

“...they left,” Xoc said.

“They did,” Winter Moon agreed.

As the last of the Council’s ships disappeared over the horizon, Xoc felt a lifetime’s worth of tension suddenly ebb away. Her legs gave out and she fell back onto a nearby tree root, content to lie limply looking up at the jungle canopy.

After speaking with Vogroth nar Ki’ra, the Nar and his retinue turned back to the crowd to resume their recruitment. Xoc could almost feel the frustration rising from the warriors as they assessed the combat prowess of the city’s hopefuls. She wouldn’t have been surprised if someone claimed that half of Ghrkhor’s storof’hekheralhr had shown up, but the biggest surprise was that the Council’s representatives didn’t approach her party at all.

By the time they were done, about twenty thousand of the largest, healthiest citizens boarded the ships and departed on their journey upriver. Once the disappointed remainder started to dissipate, Xoc headed straight back to her clanhold to discuss what they had seen and heard.

“That messenger said ‘no exceptions’,” Xoc said, “so I thought they would try to grab some of us for sure.”

“It’s good to know people,” Master Leeds said. “That being said, there were probably other reasons for it.”

“Like what?”

“Well, you mentioned that they weren’t happy about the quality of the people trying to join,” the Guildmaster said. “They might have come in like a guy looking to buy pieces of art, but they left like a guy who bought a load of grain.”

“I’m sorry, I don’t understand what that means.”

“It means that they figured that the quality of available soldiers in the city wasn’t going to get much better than what they saw,” Master Leeds said. “Since your clan is so new it isn’t even a clan yet, they must’ve figured it’d be more of the same.”

“Vogroth nar Ki’ra may have been doing us a favour, as well,” Xoc’s father said. “Rather than disrupt our work, he’s hoping that allowing us to grow as a warrior clan will net him allies in the future.”

From the top of the wide stairs to her court, Xoc looked out over the activity of her reborn clan. Both Master Leeds and her father voiced valid points.

“So they expect us to provide better warriors than what the city normally would in the future,” Xoc said. “I guess that makes sense as an idea, but aren’t we being invaded right *now*?”

“He said that we’re being invaded,” her father said. “Did he say that our armies are lost?”

“No...”

“Then the warrior clans will continue to fight. *Everyone* will fight. Rol’en’gorek is our one and only home. It may take generations for the Commonwealth to make it to Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr, assuming that we don’t turn things around before then.”

“So he’s buying us time under that reasoning,” Xoc murmured. “They’re sending the citizens to war, too...”

Xoc snapped her mouth, leaving the last, miserable, thought unspoken. There wasn’t any reason why the Council wouldn’t be aware of the impending famine. Every person that they sent to fight not only helped slow down the Jorgulan advance, but eventually became one less mouth to feed. In a morbid way, the invasion was a fortuitous event.

“How should we proceed, Enxoc?” Elder Patli asked.

“We already figured out what we’re doing, right?” Xoc replied, “Oh, I thought of a few more things. First, we should include the tribes on the city’s northern borders in this fodder exchange.”

The aforementioned tribes were situated on the banks of the Rol’en’gorek, so they were undoubtedly being affected by the flooding.

“That makes sense,” Master Leeds nodded. “We won’t have to secure additional ships for that, either. Speaking of which, are we clear to secure more vessels for the river trade?”

“What about that idea we discussed the other day?” Itzal asked.

“Idea...? Ah, you’re right. We should just do that instead. It’s a long-term project, though.”

“What are you talking about?” Xoc asked.

“We were bouncing around the idea of building a shipyard on our lake,” Master Leeds said. “The flooding basin’s probably destroyed most of the shipyards in Rol’en’gorek, so a good paddle boat is going to be harder and harder to come across. Don’t even get me started on big maintenance jobs. Our dam will protect us from the flooding, but getting ships out of the new shipyard would involve building a lock.”

“What’s that?”

“Er...basically, it’s a spot on the river where we can control the water level to allow ships to pass sections of a river with big differences in elevation. It’s like filling or emptying a container depending on how high you want the water level inside to be, then you open up the side you want to come out of when you reach the same water level.”

