

“Me?”

“Pleeeeeease?”

Extending words to stress one’s desires seemed to be a common behaviour amongst mortals. Ilyshn’ish didn’t know how it worked, but she had seen some success in imitating it. It didn’t work on her, though.

“You’re travelling in that direction, anyway,” Xoc pawed at her arm. “And your memory is good. All you have to do is tell the lords that you meet during your travels what I’ve been telling the lords that’ve been visiting us here. You’re better at persuading people than I am, anyway.”

“It’s not the same thing,” Ilyshn’ish said.

“What do you mean?”

“Me persuading those lords isn’t the same as you doing it. This is something you want to be handling personally.”

“I don’t get it.”

“Maybe you will one day,” Ilyshn’ish said.

“Does that mean you won’t help me?” Xoc asked.

“Your Merchants seem to be doing a good enough job of sending people to you,” Ilyshn’ish answered. “Things have been moving along so quickly that I thought you’d appreciate some time to sort all of these guests of yours out. I can send a few thousand your way all at once if you’d like.”

The Ocelo Lord backed away, her ears lying flat and her tail tucked between her legs.

“Uh...no. My hair would fall out if that happened.”

“But it’s already falling out,” Ilyshn’ish said.

“What?!”

“You furry creatures shed hair constantly,” Ilyshn’ish said.

“You’re one of those ‘furry creatures’ too,” Xoc told her. “Um, I’m not shedding any more than I usually do, am I?”

“No.”

Xoc’s tense posture relaxed a bit. The Ocelo Lord glanced at their surroundings before trying to enlist Ilyshn’ish’s help again.

“At least help me with nar Ki’ra,” Xoc said. “We already have a bit of a relationship with them and they’re among the top ten clans in the east. This equipment needs to count for as much as possible.”

“If it means so much to you, then why not go personally?”

“I would,” Xoc replied, “but I’m too busy here. We’ll be hosting representatives from two cities and sixteen towns this week alone! They’ll be insulted if I’m not around to receive them.”

“...and nar Ki’ra *won’t* be insulted if you don’t go to make your case personally?”

“They’re not even expecting us,” Xoc said. “Our trade network hasn’t come close to reaching them, so I doubt that they have any idea what we’re up to. This shipment we’re sending over is more like a pleasant surprise, so they should be happy to talk to anyone that we send.”

“Are you *sure* about that?”

“Who would get mad at free stuff?”

She supposed that the Beastman had a point. Free stuff was good if one was on the receiving end.

“What exactly would I be telling them?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“You’ve attended pretty much every meeting I’ve had with the visiting lords,” Xoc answered. “I’m sure you get the gist of it by now.”

“Very well,” Ilyshn’ish answered with a nod, “I shall demand that they submit to you as subjects of a new and unified Rol’en’gorek.”

“What? No! How in the world did you come up with that?”

“Isn’t that what all these visiting lords have been doing? They come in bowing and scraping. By the time you’re done with them, you’ve guaranteed their compliance.”

In Ilyshn’ish’s opinion, Xoc was too soft on her people, but she supposed it hardly mattered so long as she got the desired results. Unifying Rol’en’gorek worked in Ilyshn’ish’s favour, as well. Her report to the Ministry of Transportation would be far easier – and shorter – to convey if the Merchant Guild set the standards for the country’s industry and logistics.

“That’s because we’re in a weird situation,” Xoc told her. “I’ve seen plenty of lords when they visited the city in the past. People like me and my clanmates barely existed to them. Now, those same lords are both figuratively and literally being washed away by these floods. People will reach for any twig that they can in that situation.”

“If you understand that much,” Ilyshn’ish said, “why aren’t you being more assertive? You hold the advantage over everyone else and you yourself admitted that time is of the essence when addressing the problems looming over Rol’en’gorek.”

She had never met a lord quite like Xoc before. Lady Zahradnik studied things like one would study prey and there was absolutely no hesitation when she pounced on an issue. Nemel Gran was similar in that sense despite her outward displays of uncertainty: when something needed to be done, she went and did it, be it organising migrants or conquering her neighbours.

