

“Ngalngaw.”

“Ngalngaw.”

“Tsinau.”

“Tsinau.”

“Dhol.”

“Dhol.”

“Ngalngaw. Tsinau. Dhol. Who strongest?”

Brother Jhola chuckled gently, gesturing to the three main pillars of the temple. Each represented one of the Yeti gods and each bore engravings of their respective iconographies.

“Our gods are equally powerful,” he told her. “Ngalngaw is the heart of stone. Tsinau is the shield of ice. Dhol is the sentinel wind. Together, they are the gods who rule over the mountains – the gods that preside over every aspect of our people’s lives.”

They *were* in a temple, so she should have expected her ‘education’ to start with something like this. When she was investigating the Baharuth Empire, it was much the same. She had entered temples on several occasions and the staff would always happily welcome her before asserting that their gods were her gods. The lore behind those gods felt fairly slipshod, however. Lady Zahradnik said it was the result of them breaking off from the Faith of the Six and replacing everything that they didn’t like about it with ‘feelgood nonsense’.

“Ngalngaw. Tsinau. Dhol. Winter Moon see?”

“But of course!” Jhola answered, “In Rygal, their majesty may be seen by all; their might, felt by all.”

*Well, that’s different.*

Priests she had spoken with in the past usually answered that question by claiming their gods ruled from some divine realm and that their agents in the mortal realm spoke with their authority or some such. She had never seen a god before, so she made a mental note to take a look at some point.

“Other gods? God of beast. God of fire?”

Jhola’s expression turned dark at her query.

“Fire is the great enemy,” he told her. “Any being who claims kinship to fire can be no god of ours. Every flame must be stamped out immediately upon notice. You must keep the great enemy from your words and thoughts, lest it consume you where you stand.”

“Scary!” Ilyshn’ish cried, “This country, no fi—?”

“Indeed, any trace of the great enemy is prohibited in this realm. Outsiders often think to bring the great enemy to bear against us, but all who attempt to do so are extinguished without mercy.”

“Ice good? Elemental? Dragon?”

“Elementals are Elementals and act as Elementals will. As for Ice Dragons...have you seen these creatures?”

“Legend,” Ilyshn’ish put some conviction into her response.

“I’m sure that the people in the capital would appreciate what you can share, even if they are just legends. The existence of challengers to our domain cannot be tolerated.”

*What an unpleasant fellow. Speaking of unpleasant fellows...*

“Challenger bad,” Ilyshn’ish nodded to herself. “Frost Giant bad?”

“I’ve never heard of them before,” the Yeti Priest said, “what are they like?”

“Frost Giant scary. Big weapon. Big angry. Big warband come raid big raid.”

“...they’re coming in force?”

“Wind say yes. Frost Giant tribes escape. Warpath now.”

At her every word, Jhola’s expression turned increasingly grave.

“What of their weaknesses?” He asked, “Even the mightiest Magical Beast may be felled by unrelenting exposure to the frozen winds.”

“Frost Giant is Frost Giant,” Ilyshn’ish answered. “Cold no hurt. Snow; fog no blind.”

“You make it sound as if the effort of our Stormcasters won’t deter them.”

“Stormcaster...? What that?”

The Yeti Priest looked up at three elemental gods, who frowned down at them sternly.

“They are the Adepts of Tsinau and Dhol,” he said as he made a ritual gesture. “It is our Stormcasters who bring the blessing of the mountain to the frontier. This is troublesome information. It must be by the grace of the gods that you have come to us, Winter Moon. Your knowledge of the lands beyond our borders will undoubtedly prove critical to the future of the Yeti nation.”

Ilyshn’ish silently followed the Yeti Priest around as he resumed lecturing her on the religion of the Solidarity. As far as she could tell, it was a faith that had its roots in the druidic traditions of tribal mysticism. The Solidarity was a stronghold of three elements, which were represented by a triumvirate of elemental gods. With the rise of the Yeti nation, an organised religion has formed around them – one which curiously eschewed conventional druidic notions of elemental balance.