“Heh...” Xoc gazed at the Guildmaster in wonderment, “You know so many things.”

“I’m a Master of the Merchant Guild. Good infrastructure is essential for strong trade. Of course, I don’t know how to build what we’re talking about, but our tradesmen will.”

Everything that he spoke of may as well have been magic to her. As long as it worked, however, she didn’t really care.

“What else did you wish to add, Enxoc?” Elder Patli asked.

“Um...this is sort of related to the first thing,” Xoc said, “but we should reach out to our neighbours. So many people being taken away by the clans helps a little, but so long as the flooding continues, so will the problems that it brings.”

“What would be the goal of this outreach?” Her father asked.

“Stability,” Xoc said. “Instead of trying to guard against our neighbours from every direction, we should become friends with them.”

Eventually, she wanted to involve the entire city, but she wanted to know if her ideas would work first.

“Buffer territories, huh...” Master Leeds nodded slowly, “A prudent move.”

“What’s a buffer territory?” Xoc asked.

“Putting other people between yourself and potential threats,” Winter Moon supplied.

“Eh?” Xoc blinked, “Th-That’s not what I meant! Well, it might become that way if something bad happens, but I just want to keep everyone from suffering! Really, I do!”

Winter Moon answered her protests with silence. Xoc tearfully looked at her until Master Leeds cleared his throat.

“How things are arranged is up to you,” he said. “Usually, there is some degree of mutual benefit to such an arrangement. For instance, many tribes in Rol’en’gorek rely on the local warrior clan for security and offer some form of tribute in exchange – usually food. Since it’s a familiar concept in your culture, you could start from there and adjust things to your liking.”

“I see,” Xoc said. “It doesn’t sound so bad when you put it that way, but we don’t have any warriors to send right now.”

“That may be the traditional approach,” the Guildmaster said, “but we’re not bound to it. What’s important for now is that we establish ties with the neighbours and we’re doing that with trade. The rest can come when trouble does.”

“I’d rather it didn’t,” Xoc said. “Trouble, I mean.”

The Guildmaster showed his teeth.

“No one wants trouble to come knocking, of course. From what I’ve seen of Rol’en’gorek on the way here, however, the warrior clans still provide security in peacetime. Rather than you imposing yourself on them, they may demand your protection instead.”

“That’s *just* as bad,” Xoc said. “I just told you we don’t have warriors to spare.”

A chuckle rippled around her court. She didn’t think it was very funny. They weren’t in any position to be relied upon, but not being able to help made her feel terrible nonetheless.

Once her court convened, it took a day for her people to prepare for their visit to the northern tribes. Jute sacks filled with Blood Antlers were loaded onto a litter along with a variety of other goods that the Merchants decided would capture the interest of their prospective trading partners.

“Are you ready for this, Chimali?” Xoc asked.

“Doesn’t matter if I’m ready or not, yeah?” Chimali replied, “Just gotta do it. It’ll be just like my work before.”

“Make sure you keep this work honest,” Xoc told him. “Our clan’s reputation is at stake.”

In addition to being her ‘promoter’ at the fighting pits, Chimali had done countless jobs on the side. It was probably better to say that being her promoter was just one of those side jobs. She had heard all sorts of things about his other work from gossip and rumours, but Chimali only shared stories that he thought sounded impressive.

When the Humans arrived in the clanhold and set themselves up, Chimali had unsurprisingly taken an interest in working for the Merchant Guild. Xoc wasn’t sure whether he should be considered a Merchant ‘Apprentice’ or some sort of agent for the Guild itself.

Either way, the Merchant Guild employed both, managing them from the safety of their ships as they went from port to port. There wasn’t a ship to hide in this time, however, so they simply dispatched them from the clanhold.

“I get it,” Chimali’s tail waved back and forth in an expression of anticipation. “We’re doing big things now. Say, do you think we can take over the city like you said?”

“Well, it’s not like anyone’s there to stop us,” Xoc said. “We just have to make sure we do things right so trouble doesn’t come around to catch our tails.”

“What about those packs that I mentioned?” Winter Moon said from the trail behind them, “Won’t they become tribes and clans, too?”