Xoc, however, was like a pot of soup left unattended over a fire. She just cooked and cooked until boiling over in some charismatic display or feat of leadership. Ilyshn’ish idly wondered if the soup would burn at some point and what that might look like.

“Our problems won’t be problems forever,” Xoc said. “I have to consider what happens after that. They may not be so cooperative after the crisis is over if they consider me an unpleasant person to work with.”

“They may choose to do so no matter how you treat them,” Ilyshn’ish said. “I’ve spoken of this matter with members of many races. The answers are varied, but they all tend towards the same conclusion.”

“And what’s that?”

“Power is required to enforce compliance. All it takes is one act of unanswered defiance to undermine the people’s confidence in a lord’s rule.”

“But...that’s basically how the gangs do things. I don’t want to be some sort of evil lord who oppresses their people.”

Ilyshn’ish chuffed in amusement at the Ocelo Lord’s words.

“You are conflating morality with authority,” she told Xoc. “This illness seems to be common in the different societies of the region. Morality may determine what is and isn’t just in any particular society, but it is the effective application of power that delivers justice. You may have gotten past the point where the strong eat the weak simply because they can, but, make no mistake: the strong rule in this world. Everyone exists by the grace of a greater power.”

“I don’t think I’ll ever hold so much power that I can exert it over everyone...”

“I doubt you’d need to,” Ilyshn’ish said. “You only need enough power to answer challenges to authority. Every successfully answered challenge serves to legitimise your rule. The true problem is keeping track of everything.”

Mortal lords truly weren’t suited to dominate their domains. All Dragons had to do was patrol their territories once in a while and only the most powerful or foolhardy would dare challenge them. Mortals, on the other hand, had to busy themselves with managing other mortals. Dragons had minions to deal with that.

“Do you have any ideas about that?” Xoc asked.

“Hmm...the Merchant Guild would probably work wonders for you,” Ilyshn’ish answered.

“How so?”

“Normally, the Merchant Guild is an organisation that has enough economic clout to influence the politics of any place they set up shop in. They use that influence to help protect their interests. What they won’t point out is that they’re entirely dependent on local governments to provide their members with a profitable environment. That’s one of the biggest reasons why Master Leeds so readily cooperates with you in your bid to build up ocelo Pa’chan: the Merchant Guild cannot expand its operations without the expansion of your authority.”

Xoc leaned on the stone railing overlooking her clanhold’s growing harbour. It wasn’t the only infrastructure being raised along the river: not far upstream, hundreds of workers were preparing a channel for Master Leeds’ proposed locks, while the clan’s new shipyards were being built on

the other side of the dam. Directly below them, the river barge loaded with equipment bound Ki'ra was undergoing last-minute checks before casting off.

"I don't mind cooperating with them," the Ocelo Lord gestured to the activity below. "Most of what we've achieved here is thanks to their assistance."

"That's what they want you to think, anyway," Ilyshn'ish said.

"What do you mean?" Xoc looked up at her curiously.

"A Merchant's greatest obstacle is the authority that controls the land they wish to operate on," Ilyshn'ish replied. "Economic activity is easily disrupted. If a Merchant's trade route goes through a wilderness or they attempt to extract resources from it, then they must deal with the local tribes and bandits. If the local authorities are strong enough to keep the local tribes and bandits at bay, then they're certainly strong enough to disrupt the average Merchant."

"I wouldn't do anything mean like that," Xoc said.

"I believe most Merchants hope for that response," Ilyshn'ish said. "It means they can get away with anything for free. You should already be well aware of the cost of maintaining order. On top of that, they may take resources from your land to sell in far-off places and your people won't see a single copper coin out of it. Industries that they set up may occupy valuable space and dump undesirable waste all over the place."

"...do people do that?"

"When a society gets into the habit of commoditising and monetising, its people start seeing everything in those terms. I've even encountered individuals who assert that nothing has value until it is rendered into a product recognisable to their economy."

"That has to be a lie," Xoc said.

"Unfortunately not," Ilyshn'ish replied.

"Can't people just appreciate things for what they are? I mean, what you were describing was sounding like us city folk here, but then it got ridiculous."

“You’re not quite there yet. Maybe you’ll get there soon.”

“...but I don’t *want* to get there.”

