

“I think we lost him again.”

“Probably.”

Stopping to stand between the roots of a Kapok tree, Ilyshn'ish peered down the mountain trail.

“Someone should carry him,” Ilyshn'ish said. “It will take us a week to get to the Worldspine at this rate.”

The Krkonoše remained silent. Five minutes later, a figure appeared in the shadows of the undergrowth. Heavy panting filled the air as Ghroklor nar Ki'ra closed on their location. Despite his ragged condition, his face was set in an expression of self-assuredness as he walked right past them. That expression instantly disintegrated when Vltava stepped out from between the roots and nipped the tip of the Nar's tail.

Ghroklor leapt up with a yowl. Shavings of wood rained down on Ilyshn'ish as his claws dug long furrows into the trunk above them. Vltava made a derisive noise.

“Is it common for Beastmen to get ambushed by herbivores around here?” Ilyshn'ish asked.

“O-Of course not!”

Ghroklor released his grip on the tree, landing on the ground beside them. He raised his tail in front of himself, examining it for a moment before lowering it again.

“Usually,” he said, “the only thing that attacks us out here are raiders, various Magical Beasts, and Monsters. Thus any attack elicits an extreme reaction.”

“I see...well, if you keep falling behind us, a predator will undoubtedly mark you out as the weakest in our group and nature will take its course. Are you sure about not taking the barge upriver?”

“Korrogh is the farthest river traffic is permitted for good reason,” Ghroklor replied. “Past that point, the waterways have a high chance of harbouring a Jorgulan tribe. As confident as anyone may be in their strength, it will avail them little against raiders tearing a hole in the bottom of a ship.”

Ilyshn'ish disagreed with his assessment of their chances, but it was pointless to argue since they were already on the road. Their journey north to the Worldspine didn't start with them heading north at all: they had travelled three hundred kilometres east up the Oriculon before reaching the city of Korrogh. From there, they set off on foot northeast following a river of the same name.

According to her mistress, the average Nar civilian was only capable of walking twenty kilometres a day on the coastal plains of the Draconic Kingdom. Their hunters could traverse a greater distance, but Ghroklor showed no sign of being one. Going by what they could squeeze out of him, it would take nine or ten days to cover the one-hundred-fifty-kilometre-long uphill trek to the Worldspine.

Maybe longer, considering this detour...

In order to mitigate losses from raiding, the route prescribed to Merchants and other travellers was a dozen kilometres west of the main road along the river. Ilyshn'ish and the Krkonoše didn't particularly care which route they took so long as it went in the right direction, but that was before they found out how slow Ghroklor was.

"Is that a convoy up ahead?" Ghroklor asked.

"Yes," Ilyshn'ish asked. "We decided it was for the best that you speak to them on our behalf. Having strangers come up from behind them might result in a less-than-friendly reaction."

"A prudent choice."

The Nar straightened his Green Dragonscale armour and patted down his fur before walking ahead to address the people in the rear of the convoy. In truth, Ilyshn'ish and the Krkonoše were going to just bypass them, but Pebble figured that the only way for them to not have the prideful Nar kill himself trying to keep up was to give him an excuse to slow down.

After speaking with the caravan for a few minutes, Ghroklor waved back in Ilyshn'ish's general direction. She hated it when people did that.

"Are we going to travel with them?" Pinecone asked.

"I figured we could use them as a slowly moving base of operations," Pebble answered. "We have much to investigate along the way. Winter Moon can identify potential sites from the air."

"I'm not even sure what a 'potential site' would look like," Ilyshn'ish said. "These aren't just Ocelo lands, you know."

Vltava's search of Ki'ra hadn't turned up any ancient ruins, so she didn't have any examples of non-Ocelo ruins to match her observations with.

"The Ocelo ruins don't try to meld with the landscape," Pebble reasoned, "and the architecture in Ki'ra suggests that their ancestors did the same. Anything artificial should stick out to you."

She supposed that was true. Her Draconic senses allowed her to map out every nook and cranny of her surroundings. Thick overgrowth and even layers of soil couldn't foil her from feeling out what lay beneath them.

The caravan's members shied away when Ilyshn'ish revealed herself. Ghroklor made calming gestures as he introduced them.

"These are my travelling companions," he said. "This is Winter Moon, that's Pebble, and that's Pinecone. Vltava is...where did Vltava go?"

"Who knows," Ilyshn'ish shrugged.

"He'll show up when he feels like it," Pinecone said.