“I don’t know about that,” Xoc said. “Even if they did, we could still become friends. If everyone’s on the same side, that means the city belongs to us, right?”

“You and I have very different takes on ‘taking over’,” Winter Moon said. “And I wonder if ‘becoming friends’ will be as simple as you imply.”

“Why wouldn’t it?” Xoc looked over her shoulder at Winter Moon, “Everyone in the city coexisted before.”

“I suppose we’re about to find out,” Winter Moon said.

Xoc's whiskers picked up a low growl coming from ahead of them. She turned her attention forward, finding five Nar standing at the crest of the low ridge that marked the city limits.

"Stop right there!" A female at their lead roared, "No one enters nar Tamal's territory uninvited!"

Xoc's party stopped. She poked Chimali.

"What?" He jumped.

"Time to go," she said.

"Me? But..."

"There are only twelve Nar," Winter Moon said. "You can take them!"

*Twelve?*

Winter Moon was a mighty hunter, so she must have detected more Nar lying in ambush.

A huge paw shoved Chimali forward, sending him stumbling in front of the Nar. They seemed none too pleased about Winter Moon's proclamation. Chimali seemed to be trying to divide his attention between all of them, his ears flattened against his head as his tail curled timidly between his legs.

"G-Good afternoon," he said. "With your permission, we would like to enter nar Tamal territory."

The lead Nar's lips pulled back in a snarl. She stalked forward to tower over Chimali in a threatening display.

"Are you deaf? We aren't allowing any damn vagrants from the city onto our land!"

"Vagrants?" Chimali's tail uncurled and curled upwards curiously, "You seem to be mistaken. I am Chimali, a Merchant from ocelo Pa'chan."

"Never heard of them."

Despite the Nar's display of disinterest, the heavy air grew lighter. Chimali put on a hurt expression.

"You've shared a border with us all this time," he said mournfully. "How could you say such a thing? Our most benevolent lord, Enxoc ocelo Pa'chan sent us to trade equipment and fodder out of a concern for your well-being."

Xoc cringed at Chimali's performance. He always played her up when negotiating with the fighting pit managers, but being promoted as a lord felt ten times worse.

The Nar standing in front of Chimali turned a confused look behind her. Her companions seemed similarly befuddled.

"Wait," one of the Nar standing on the ridge said. "You mentioned fodder. I've never heard of a Merchant trading fodder before."

"Ah," Chimali's ears came back up his tail lifted into the air, "would you like to take a look? Ocelo Pa'chan has recently learned how to cultivate a new type of fodder for our Nug herds. It's been so successful that we have a surplus! One that we are willing to trade with our good neighbours in these troubled times."

*Even when he tells the truth, he sounds dishonest.*

"Fine. Let's take a look at this new fodder."

Maybe that was just her opinion. That, or the Nar were too desperate to care.

Chimali called for a bag of Blood Antlers to be brought forward. Xoc looked on nervously as the Nar inspected their produce.

"They're red," one of the Nar said. "Are you sure this stuff isn't dangerous?"

"Well, it's true that we Beastmen can't eat it," Chimali replied, "but our Nug love the stuff. We've been feeding it to them for months now and their meat tastes no different than before...or maybe it's better?"

"They've been feeding on it for much longer," Elder Patli came forward.

"And you are...?"

“Patli, a mystic and an elder of ocelo Pa’chan. I’ve been personally overseeing the cultivation of Blood Antlers as an alternative food source for our herds.”

The word of an elder carried far more weight than that of a Merchant, and the border sentries – they were actually a bunch of ranchers tending to a herd nearby – bid them to follow. It was apparent even to Xoc how overgrazing had affected the undergrowth. Everywhere she looked, the terrain was devoid of its usual ferns, vines, and bushes.

“This is terrible,” Elder Patli said.

“We’ve been trying to spread things out,” one of the ranchers said, “but the Nug only lost weight as a result. Our elders have all agreed that we should cull the herds before our losses get even worse.”