“Well, I can’t help you with that. Anyway, it looks like everyone’s ready to go. I’ll see you whenever I see you.”

“A-Alright,” Xoc didn’t look too pleased about where their conversation had ended. “Please do what you can to help us out there. We need every advantage that we can get.”

“I have no idea what’s waiting for me out there,” Ilyshn’ish replied, “so I can’t reasonably promise you anything.”

With that, Ilyshn’ish made her way down to the waterfront. Vitava, Pinecone, and Pebble had already boarded the barge, occupying the space just behind Chimali and his ‘staff’. The rest of the ship was occupied by its crew, their supplies, and thousands of suits of armour fashioned out of Nug leather.

The craftsmanship of the equipment was far better than those of more ‘civilised’ places would have probably expected. This was because any society that herded Magical Beasts also had access to superior materials. Those materials, in turn, demanded better artisans compared to places that relied on regular Beasts like cows, pigs, and deer. In essence, it was the timeless tale of how people in more challenging environments ended up being stronger than their counterparts who chose to live easier lives elsewhere.

“So,” Chimali turned around to speak to them as they pushed off from the pier, “are you excited about the trip?”

“We’ve been on a trip for months,” Ilyshn’ish replied.

“Oh,” the Ocelo Merchant chuckled. “I guess that’s true. For my part, I never expected that I would ever see the world outside of Ghrkhor’storof’hekheralhr.”

“That seems to be a common story among urbanites,” Ilyshn’ish said. “They live and die within their city’s limits, only ever hearing about the world beyond.”

“Well, that won’t be me,” Chimali said. “I want to see as much as I can. Maybe I’ll come by your home one day, eh? What do you think Ki’ra will be like?”

“I’ve heard that it’s a large city on a lake,” Ilyshn’ish replied, “so it will probably look like a large city on a lake.”

She had flown over Rol’en’gorek – or at least the parts that she dared to – several times since her arrival, so she knew far more than that. However, time and experience proved that feigning ignorance often led to people giving away free information in an effort to impress her.

“That’s what I’ve heard as well,” Chimali said. “Still, it’s the home of a warrior clan. I wonder how different they’ll look from us.”

“They’re Nar.”

“Aside from that. Those fellows from Ki’ra who came to recruit for the Jorgulan front were all *huge!* If people like that are having trouble in the east, I can only wonder what they have to fight.”

“Shouldn’t you be focusing on your responsibilities as a Merchant?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“I-I can at least chat about other things, can’t I?” Chimali protested, “It’s not as if we’re doing anything right at this very moment. You know, I used to imagine myself as one of those mighty warriors.”

Once again, a commonality between multiple races displayed itself. This one, however, made more sense than most. To survive in a competitive and often violent world, most species needed an inbred predilection for conflict. Even unintelligent Beasts had young that naturally engaged in playfighting while the children of intelligent races even went so far as to turn mortal conflict into a variety of ‘games’.

Indeed, mortal societies appeared to glorify conflict. No matter where she went, there was a fighting pit, arena, or any number of monuments raised to immortalise people who had turned mass murder into a profession.

“What happened, then?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“Il-Enxoc happened, I guess,” Chimali answered. “Some people are just born to fight and be admired by all. Just by watching her, I knew that I wasn’t one of them. It didn’t take long for me to give up on my dreams of becoming a warrior, and that turned out to be a good thing. I am far better at what I’m doing now.”

“You don’t mind how others perceive you? There are some nasty rumours about you floating around.”

“I’m used to it,” Chimali waved a paw dismissively. “So long as my work isn’t affected, I could care less about what people say about me.”

“Will you even be able to carry out your work?” Ilyshn’ish asked, “Nar Ki’ra may have heard of ocelo Pa’chan, but they certainly haven’t heard of you. Even with this equipment, they may treat you as a messenger rather than a representative.”

“Believe it or not,” Chimali answered, “that is the least of my concerns. You see, I’ve long learned how to deal with warrior types, and it seems that warrior clans are much the same. They are good at a handful of things and not much else. Trying to portray myself as a representative when I’m a Merchant would be too confusing for them. It’s possible that they would even take offence at the notion that a non-warrior is trying to speak for a warrior clan.”

