome back. How are things in the south?”

“Things?”

“You know...um, is it anything like what you saw coming into Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr?”

“You'll have to be more specific.”

As a Frost Dragon, she disliked it when people were vague. It always sent her mind spinning into a wasteful mental exercise as she tried to figure out what they meant based on every conversation that she ever had in the past.

“The flooding, for instance.”

“A bit,” Ilyshn'ish replied. “Rising water levels are having the same effect in the lower valleys, but the settlements out there don't have anywhere near the population of Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr. They're managed by the clans, as well. If anything, what's going on here is far more interesting. Speaking of which, why haven't you disintegrated yet?”

Xoc's ears went straight into the air.

“...what?”

“From what I saw,” Ilyshn'ish told her, “public order in the city is in shambles. I didn't see many Merchants and the markets were subdued. You seem to be faring much better.”

“Thanks, I guess? We've been working nonstop to build everything up and keep it safe. Is it really that bad out there?”

“Shouldn’t you know better than me? I’ve been away for nearly two weeks.”

“I’m so busy that I haven’t been able to leave the clanhold at all,” Xoc whined. “I had reports delivered, but you make things sound far worse.”

“Perhaps it’s because Winter Moon can only compare it to her last memory of the place,” Elder Patli offered. “We, on the other hand, have been monitoring the small changes that happen from day to day. How does the city appear to you, Winter Moon? You mentioned poor public order...is there any danger that might threaten us?”

Ilyshn’ish considered the elder’s question. The new ‘tribes’ that were forming were barely organised and Xoc’s clanhold was highly defensible by terrestrial standards, especially now that the river separating them from the rest of the city was nearly a kilometre wide.

“The Gao and Lup are forming large packs,” Ilyshn’ish said. “They’ve taken over the groves and clanholds of the wealthy, which have been abandoned by their former occupants. Some ranchers I spoke with on the way here claim that the citizens are raiding their livestock.”

Xoc’s ears flattened and her tail curled between her legs. Low discussion rose between the Beastmen and Humans gathered for the meal.

“There must be a better way to do this,” the Ocelo Lord said.

“Didn’t I say you seem to be doing well?”

“It’s not enough!” Xoc moaned, “Maybe we can save ourselves, but what about everyone else? This flooding is happening all across the basin. If the Confederation collapses, our enemies will invade and eat us!”

“Not to trample on your concern,” Pebble said, “but this event is the result of how Rol’en’gorek built itself. If anything, you are fortunate that a disaster of some kind hasn’t already overturned your civilisation. If you intend to return things to how they once were, this tragedy will only repeat itself.”

“But I don’t want to watch everyone die!”

Pebble sat on her haunches and curled her long, fluffy tail around her feet.

“I never demanded that you do,” she said. “Your actions are yours to make. I was merely pointing out the challenges that you will face should you choose to act to save your fellows.”

Xoc settled back down and went to her seat, looking thoroughly miserable. At the table below her, Master Leeds cleared his throat.

“I don’t see what’s so hard about this,” he said. “The way things are going, Lady Xoc could carve out a new kingdom if she wanted to. Hell, the Confederation could become a new empire if we play things right.”

“What do you mean?” Xoc asked.

“You want to do something about the situation,” Master Leeds said, “but you’re looking at things the wrong way. You see a wall of problems that are getting too big, too fast. It’s natural to think that things are overwhelmingly hopeless if you only consider everything in those terms. Instead, we should consider our advantages and attack our problems with them.”

The Guildmaster winced as he uncrooked his legs and rose from his seat. Ilyshn’ish wondered how long the meeting had been going on for.

“Now,” he said, “this is just from our observations since we arrived in Rol’en’gorek, so feel free to correct me if you think something’s wrong. The Confederation is a huge, unwieldy place where customs don’t change much and innovation is pretty rare. Politically speaking, each clan and tribe only really police their respective territories with the exception of the whole Confederation banding together for security against external threats. It has what would be considered a pastoral economy where the vast majority of trade revolves around Nug.

“Don’t get me wrong: the Nug trade is *huge* in Rol’en’gorek because Rol’en’gorek itself is similarly huge, but we estimate that everything outside of the Nug industry makes up around five per cent of the Confederation’s trade. If you break the numbers down even further, timber and jute production make up most of that five per cent while mining is a small fraction of the remainder.”

“How did you figure that out?” Xoc asked.

“We’re Merchants,” Master Leeds shrugged. “The market information that we’ve compiled, combined with what we’ve seen the people – warriors and civilians alike – work with gives us a pretty good idea of what the overall situation is like. Obviously, trade is what we’re the most interested in and it’s through trade that we may be able to drastically improve the situation of the city and its surroundings.”