Xoc felt a pang of sympathy. Nug ranching was a process where one led the animals through a cycle between seasonal feeding grounds, allowing them to gradually mature and put on weight – in other words, food for the tribes and the people of the cities. Letting the animals lose weight at any point meant losing all of the progress that they had made and similarly lowering the quantity of food that could be gained per animal. The only way to get it back was to spend months grazing the animals until they regained it.

“If you don’t mind,” one of the ranchers asked, “we’d like to put your fodder to the test.”

“Of course,” Chimali said. “Be our guest.”

They gave the ranchers a bag of Blood Antlers and watched as they took it over to a brook where a group of Nug were trying to get a bit of moss off of the damp rocks. The ranchers spread the fungi along the riverbank and waited to see what would happen. It wasn’t long until the nearest Magical Beast noticed the bright red morsels and signalled its findings to the rest of the herd. Nothing was left after a few minutes.

“It looks like they know what it is,” one of the ranchers said.

“They do,” Elder Patli said. “We just haven’t noticed them eating it until recently. Blood Antlers are native to this area and the Nug eat it as soon as they find some.”

“How much fodder do you have? We’re going to need a lot of it so long as this flooding continues.”

“That’s something we should speak with your elders about,” Chimali said. “Enxoc has much to discuss with them besides.”



“Will your lord be coming personally?”

“She’s already here,” Chimali gestured to Xoc.

“Hi,” Xoc said.

She shifted slightly as the group of Nar scrutinised her. In the end, none of them voiced whatever it was that they thought. One of the ranchers handed his pack to another.

“I am Gaara,” he said. “The main village is a day’s walk from here.”

Her party picked up their cargo litters and followed Gaara north along the stream. They occasionally came across other groups of ranchers with their modest herds and none of them seemed to be in a much better situation than the others.

“Everyone is on edge,” Xoc noted. “Is it only because of the lack of grazing, or has something else happened?”

“Half of our land is underwater,” Gaara replied. “The remaining villages are filled to bursting. To make it worse, people from the city have been trespassing on our lands.”

“Not our people, I hope,” Xoc said.

“If your people are well-fed, then I doubt it. We’ve been supplying the city with meat for as long as anyone can remember. Unfortunately, it appears that this fact has turned our herds into a target for hungry cityfolk. This has happened on occasion in the past, but it is becoming more frequent as the days pass.”

*We’re not ready for this.*

The scope of the city’s problems threatened to overwhelm her once again. It felt like her clan was too far behind to address them and the situation only got further ahead of them as time passed.

“Just to be clear,” Chimali said, “Nar Tamal isn’t under any of the warrior clans, right?”

“Our tribe has always been affiliated with the city,” Gaara told them, “and the city is not ruled by any one clan. Or any clans, for that matter. Tell me, how is it that you have formed one? Is it because of the troubling times that we find ourselves in?”

“Believe it or not,” Elder Patli said, “Enxoc seems to have always had the makings of a lord. Long after Pa’chan was absorbed by Ghrkhor’sstorof’hekheralhr and the Ocelo of our tribe transformed into its citizens, Enxoc came into the world and did what she could to improve our lot. We have naturally come to look to her for leadership, and I suspect it would have happened even if these ‘troubling times’ hadn’t come.”

Xoc wished they would stop talking about her like that. There was already enough to deal with without adding their expectations on top of everything.

Before noon the next day, they arrived at the main village of nar Tamal. It had a ramshackle appearance, making it look like a dense collection of hastily constructed hovels.

“Did something happen to the village?” Xoc asked, “I don’t see anything that looks permanent.”

“What was the main village is now underwater,” Gaara said. “It used to be our port on the river. With the floodwaters still rising, we’ve had to move once every few days.”

“Ah…”

She should have realised that. Every tribe would have their main settlement on a major river for trade if it was possible. Normally, most of the food shipments from nar Tamal would come by ship, not by land.

Gaara brought them straight to the village’s central fire before going to retrieve the village elders. Among them was a chief who was probably twice Xoc’s age. He didn’t have the look of a warrior, but, as a Nar, he was still pretty huge. The elders arranged themselves in a line behind their chief as he stepped up to speak.