Ilyshn’ish tried to imagine how Lady Zahradnik might react in the face of Chimali’s assessment, but it was a futile exercise. She had never seen anyone say something like that to her before.

“You seem to have put some thought into your strategy for nar Ki’ra,” Ilyshn’ish said. “How will ensure that il-Enxoc’s plans for Rol’en’gorek don’t go awry?”

“By keeping things simple,” Chimali replied. “Instead of trying to assert myself as something they’ll refuse to see me as, I will take advantage of the way that they frame things. Chimali will become the Merchant running the route between Ghrkhor’storof’hekheralhr and Ki’ra. This crew answers to me and so any questions or requests must come to me also. Nar Ki’ra, of course, will only discuss matters that they deem me qualified for, which is exactly what I want. For all other matters, I am merely a messenger at best who will deliver their words to il-Enxoc.”

“So you mean to employ strategic incompetence.”

“There was a word for it? I wasn’t aware. It felt like the correct course of action. Fighting the preconceptions of people who are accustomed to being in charge and whose entire purpose in life is to fight seems like a waste of time and energy to me. Better to be a face that represents a certain aspect of nar Ki’ra’s dealings with ocelo Pa’chan. That way, I retain the clout of a warrior clan where I require it while staying out of trouble in everything else.”

“And you learned this while growing up in Ghrkhor’storof’hekheralhr?”

Chimali shrugged.

“Where better to learn than the centre of it all? To be fair, everyone is like what I described to some extent, but the clans are especially prickly about it. City folk like myself and il-Enxoc at least know how and when to be flexible. My objectives in Ki’ra aren’t overly ambitious. First, I need to



solidify nar Ki'ra's positive opinion of ocelo Pa'chan. Second, they need to remember who I am. I'll work my way up from there in future dealings. This fight against the Jorgulans will be a long one, after all."

Two barges heading in the opposite direction passed them before their ship entered the huge lake that seemed determined to swallow Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr. In the weeks that had passed since Xoc started unifying the city, the water level had risen by another half-metre, putting tens of thousands of square kilometres of shoreline underwater. The flooding was slowing down, at least, if only because there was so much more space for the incoming water to fill.

Ilyshn'ish looked up at the sliver of the moon hanging amidst a pristine field of stars. According to everyone they had spoken to, Rol'en'gorek had two seasons – wet and dry – and they were already well into the dry season. The skies that stayed clear for weeks at a time supported that notion, yet the flooding continued unabated.

"Has your trade network brought you any information related to this flooding?" She asked.

"Aside from the fact that it continues to get worse, no," Chimali answered. "Master Leeds says that our reach is expanding at a rapid pace by normal standards, but that still only means we're now covering a one-hundred-kilometre radius around Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr. Whatever it is that's causing the flooding is still so far away that information still hasn't trickled down from wherever it's happening."

*What are the chances that it has to do with the Jorgulan invasion?*

It was a question that had already been asked several times since they received news of the escalating conflict in the east. Everyone asserted that it was impossible, however, as the Jorgulans had never shown any such capability in all of the generations of their long war with Rol'en'gorek. Surely, they reasoned, such power would have been brought to bear long ago if it existed.

Ilyshn'ish couldn't say whether their reasoning held or not, but the weather she noticed far to the east suggested that they were wrong about the Jorgulans not being able to flood the basin. The entire area reeked of Green Dragons, however, so she didn't dare get close enough to investigate the cause.

"What will you do if you discover if it's something that you don't have the power to stop?" Ilyshn'ish asked.

"...do you think that the flooding will continue forever?" Chimali asked back, "Will nothing remain of Rol'en'gorek but a giant lake?"

"I somehow doubt that, but it still leaves your people in dire straits."

If the flooding got so bad that it raised water levels throughout the region, someone very powerful would undoubtedly show up to find out what was going on. The Sorcerous Kingdom, for instance, wouldn't be very happy if half of its land was flooded. Rol'en'gorek's problem would be solved without the Beastmen ever understanding what had happened in that case.