As Jhola went on about the mandate of the gods for the Solidarity, Ilyshn’ish nudged him in a direction that was more relevant to her interests.

“My home, change?” She asked.

“Of course,” Jhola answered. “All must change, for the mountain must reign over all. By the will of the gods, the great enemy will be extinguished from the world so that way may enter a blessed age of eternal ice.”

“Sound good. When do?”

“I am far from worthy to decipher the designs of deities,” the Yeti Priest replied. “Practically speaking, the Solidarity is first focusing on transforming its mountain frontiers before exerting its influence upon less desirable areas.”

“East Yeti not like West Yeti. How so different?”

Johla chuckled in amusement.

“You are not the first to bring this up,” he said. “Nor will you be the last, I suspect. A very long time ago, the Yeti tribe that would give rise to the Solidarity was not so different from the ones you might find around here. We were content to live our lives in harmony with our little part of the world, but all that changed when the great enemy sent his followers against us.”

“Fi—great enemy attack?”

“A nation of fire,” Jhola intoned. “Of ash and smoke and molten metal. They came with their burning legions, stripping the mountains bare and levelling mighty peaks in their desire to consume all. None could stand against them. Our people could only flee deeper into the ranges of the Worldspine, facing all manner of mortal peril. It was there that we found the gods, and it was there that the Solidarity was born.”

“Fire nation, what happen?”

“We drove them out. Many generations after our homes were stolen, we returned to destroy the invaders. We stamped out their fires and buried their screaming hordes in ice. The few who survived fled back to the pits of accursed glass that they spawned from.”

“Scary,” Ilyshn’ish said. “Enemy, what tribe? Ogre? Beastman?”

“There were many different races,” Jhola told her. “But all bore the marks of their fiery masters. They hated us just as surely as fire hates ice, burning young and old alike. The world beyond the mountain is a terrible place, Winter Moon. Our Great Solidarity exists so that the atrocities of the past may never again be visited upon our people.”

As far as national narratives went, it was more compelling than most. Most places she had visited had systems that hinged on belief in divine or tribal precedents. Without an external threat that faced the whole, gazes turned inward and competition for limited resources became rampant.

*Come to think of it, this Solidarity sort of sounds like the Slane Theocracy.*

“Gods bless Yeti?” Ilyshn’ish asked, “Have strong children? Champion?”

“The Solidarity has many Champions,” Jhola answered. “With looks like yours, I’m sure you’ll attract their attention. Indeed, I expect that you’ll give birth to many strong offspring.”

*That’s not what I was asking...*

Ilyshn’ish concealed her disappointment at the Priest’s unsatisfactory answer. With his claim that their gods existed amongst them, she was hoping to find out if the Solidarity possessed any strong individuals that might qualify as godkin, demigods, or something similar.

After being subjected to over an hour of Jhola’s religious instruction, Yoten reappeared to check up on her. He had disappeared to attend to some business, but she suspected that he had simply fled the temple to avoid Jhola’s dogmatic lectures. Ilyshn’ish brightened upon his entrance and greeted him with an innocent smile.

“Yoten. Business...good?”

“Nothing is amiss on my end, my dear,” Yoten replied. “How is your lesson with Brother Jhola going?”

“Many new things,” Ilyshn’ish replied. “Ngalngaw. Tsinau. Dhol. Great enemy.”

“If I didn’t know any better,” Yoten peered at the Priest, “I’d think you’re trying to steal her for the Temples.”

“That isn’t a bad idea now that you mention it,” Jhola said. “You were right about her being more than she seems. Her linguistic background is primitive, but she can understand my words well enough. It’s to the point where she can ask questions as I speak on different topics.”

“Me like learn,” Ilyshn’ish said. “Like travel. See new things.”

Jhola released a wistful sigh.