"Right," Ghroklor said. "Anyway, Winter Moon and her party are visitors from a land far to the northwest. I hope everyone can get along as fellow Beastmen."

Sounds of awe and curiosity rose from the members of the caravan. The fact that they were from the world beyond seemed to interest them the most.

"Do you intend to travel with us, sir?" One of the caravan's guards asked.

"It would be prudent to do so," Ghroklor answered. "What's the destination of your cargo?"

"The northern front," the warrior replied.

"Perfect!" Ghroklor narrowed his eyes, "We're heading to the Worldspine ourselves. Let's hope that our journey will be an enjoyable one!"

With that, the convoy got going again. Or, rather, the rear of it. The rest hadn't stopped to see what Ghroklor had to say. With hundreds of members, the procession wound its way along the high jungle trail, disappearing around a cliff a kilometre ahead of them.

“This caravan has quite the escort,” Ilyshn’ish noted.

“Our supply lines must stay secure, after all,” Ghroklor said. “Once, Merchants and travellers could go back and forth without much concern for their safety. With the Jorgulan advance, it’s standard practice to consolidate an entire day’s worth of traffic into a single, easy-to-defend convoy like this.”

“There must be at least two warbands here,” Ilyshn’ish said. “Will the Jorgulans still attack?”

Ghroklor looked to the warrior nearby for an answer.

“They don’t attack our convoys often,” the Lup warrior said. “But when they do, it’s a pretty big deal. A Dragon will coordinate with several tribes in a bid to take everything.”

Ilyshn’ish glanced at the canopy above.

“How often do they succeed?” She asked.

“Early in their offensive,” the warrior answered, “they were winning more encounters than we would have liked. They’ve lost the element of surprise, though. So long as our patrols keep thinning out the invaders, they can’t muster a large enough force to attack caravans like this.”

“How do you thin them out if they’re using the waterways to get around?”

“They may spend most of their time underwater,” the warrior replied, “but they still have to eat. Our patrols hit them when they come out to hunt. We’ve even had success baiting them out with Nug that were marked for culling anyway.”

“Interesting,” Ilyshn’ish said. “So you’re effectively laying siege to the invaders.”

“Exactly,” the Lup growled in amusement. “It may seem that they have an unassailable position, but that’s only true if you fight them on their terms. The Jorgulans can only send as many raiders as they can feed, which isn’t enough to shatter our defences.”

“Any sign of Ka’ak?” Ghroklor asked.

“Thankfully no,” the warrior replied. “We’re being extra careful about detecting their hives.”

“What’s a Ka’ak?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“An insectoid race from the Commonwealth,” Ghroklor told her. “They’re probably the biggest threat to us, but they only operate within a certain range of their hives. If one of their queens manages to establish a hive, the Jorgulans will essentially have unlimited ammunition to use against us.”

“Ammunition?”

“Ka’ak explode...at least one type of Ka’ak does. It’s a problematic form of offence.”

“What type of explosion is it?”

“The fiery type. Some say it’s similar to the *Fireballs* that outsider mages throw around.”

Ilyshn’ish suppressed a shudder. She wanted nothing to do with a bunch of crawling fireballs.

Nightfall saw them arriving at a well-used camp overlooking a town on the Korrogh River. At their elevation, the town was barely touched by the flooding, though the meltwater coming from upstream had still transformed the river into a torrent that had scoured away anything along its banks. Now that everyone had gathered, Ilyshn’ish was finally able to take a proper inventory of the caravan and its members.

The two warbands were Lup and Nar, respectively. Going by the strength of their members, attacks by younger Green Dragons wouldn’t be a problem. The civilian population was mixed and they even brought their family members along with them. This wasn’t a surprise as they couldn’t just leave their children somewhere for days and weeks while they worked; nor could they afford to even if they did.

She settled down near a group of Merchants setting up a large Nug hide tent – one of many arranged around one of the camp’s sentry fires. The group eyed her warily until she addressed them.

“Is this your first time running this route?” Ilyshn’ish asked, “My understanding is that people usually travel by river.”

“Third time,” an Ocelo Merchant answered, “all from this change in our route.”

“Second,” said another.

“My family’s run the highland routes we’ll be seeing later on for generations,” a Con Merchant added. “What about you? You look like you belong up in the Worldspine, but I don’t think I’ve heard of anything like your kind.”

“I’m from a mountain range far to the northwest,” Ilyshn’ish replied. “The conditions there are similar enough to your Worldspine. I’ve been looking forward to our visit.”

The Merchants stopped what they were doing to exchange a look between themselves.