“I hope I can understand what you want to do...”

Master Leeds grinned at Xoc's wary response.

"The basic ideas should be easy to understand," he said. "The hard part is making all of the moving pieces work and, fortunately, we're already well on our way to having that covered. As far as we've discussed today, the central issue we're facing is that the flooding is preventing ranchers all across Rol'en'gorek from accessing their summer pastures. A food shortage for the Nug eventually becomes a food shortage for the Beastmen. Does everyone follow so far?"

Xoc and the elders nodded.

"In response," the Guildmaster continued, "you've ordered us to import as much food as possible to prepare for the impending famine. This sort of defensive thinking is pretty common: people identify a problem and turn to the most readily apparent solution."

"Are you saying that it's the wrong decision?" Xoc asked.

"It is a solution," Master Leeds answered, "but it's not the best solution that we have at our disposal. Elder Patli also requested that we import food so that our Nug herds could grow to keep up with the expanding fungus farms."

"Yeah," Xoc said, "that's what convinced me to issue the order to import as much food as we can."

"And that's where we screwed up."

"We screwed up?"

"You just issued the order," the Guildmaster said, "so it's a mistake easily remedied. Here's what we should actually be doing: we export fodder, trading it for preserved meat and animals to add to our herds."

Master Leeds grinned at the Beastmen's dumbfounded silence.

"...we can do that?" Xoc raised her tail in the air.

"So long as the other side's willing to take the trade," the Guildmaster said. "And I wager that they will. They're culling their herds faster than they can preserve meat, after all. This trade is just the beginning, though. With it, we have the last cornerstone we need to build something big."



The Guildmaster bent forward to pick up a piece of parchment on the mat in front of him.

“First is the expansion of the fungus farms,” he said. “Elder Patli’s work is limited by labour. We use the meat that we trade for to bring in more labour from the city. Those Blood Antlers take two weeks to grow and harvest, so it’s an industry just waiting to explode. The more fungus we grow, the more Nug we can trade for, and the more people we can bring in to become anything we need them to be. This crisis is, in reality, an opportunity of unprecedented proportions.”

“Will it be so simple?” Elder Patli asked.

“I don’t see why it shouldn’t be,” Master Leeds answered. “You yourself mentioned that the fungus farms are easy to set up. On top of that, setting up the fungus farms creates housing for Ocelo and anyone else who doesn’t mind living in the trees. We’re growing food by building housing which houses labour that allows us to grow more food.”

“But what about government?” Xoc asked, “I’m already at my limit managing the clan as it is.”

“Clans are composed of tribes, aren’t they?” The Guildmaster said, “Human Lords delegate responsibility to their vassals and magistrates. Guildmasters have office staff. You’re trying to do everything on your own so far and that’s not good.”

“That’s because I’m still learning,” Xoc said, “how can I teach other people what to do if I don’t know how to do it myself?”

“For one, collecting and sorting out information is the bulk of your work. That’s not something that specifically requires your direct involvement. You have the clan elders to help you out in court, too. As the lord in charge of the clan, your time should be dedicated to making decisions for the betterment of the clan. Trying to do everything yourself will hurt everyone in the long run because it keeps you from doing what you need to do.”

Ilyshn’ish stifled a yawn. Dragons naturally knew that. That’s why they had minions.

“That makes sense...I think,” Xoc said, then turned to the clan elders. “What do you think?”

“I still have my doubts about whether we can grow as quickly as Master Leeds suggests,” Elder Patli said, “but the more people we can save, the better. As for organising the clan into tribes, we needed to do it sooner or later anyway. I can only hope that we don’t get into trouble with the Confederation Council for this ambitious undertaking.”

“As I mentioned at the beginning of my proposal,” Master Leeds said, “the clans don’t really project power beyond their own territories. They certainly don’t help manage the city. With what that messenger stated earlier today in addition to all of the problems that have cropped up, they’re so short-handed that they couldn’t do anything about us even if they knew.”

“What did the messenger say?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“They’re trying to gather more warriors and hunters for something,” Xoc answered. “Going by what they told us to do, I’m not even sure if the clans even care about what’s happening in the city.”

“Further proof that we’re free to act,” Mister Leeds said. “I doubt the clans will come and save us if things fall apart, so it’d be foolish to wait on their approval or recognition for anything.”

Voices of agreement started to rise from around the court. Xoc, who always seemed hesitant about everything, finally acquiesced.

The next day, Ilyshn’ish was sorting out a few belongings that she had picked up on their trip to the south when Xoc appeared at the entrance to her room.