“If only you had been born in the Solidarity,” he said. “You would have undoubtedly received the finest education from childhood and become one of the great Sages of our time.”

“Cannot now?”

“Don’t let this mangy old ape discourage you,” Yoten said. “You’re still young; your beauty and intelligence will take you far.”

“...did you just call me a mangy old ape?” Jhola narrowed his eyes.

“You’re not?” Yoten replied.

The two Yeti glared at one another before their threatening expressions broke and they shared a friendly laugh. Jhola turned to regard Ilyshn’ish.

“Forgive me, Winter Moon,” the Priest said, “I spoke in haste. Yoten is likely correct. If you apply yourself well, you may yet earn a place of honour among our people.”

“Speaking of ‘places of honour’,” Yoten said, “you didn’t tell me that Warlord Khrol was on his way.”

“I wasn’t aware that he was,” Jhola replied. “It’s not as if he answers to me. The only time I learn about his comings and goings is when the Stormcaster team comes in from an assignment. Anytime else, he’s out doing whatever Warlords do.”

“This isn’t good,” the overseer said. “Winter Moon and I need to get out of here before Khrol and his officers catch a whiff of her.”

“Of course,” Jhola nodded. “You should be safe when you reach the temple in Khala if he tries to give you trouble outside of his jurisdiction. May Dhol grant you swiftness.”

Yoten took her by the hand and they swiftly waddled out of the temple. Along the streets of packed snow, it looked like the camp’s denizens were readying storefronts and stalls – all made out of ice – for business. Their lively activities stood in stark contrast to the overseer, whose shoulders were hunched in worry.

“Cover yourself with your mantle,” Yoten said. “We don’t want any of Khrol’s people noticing you.”

“Khrol bad?” Ilyshn’ish asked.

“That depends on whom you ask,” the overseer answered. “Anyone who earns the position of Warlord isn’t incompetent, but power’s everything to his type. Out here on the frontier, that can lead to some...*overreach*.”

“Yoten protect Winter Moon?”

“Of course, my dear. We just need to get to the sledge and be on our way and Khrol will be none the wiser.”

They squeezed their way between the rows of ice huts, tracing a zigzagging course out of the camp. Ultimately, however, the overseer’s efforts to elude detection proved futile. Upon entering the lot where their sledge was parked, they found a contingent of Yeti surrounding it. A pair patrolling the perimeter spotted them lurking in the shadow of a nearby building.

“You there,” one of them called out, “what are you skulking around for?”

Yoten stepped out in front of Ilyshn’ish.

“Skulking?” He said in incensed tones, “That’s *my* sledge you people are crowding around! Who gave you permission to unload my cargo?”

“Warlord Khrol. This way.”

“W-Wait! I didn’t—”

At a gesture from the patrol, two Yeti from the contingent came and took Yoten by the arms. They dragged him off toward the sledge amidst his protests, bringing him before an especially large Yeti frowning down at a tablet made of ice. The big Yeti didn’t look up from his reading, but no one dared to interrupt him.

“Overseer Yoten,” he said after a minute. “I noticed you came in with a shipment, so I decided to save you some time by having the troops offload everything.”

“I appreciate your consideration, Warlord,” Yoten bobbed his head in reply, “but my cargo is meant for Khala. We were just about to depart.”

“Khala?” The Warlord finally looked up from his tablet, “That’s highly irregular. Why would unprocessed salvage be delivered directly to Khala? Highly inefficient, don’t you agree?”

“I’m simply following my instructions,” Yoten said. “It’s not my place to question company orders.”

“Ah, but it *is* mine,” Khrol said as he gestured to his nearby troops. “Double check the cargo. We wouldn’t want anything strange making its way into the city.”