“I wouldn’t recommend any sort of ‘visit’,” the Con Merchant said as he resumed his work. “Your mountain home might be filled with friendly folk, but the tribes up in the Worldspine are anything but.”

“Savages and cannibals that can’t do anything but raid and wage war on their neighbours,” the Lup Merchant said with a snap of his teeth. “They’re not civil like us.”

“What races are these tribes in the Worldspine formed out of?” Ilyshn’ish asked, “It’s been hard to get any useful information about what’s going on up there.”

“As far as the dominant tribes go,” the Lup Merchant replied, “There are the Skrili and Haugrarl in the area we’re delivering this cargo to. The Skrili are blood-drinking monsters made out of shards of ice. The Haugrarl are like Owlbears, but smarter.”

“And you have no interactions with them beyond raiding?”

“They attack anyone that isn’t one of theirs, so trying to trade or even talk with them is useless. The northern tribes are just one giant collection of angry assholes.”

“That’s a shame,” Ilyshn’ish said. “You may have divided this place into friends and enemies, but everyone here is a stranger to me. I’d have liked to hear their story, as well.”

The Merchant snorted, securing his line to a wooden tent peg.

“Even if you could, I doubt you’d hear anything but ‘eat’ and ‘kill’.”

“I see,” Ilyshn’ish said. “Well, enough of that, I suppose. How about we move onto a topic that may be more to a Merchant’s interest?”

“What might that be, miss?”

“Winter Moon,” Ilyshn’ish said as she bowed slightly, “my apologies for not introducing myself earlier.”

“Name’s Yip,” the Lup Merchant said.

“Ragh,” the Con Merchant raised a paw.

The two Merchants and a few of their family members settled onto a ring of boulders rolled into place around the nearby sentry fire. Some raw Nug meat of dubious freshness was passed around, which most of the travellers opted to cook over the fire with wooden skewers.

“Are the others at this tent members of your families?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“That’s right,” Yip yipped. “Three generations, all right with us here.”

“It looks like everyone’s involved in the work.”

“Of course! We wouldn’t be able to move so much if they didn’t.”

“We’re going a lot slower than we’re used to, though,” Ragh said. “The warrior clans insist on having everyone travel together for safety.”

Meaning they could only move at the speed of their slowest members, which were Nar. The warbands escorting them seemed to be making the most out of the slow rate of travel, but Ilyshn’ish wondered whether it was better to just have faster caravans. Speed was often the best armour, after all.

“I take it that you don’t usually hire an escort?”

“It’s usually safe to go about our business without one,” Yip replied. “At least for bigger Merchants like us. We only go between the largest markets and most of it is by river.”

They're big Merchants?

Compared to Human and Dwarven companies, they weren't much to look at. The entire convoy that she was travelling with would amount to a single caravan of one company under the Merchant Nobles in the Sorcerous Kingdom.

"As major Merchants," Ilyshn'ish asked, "have you ever considered collaborating with other Merchants?"

"We travel together if that's what you mean," Ragh answered. "Cargos aren't perfect all the time and sometimes you have half a hold to spare. We'll split the cost of the charter with another Merchant when that happens."

"That's not quite what I meant," Ilyshn'ish said. "I was thinking more along the lines of banding together as an organisation that looked out for your common interests and supported its members with various services."

"I can't say that anyone's proposed something like that before," Yip said. "Is that something Merchants elsewhere do?"

"Yes, that's right," Ilyshn'ish replied. "With its robust trade networks, I was surprised to find that it wasn't commonplace in Rol'en'gorek. In fact, the only location that had something similar was Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr."

"Really?" Yip asked, "What's it like?"

The Beastmen watched Ilyshn'ish intently as she considered what she should share. As the Krkonoše occasionally mentioned, the people of Rol'en'gorek had a number of conceptual barriers that outsiders had to deal with. She supposed that those barriers now also existed between Xoc's burgeoning base of power and the rest of the Confederation.

"It's very popular with the local Merchants and artisans," Ilyshn'ish answered.

"*And* artisans?"

"Yes, that's right. The Merchant Guild – that's what the organisation is called – has been building new infrastructure around the city and they've set about establishing standards and measures for industry and commerce."

"That's pretty vague," Ragh said. "Could you go into the details of some of that?"

“Of course,” Ilyshn’ish replied. “Infrastructure would include secure new markets and piers to replace the ones taken by the flooding. They’re also establishing social infrastructure to support their long-term efforts. Members can secure permanent housing for their families. Schools are teaching children to read, write, and calculate, while a formal apprenticeship program is in place for many vocations.”