“Winter Moon,” she said. “Could you come with us into the city?”

“I don’t mind,” Ilyshn’ish replied, “but why?”

“According to the messenger yesterday, someone from the Council will be picking up the warriors that they wanted.”

Ilyshn’ish looked up from her collection of items, peering suspiciously at the Ocelo in the doorway.

“...you’re not shipping me off somewhere, are you?”

“Huh? No, of course not! I just wanted some knowledgeable people to come with me to see if they could make any sense of what the Council wants.”

“Oh. Alright.”

She swept up her things with a paw and dropped them back into her *Infinite Haversack* before following Xoc outside. Vltava hopped on Ilyshn'ish's shoulder as soon as she stepped into the open air of the courtyard. A few of the clan elders and an Ocelo male named Chimali joined them as they made their way down to the river and took a boat to the opposite shore.

"What do you expect will happen?" Ilyshn'ish asked Xoc.

"I'm not sure," Xoc replied. "Chimali said it'll be like when they came to get people to fight the Undead."

"There's no other way," Chimali said. "The shores will be filled with people who see the Council's announcement as an opportunity to secure a meal."

"But that means people from the warrior clans will be here to test them," Xoc's tail hung nervously. "If they find out what we're doing and don't like it..."

The discussion died on that uncertain note. They travelled downriver, coming ashore just before they reached the lake to join the crowds which had gathered as close to the submerged docks as possible. As Chimali predicted, it seemed like many hungry hopefuls were looking for a way to escape both their hunger and the city. A flotilla of ships from the Council was anchored a few dozen metres offshore and groups of representatives were sorting out the crowd with none-too-pleased looks.

"Let's not get too close," Xoc said. "I don't want to be randomly 'recruited'."

Xoc looked around and settled on observing the proceedings from a nearby set of tree roots. Ilyshn'ish sat down beside her, intently watching the chaos unfold.

"If they're so desperate for warriors," she said, "why not train them?"

"I don't think that would ever happen," Xoc replied. "The warrior clans train their own warriors; they only come to the city looking for them if they're needed right away. Can you make out what the representatives are saying?"

"Nothing terribly useful," Ilyshn'ish's ears swivelled this way and that. "Mostly complaints about the poor showing. Uh oh, some of them are coming this way."

A group of Nar pushed their way through the crowd, their gazes fastened on Ilyshn'ish.

“Ugh,” Xoc said, “maybe bringing you along was a bad idea. You stick out just by *existing*.”

“You there!” A young male Nar at the head of his fellows called out to her, “Identify yourself!”

Xoc stepped between them, holding her paws out disarmingly.

“Winter Moon is a traveller from the northwest. She and her friends are staying at my home.”

“And you are...?”

“Xoc. I live just upriver.”

“Xoc?” The Nar stared at the much shorter Ocelo intently, “Would you happen to be acquainted with anyone from nar Ki’ra?”

The mention of the great clan caused Xoc to visibly tense.

“Sort of...? I spoke to il-Ensaj once. They came through the city on their way to the Draconic Kingdom.”

“I see!” The Nar visibly brightened, “Allow me to introduce myself. I am Vogroth nar Ki’ra, the fifteenth son of il-Ensaj. My father mentioned you in a correspondence with our clanhold. Something about a promising connection in Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr.”

“Is that why a messenger came to my place?”

“That’s right,” Vogroth replied. “Since my father took note of you, I figured you were the lord of a clan growing in power nearby. With such a meagre selection of combatants from the city, I’m glad we could at least bring on a few good warriors.”

Ilyshn’ish looked on as she observed Xoc’s mounting panic.

“About that...” Xoc started timidly, “Il-Ensaj *is* right about us in various ways, but we don’t have any warriors to spare. The truth is that we’re not even an official clan yet – just one that’s starting to band together and organise itself. We’d like to join the ranks of the warrior clans, but that’s a goal for the distant future.”

“Is that so?” Vogroth replied in measured tones, “That’s unfortunate. Forgive me for my presumption.”

“I-It’s alright. Um, could you tell me *why* the Council is recruiting more warriors? Are reinforcements needed in the Draconic Kingdom?”

Vogroth looked around before coming a few steps closer.

“They aren’t for the west,” he said in a low voice. “They’re for the east. The Jorgulans seized Gor’lior and five other major fortresses during the Deluge.”

“*Five?*” Xoc gaped at his statement, “But isn’t that all of them?”

“It is,” Vogroth’s voice was grim. “The Jorgulan Front has collapsed. The Commonwealth has already begun their invasion of Rol’en’gorek.”