Yoten opened his mouth as if to protest, but then settled into a resigned silence. His reaction reminded Ilyshn’ish a bit of Zu Chiru, whose wagons were often subjected to ‘routine’ inspections by customs officers in the Baharuth Empire to make sure the diminutive Demihuman Merchant wasn’t transporting anything ‘weird’ into their cities. Based on Yoten’s feelings about the Warlord, however, Ilyshn’ish suspected that things wouldn’t go very smoothly here.

“Let’s take a look at this order of yours,” Khrol held out his hand.

“They were verbal instructions,” Yoten replied. “Nothing out of the ordinary, I assure you. The company simply wishes to ensure that our teams are efficiently processing salvage...and aren’t stealing anything. To that end, they wanted a shipment of unprocessed goods.”

The Warlord’s gaze went from Yoten to Ilyshn’ish.

“Can you confirm your employer’s claim?” He asked, then frowned, “Actually, aren’t you a bit too well-dressed for a labourer? Remove your hood.”

“She is my guest,” Yoten said as he shifted closer to Ilyshn’ish. “How much longer will you be delaying us?”

“If we requisition the cargo you’re supposedly delivering,” Khrol replied, “then you won’t have a shipment *to* delay. Why are you in such a hurry to leave?”

“Even if I have no cargo, I still have a report to make to my superiors. My company won’t be pleased by your actions.”

“Then it’s a good thing that I don’t answer to your company. Need I remind you who issues your licence to operate on the frontier?”

Yoten once again fell into a sullen silence. The Warlord addressed Ilyshn’ish again.

“And you, are you deaf? I ordered you to remove your hood!”

Ilyshn’ish hesitantly pulled back her hood. A low murmur rose from the crowd of soldiers.



“My, my,” Warlord Khrol waddled forward, examining Ilyshn’ish up and down, “what do we have here? I smelled a female, but this ‘guest’ of yours is clearly above your station, Yoten.”

“You misunderstood my meaning, Warlord,” Yoten said. “I am merely delivering her as tribute to the capital.”

“Tribute?” Khrol barked out a laugh, “Those corpulent councillors in the capital don’t *deserve* anything so fine! It is *we* who are carving out new frontiers for the Solidarity. The conquerors should be first to the spoils!”

“*Conquerers?*” Yoten spat, “Ever since you were bloodied by those Beastmen last year, you’ve been letting the Stormcasters do all of the work for you. Some ‘Warlord’ you are.”

Khrol’s backhand sent the three-metre-tall overseer spinning through the air to crash headfirst into the ice. Ilyshn’ish let out a terrified shriek and fled.

“Seize her!” The Warlord shouted.

Bowling an entire contingent of Yeti over would probably invite unwelcome suspicion. She waddled into the wall of soldiers behind her and made a show of struggling as they brought her back before the Warlord.

“No!” She cried, “Yoten! *Yoten!!!* Bad Yeti kill Yoten! Me go home!”

“A local...?” Khrol murmured, “Well, no matter. Forget about that sleazy overseer: you’re my guest now.”

“No! No want! Bad Yeti bad! *Bad!!!*”

“What in the name of the gods is going on here?!”

Brother Jhola’s voice thundered through the air. The soldiers cleared a path as the Yeti Priest walked through the crowd with a half dozen other Yeti in temple garb. An annoyed expression flashed across the Warlord’s face before he performed one of the respectful gestures Ilyshn’ish had been shown early in Jhola’s instruction.

“The Stormcasters mentioned that you were requisitioning supplies from company inventories, Warlord Khrol,” Brother Jhola said. “But this shipment is hardly fit for consumption. Why did you not present your needs to the magistrate? It isn’t as if we’re short on food.”

“I was on my way to do just that, Brother Jhola,” the Warlord replied. “But then I noticed how irregular this sledge’s cargo was. Overseer Yoten obstructed us in our duties with some highly suspicious behaviour.”

As the Warlord spoke, one of the Stormcasters went over to tend to Yoten. Barely a moment passed until he looked over at Jhola and shook his head.

“He’s dead,” he said.