A piece of flotsam bounced off of the barge's hull with a hollow *thunk*. Their ship slowed slightly as it entered the currents of the Oriculon, its captain cautiously examining the way ahead. Islands of debris formed out of the settlements that had been swept away by the river, turning their journey into a giant obstacle course.

"How many days will this add to our journey?" Ilyshn'ish asked.

"It hasn't been a problem for our routes so far," the captain answered, "but I've seen some blind fools crash into half a house before. We're loaded to the waterline, so some extra eyes calling out potential hazards would be appreciated."

Dawn came without incident and they were making their way past Atazli by mid-afternoon. The view from the river wasn't as informative as her flights overhead, yet Chimali gazed upon the waterfront with a crestfallen look.

"I knew it was like this from the reports," he said, "but seeing the damage in person is something else entirely. It's like a reverse mudslide."

The description made a strange sort of sense. Though nothing had been swept uphill – it was just that everyone had been slowly displaced – the way that the countless hovels of the lower city's citizens retreated before the advancing floodwaters made it seem that way.

"Just looking at it makes you feel so powerless, doesn't it?" Chimali said, "It's no wonder all of our guests acted so desperately without trying to save face."

"Atazli is much smaller than Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr," Ilyshn'ish said. "I wonder why it looks so much worse."

"It's the land that the city was built on," the Merchant beside Chimali said. "Atazli was my route early on in the flooding. The whole place was built on a single mountain with low-lying jungle fanning out to the riverbank. Nine out of ten people here lived in that jungle; now they're all crammed onto that mountain's slopes."

"From what I've seen," Ilyshn'ish said, "most of the urban centres in Rol'en'gorek are similarly structured. Clans build their holds at strategically significant high points along the river, then people populate the cities and towns below them. Does that mean this will be a common sight?"

“Some places are less vulnerable to the flooding than others, but, yes, some variant of what you see before you will be commonplace along the major rivers. Any settlements that you see are actually the fortunate ones: countless towns and villages along the river have already been completely submerged.”

“Where did the people from those settlements go?”

“I can’t say for certain,” the Merchant replied. “Anyplace that offered them shelter, presumably.”

She doubted that there would be many places that did. Rol’en’gorek wasn’t a political monolith. In the face of what they considered a natural disaster, every clan prioritised its own. The way that things were playing out, very few, if any, would have the resources to support refugees.

*I suppose that it’s all a part of Rol’en’gorek’s story. We’re merely present to bear witness to it.*

Would there be an audience for such a tale? Most Humanoids probably wouldn’t care unless she reframed Rol’en’gorek as a Humanoid nation. Even then, the audience probably wouldn’t be appreciative unless there was an antagonist to defeat. Would the Jorgulans be enough? Or the Green Dragons? Maybe both would work.

With four shifts of Lup working the paddlewheels, they passed two more cities by the end of the next day. Upon confirming their populations, a thought occurred to Ilyshn’ish.

“The Con tend to live at higher elevations, don’t they?”

“Yeah,” Chimali said. “What about it?”

“Doesn’t that mean they’re relatively unscathed by this whole affair?” Ilyshn’ish asked, “The Urmah in the south, as well.”

“That should be the case,” Chimali said. “And it’s a good thing, too. The Jorgulans aren’t the only neighbours we have to worry about. The tribes of the Worldspine are arguably worse. If they somehow unified, they would be the far greater threat.”

“The southern frontier isn’t as bad,” the Merchant beside him added, “but there are still tribes to defend against out there. Any disruptions to trade with the Lut would be disastrous for us.”

“Is it really alright to be in such a precarious position?” Ilyshn’ish said as she scanned the eastern skyline.

“It’s not as if we chose this,” Chimali said defensively. “This is the best we could manage until recently. Under il-Enxoc’s leadership, we’re bound for greater things!”

“Assuming you survive this.”

“Yes, of course, but—wait, what are you doing?”

On the bench behind her, Pebble and Pinecone had pulled their slings out of their packs. Ilyshn’ish looked over her shoulder.

“Captain?” She called out, “Are we still looking out for potential hazards?”

“Aye, miss. What do you have for us?”

“One Green Dragon,” Ilyshn’ish gestured to a speck that the captain probably couldn’t see. “She’ll be on top of us in two minutes.”