“What’s an apprenticeship?”

Ilyshn’ish gestured to some of the younger Beastmen nearby.

“It’s a formalised system to teach members of the next generation their respective trades. Once children are old enough to start working, they begin learning under an experienced member of the guild. This is not unlike how you teach your children the family business. The difference is that an apprenticeship conforms to the Merchant Guild’s standards.”

“You mean they’ll take our children away from us?” A female Lup sitting beside Yip asked worriedly.

Why must these mortals have such an unhealthy attachment to their children?

“It’s not as if they snatch them away,” Ilyshn’ish said. “Most of the time, masters end up teaching their own children. Some see it as an opportunity for them to explore new horizons before returning to help with the family business.”

The answer seemed to quell their apprehension somewhat. To her side, a Con raised a paw.

“You mentioned reading and writing,” she said. “What do you mean by that?”

Ugh...

Now that she thought about it, the Humans used Low Draconic. That probably wouldn’t go over well when Rol’en’gorek was at war with a gang of Green Dragons.

“It’s a part of their standardisation efforts,” Ilyshn’ish replied. “By putting language to script, all sorts of things are made easier. Education, communication, running one’s business...reading and writing are useful life skills no matter what one’s vocation is. Anyone who doesn’t learn is bound to fall behind.”

Ilyshn'ish reached for her skewer while the Beastmen digested her words. The idea that one was falling behind or missing out on an advantage usually got through to Merchant types.

“How do the warrior clans feel about what they’re doing?” Yip asked, “I don’t know about other parts of Rol’en’gorek, but the warrior clans around here might see this ‘Merchant Guild’ as a challenge to their authority.”

“Ocelo Pa’chan, the clan that has risen to bring order to Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr and its surrounding territories, is cooperating with the Merchant Guild. In fact, they’re the ones that introduced the organisation. In all, it’s been instrumental in maintaining stability and bringing long-awaited progress to the area. If you’d like to know more, you could visit Rol’en’gorek. I’m sure they’d be more than happy to show fellow Merchants what the Guild has to offer.”

“Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr, eh...” Yip said as he looked up at the night sky, “That’s a bit too far and fancy for humble Merchants like us.”

“We can hardly leave our work here,” Ragh added.

Weren't you just calling yourself the bigger Merchants around here? It's only a week by boat from Korrogh to Ghrkhor'sstorof'hekheralhr by ship, too... I want my time and effort back!

In her experience, whenever people made excuses for them not to do something, they didn’t believe what she was saying. Was the concept of the Merchant Guild truly so far-fetched in their worldview that it amounted to some sort of myth or fantasy that even she couldn’t convince them of?

The next few days passed without incident, though the convoy’s warbands liked to make a point of stressing the escalating risks that came with their proximity to the frontier. Ilyshn'ish, however, felt more comfortable as they ascended out of the tropical jungles and into the dense conifer forests carpeting the foothills of the Worldspine. Through the trees, one could spot the ice-clad peaks of the massive ranges looming in the distance.

Ilyshn'ish took a deep breath of the crisp mountain air coming down from the hills, but it was marred by the annoying odour of aqua regia. She looked down at Ghroklor, who was walking beside her.

“Have the Greens been giving you trouble up here?”

“Not that I’ve heard of,” the Nar warrior replied, then looked over at a nearby Lup escort. “Any recent developments?”

“No attacks,” the escort replied, “but our hunters can smell them.”

“There are a few Adults in the mix,” Ilyshn’ish told them. “How far are we from the front lines of the Jorgulan advance?”

The valley they were following took them northeast, but Ilyshn’ish wasn’t sure how far they had gone relative to the conflict.

“By ‘adult’,” Ghroklor said, “do you mean an Adult Dragon?”

“Several.”

Ghroklor sent the escort away with a gesture. They watched as the Lup warrior sprinted off to warn his comrades.

“We should be at least a hundred kilometres west of Gor’lior,” Ghroklor said. “The front lines haven’t advanced far from there. I wasn’t aware that your race’s sense of smell was so keen.”

Ilyshn’ish didn’t bother responding, instead peering up through the trees for signs of Green Dragon observers. She wasn’t sure whether Krkonoše had the ability to sense Dragons, but Dragons certainly could. While Wyrmlings and Juveniles were usually detected like regular animals, Adults started to exude what was best described as the ‘pressure’ that came with establishing a domain...or perhaps it was what gradually created those domains in the first place.