“I regret that it has come to this,” Khrol said, “but I acted within the scope of my duties. I’ll put in a request with his company for a replacement when I have the time.”

Jhola didn’t say anything in response, but it was clear he didn’t approve of the Warlord’s conduct. With what Khrol has just done to the Yoten, however, Ilyshn’ish figured it was prudent for lesser beings to keep their opinions to themselves before the towering Yeti.

She felt a touch against her palm as the Priest reached out to take her hand. Khrol didn’t miss the movement.

“What are you doing?” He demanded.

“Winter Moon is clearly distraught,” Jhola replied. “I’m bringing her back to the temple.”

“We’ve finished resupplying,” one of the Stormcasters added. “It’s time we move on to the next ritual site.”

“But my troops haven’t had a chance to resupply yet,” Khrol said.

“Then I suggest that they hurry,” the Stormcaster told him. “Once the company warehouses catch wind of what happened with the overseer, I doubt they’ll be very generous with your provisions.”

The soldiers started to disperse, leaving the Warlord with little choice but to give way to the Stormcaster’s initiative. Ilyshn’ish pondered what she had learned from the interaction.

There were likely a few core similarities between Yeti society and that of other tribal groups. Like many tribes, their warrior class deferred to the priesthood while having de facto power over everyone else. Apparently, even murder was allowed so long as a nominally acceptable justification was provided.

She hadn't been familiarised with the laws of the Solidarity, so she couldn't tell how far the Warlord was stretching with his authority. As it was the frontier, however, the power of the military likely far eclipsed that of any other institution. Though many countries claimed to be 'civilised', the wilderness was always a place where might made right and 'civilisation' existed according to the whims of the strong.

Jhola stopped just inside the entrance of the temple, where he placed his hands on Ilyshn'ish's shoulders.

"I'm sorry you had to experience all that, Winter Moon," Jhola said. "Please believe me when I say that things usually aren't like this in the Solidarity. Khrol's made a name for himself with how quickly he's risen in his career, but the same qualities that drove that rise come with a number of problems."

"Bad Yeti, no kill?"

"No kill...? Ah, if you're asking if he'll be punished for his actions, it's vexing to admit that it isn't likely. Talent and success turn the eyes of the people from any number of indiscretions. So far from the capital, it isn't likely that the Warlord will become an inconvenience to his backers."

*Well, that's as common a story as there ever was.*

Such stories usually had those sorts of characters meet with violent ends. Given the apparent scope of his responsibilities, Ilyshn'ish was almost certain that it would also be the case with Khrol.

"Winter Moon sad," she sniffled. "Go home."

"Are you certain?" Jhola asked, "As we mentioned before, someone like you would surely be welcomed in lofty circles. Or you could study in the Temples since you love to learn."

"Go home."

With that, she turned and shuffled away. The shuffle turned into a waddle, and the waddle took her out of the town and behind the debris of a nearby rockfall. She carefully scanned her surroundings before becoming her regular self and taking wing.

*Now, where have those Stormcasters gone...*

Ilyshn'ish located her targets as she made a pass high above the work camp. It looked like they were still waiting for their escort to resupply. She winged over the nearby ranges as she awaited their departure, familiarising herself with the landscape. The entire area was icebound and the roads leading further into the mountains followed a winding course near the peaks to avoid crevasses and other glacial hazards. Traffic was sparse, but consistent, with sledges bringing goods from hundreds of valleys leading up from the lowlands. Now that she understood what she was looking at, she realised that the Yeti were extracting resources not just from the southern slopes of the Worldspine, but in every direction that they considered their frontier.

By the time the Warlord looked about ready to set off, Ilyshn'ish had also located the Krkonoše. The three had taken refuge behind a small peak near the camp, out of sight of those below. She alighted before them to offer an update.

"Me back," she said. "Go now."

Vltava peered up at her with a disgusted look.

"Have you somehow become even stupider, you stupid lizard?"

"Ahem. I have returned. Is everyone fit to travel?"

"You've identified our quarry?" Pinecone asked.

"Indeed," Ilyshn'ish answered. "There is a group amongst the Yeti clergy referred to as 'Stormcasters'. They use ritual magic at certain sites to deploy some form of weather control magic."

"How many of these Stormcasters are there?"

"I only saw a handful. The Priest I spoke with made it sound as if there was only a single team of them operating in the region."

"And you mentioned that they were members of the Yeti clergy."

"That's right."

The Krkonoše shared a knowing look between themselves.

“This explains much,” Pebble flicked an ear. “Rather than a corrupted Druid, we are dealing with an urban priesthood. They are bound to the values of their society rather than to the balance of nature.”

“It may not be as straightforward as that,” Ilyshn’ish said. “They claim to worship three elemental gods. One of earth, one of ice, and one of wind. While this pantheon of theirs is somewhat bland for an alpine civilisation, they also claim that these gods exist among them. In a literal sense.”

“What have you learned about these elemental gods?”

“Not much of use. A disruptive event in the distant past drove the Yeti deep into the Worldspine, which was where they first encountered their gods. Their religion labels ‘fire’ as the great enemy and they seek to extinguish it from the world. Oh, and these gods supposedly reside in their far-off capital.”

“Strange,” Pinecone said. “A being of pure elemental energy with the intelligence and will to communicate with others is exceedingly rare. The formation of a triumvirate should be next to impossible. A sign of the times, perhaps?”

“Even so,” Pebble said, “we can only play our part.”

Ilyshn’ish looked back and forth between the Krkonoše.

“I don’t like where this is going,” she said.

“What is, is.”

Pebble and Pinecone put their things away while Vltava scaled the nearby rocks to look over the valley. The work camp was situated across the icefield from them, roughly five kilometres distant. From what she could see, the Stormcaster party was only beginning to make their way down the ice road that the overseer’s sledge had arrived on.

“Wherever they’re going,” Ilyshn’ish said, “it’s going to take them a while to waddle there. Should we just speak with them on the road?”

“They were just pummelling Ghroklor’s forces the other day with a blizzard,” Pinecone said from below. “Their destination probably isn’t very far.”

“I suppose that makes sense...”

Over the remainder of the evening, they travelled parallel to the Stormcasters as they descended one of the glaciers flowing from the icefield. Eventually, their quarry scaled a steep gully which led to a rocky ridge leading to a peak overlooking the forested highlands to the south. The people of Rol'en'gorek truly had no chance of knowing they were being targeted from such a distance.

“What now?” Ilyshn'ish asked.

“Most of the soldiers look like they've been stationed to guard the land approach,” Pinecone said.

“Flying threats are scarce around here,” Ilyshn'ish said. “Never mind a Roc, I haven't seen a single Giant Eagle. The people I spoke with aren't familiar with Frost Dragons, either.”

“They're probably in a similar situation as Rol'en'gorek,” Pinecone mused. “To protect their livestock, they've eliminated or driven away most of the native predators, including competing races.”

“Does that mean it's safe or unsafe to approach them from above?” Ilyshn'ish asked.

“How would we know that? You're the one observing their behaviour up close.”

As far as she could tell, the Yeti weren't at all wary of aerial threats. Generally speaking, surface dwellers didn't even look up unless they felt actively under threat from the skies like the Beastmen fighting along the Jorgulan frontier.

“It's probably safe enough,” Ilyshn'ish said. “There's a belligerent fellow named Khrol commanding the Yeti soldiers blocking the path, so avoiding his contingent would be prudent if we're to discuss anything.”

“Then our path is decided,” Pinecone said.

*Our path and theirs...*

Given the broad attitudes of the Yeti Solidarity's members, Ilyshn'ish had little doubt that they weren't going to be happy about what the Krkonoše had to say. Hopefully, there would be something left to recover from them afterwards.