By gaining a sense of those domains, one could also gain a sense of the resident Dragon’s strength. Stronger Dragons didn’t fight between themselves much due to being able to detect the presence of other strong Dragons, as such fights tended to leave the victor in a state that other powerful beings could easily exploit. As a result, Dragons were a generally peaceful species so long as the balance of power was maintained.

Of course, Ilyshn’ish exuded the same thing herself, but it seemed that the *Ring of Nondetection* provided by Lady Shalltear to conceal her identity concealed many other things as well – including her Draconic presence.

Under the redoubled vigilance of their escort, the caravan continued its way through the foothills. Several hours passed before Ghroklor started giving her doubtful looks, but she was vindicated from his silent accusations that evening when they arrived at the next town.

“What’s going on there?” Ghroklor murmured.

“It looks like they’re receiving people from somewhere,” Ilyshn’ish said.

Civilians were trickling in from the hills bracketing the valley. There was no sign of any warbands accompanying them. Ghroklor rushed forward, but Ilyshn’ish had already pieced together what had happened by the time he reached the first bedraggled refugee.

“You!” He shook the Con female he had cornered, “What’s going on here?”

“I...I’m not sure, good sir,” she said tearfully. “Our village was attacked by the mountain tribes. The warriors ordered us to get to our homes. I went and did like they told, but then my feet just carried me off into the hills!”

“What then?”

“Once I came to my senses, I went back to my village...but it was already overrun by the tribes.”

“Which tribes?”

“Haugrarl, good sir.”

“How many?”

“I-I don’t know.”

The Con female shrank away from Ghroklor as a low growl rose from the Nar’s throat.

“Could it be...? Where are the warbands that were defending your territory now?”

“I-I don’t know, good sir.”

Ghroklor questioned several more refugees before making his way to the town hall. The local Con Lord was already gathered under the wooden pavilion with several of his elders. They turned their attention to the steps as Ghroklor stormed in.

“You’re with today’s convoy?” The Con Lord asked.

“Ghroklor are Ki’ra. No one out there seems to know what’s going on.”

“Opiche con leuwe,” the Con Lord briefly introduced himself. “Whatever it is, it’s just started. The first people coming down from the hills appeared half an hour ago.”

“No runners from any of the warbands have reported in?”

“None. The reports from the common folk are confused, at best.”

“What’s the furthest village you’ve heard from?”

Opiche paused for a moment’s thought.

“Ten kilometres,” he said. “A three-hour journey at most for these refugees.”

“And thirty minutes for a decent hunter,” Ghroklor said. “Yet they haven’t sent any runners. What’s the status of the other warbands in the area?”

“A hundred warbands are operating out of this town,” Opiche replied. “Ten are in the immediate vicinity while the rest are covering the nearby villages. Two-thirds of our forces are between us and the mountains.”

Ghroklor sent his gaze to the dark grey clouds smothering the distant mountain slopes. His eyes then turned eastward.

“Those damn Dragons have finally noticed all the fighting in the north,” he said.

“Do you mean to say that they’ve allied with the mountain tribes?” Opiche asked.

“Not necessarily,” Ghroklor said. “Going by the accounts of the refugees, the Haugrarl attack came simultaneously with a wave of dragonfear.”

“Dragonfear? But our warbands have never broken to dragonfear before.”

“I’ve been advised that several Adult Dragons have entered the area. Those damn things can see everything that’s going on under them. All they have to do is fly over a village to shatter our defences, allowing the mountain tribes to sweep us away. Allies or not, a win for the mountain tribes’ here is a loss for the enemies of the Commonwealth.”

I see. How curious.

From the shadows outside of the pavilion, Ilyshn'ish listened to the Beastmen discuss their situation. Ghroklor wasn't much of a lord, but he did display the traits of a Commander. This was something she had seen before elsewhere.

In the Baharuth Empire, there was a distinct difference between Commanders who came from aristocratic stock versus those who were drawn from the common population. For some reason, Ghroklor matched the qualities of the latter despite being a member of nar Ki'ra, one of the ruling clans. Either the Beastmen of Rol'en'gorek were doing something wrong or the Humans in the Empire's so-called 'Martial Nobles' were more than a mere label – an unknown 'something' that allowed its scions to act as lords without being lords in their own right.

"Then we face an impossible situation," Opiche said. "Our enemies hold an overwhelming advantage."

"Even if you feel that way," Ghroklor said, "it doesn't change what must be done. Summon the leader of every warband you can reach. We must regroup and mount an effective defence before this new incursion becomes an avalanche that buries the heartlands below."