“Welcome, Enxoc,” he said. “I am Agrar, chieftain of nar Tamal. Gaara claims that you have an important proposal for us.”

*Eh? Wasn’t Chimali supposed to do the talking?*

It made sense that she would have to, given how things had played out, but she wasn’t sure what she should say.

“Yes, that’s right,” Xoc replied. “We have some extra fodder to sell, plus a few other things.”

“Gaara said as much,” Agrar said. “Our mystics would inspect this fodder before we proceed with any negotiations.”

*Wait a minute, these guys have experience exporting Nug. Doesn't that mean I'm at a disadvantage here?*

Xoc sent a pointed look at Chimali. He misinterpreted her intent, however, and called for a bag of Blood Antlers to be brought forward.

“This is Chimali,” Xoc still tried to make the best of it. “He’s supposed to represent ocelo Pa’chan in these trade negotiations...”

The chief and his elders were more interested in the Blood Antlers than Chimali. When they returned to speak, they addressed Xoc despite her attempts to direct them to Chimali.

“Our mystics say that your fodder is safe for our herds,” Chief Agrar said. “How much do you have and what do you want for it?”

“What we had in mind is more complicated than a simple trade,” Xoc said.

“Explain.”

Xoc took a deep breath, taking a moment to gather her thoughts.

“This flooding is creating long-term issues,” Xoc said. “Ones that cannot simply be fixed by trading for some fodder. Across Rol’en’gorek, the tribes are culling their herds so that at least a few of their animals may survive.”

“We were going to do that ourselves,” Chief Agrar said. “The lands are being stripped bare to no good end.”

“Which will cause a food shortage. One that will last for years to come even if the flooding recedes in a month.”

“That much, we understand,” the Nar Chief grated. “We did not arrive at the decision easily. Do your words mean that you do not have enough fodder to save our herds from being culled?”

“What I meant is that I intend to save as many people as I can,” Xoc replied. “To do that, we must do things that have never before been done in Rol’en’gorek.”

“I’m listening...”

“First of all,” Xoc said, “it’s only fair that we cover what part nar Tamal will play in all of this and how it will secure the well-being of its people. For now, we must relieve the strain on your land by not only exporting food to your tribe, but also importing Nug from it. Once the trade route between nar Tamal and ocelo Pa’chan is established and made reliable, we can export enough food for nar Tamal to breed its Nug population back to its former numbers.”

“Breed them back?” Chief Agrar said, “I thought we would be taking back the animals that were transferred to your lands.”

“Um, no. We bought them, after all. According to Elder Patli here, our methods of Blood Antler cultivation will allow ten times the number of Nug to be fed on the same amount of land.”

Behind the chief, the tribal elders exchanged looks and low discussion broke out among the bystanders listening to their meeting.

“...and you want us to do that?” The chief asked, “Raise ten times the number of Nug as before?”

“No,” Xoc answered. “Elder Patli says that would be bad for the land. Maybe twice the number is fine.”

“You should also know that providing fodder will alter the growth of your herds,” Elder Patli added. “Since they won’t need to move from pasture to pasture, the energy saved will go towards growth. Adult Nug in ocelo Pa’chan give half again as much meat as they did when we practised the traditional ways of ranching.”

“You’re not giving us much room to argue here,” Chief Agrar crossed his arms. “What’s the catch?”

“I’m not sure that there is one,” Xoc replied. “Like I said, I want to save as many people from this coming famine as I can. If you want to know what you need to do, the first is that you should move your main village to a place near the border with ocelo Pa’chan so we can trade with you more easily. It will also make it easier for you to distribute the fodder to your ranchers and keep your people safe from the floodwaters. The second thing I need you to do is export your excess meat to the city as you always have.”

“It still sounds like this arrangement is nothing but advantages for us.”

“Well, the flooding is affecting everyone, so instead of hungry city dwellers, you may get attacked by hungry tribes and clans instead. If you give us a bit of time, we can help with that as well.”

Chief Agrar turned to discuss her proposal with his elders. It didn't take them long to render a response.

“Very well,” the Chief said. “It seems that you intended to renew the ancient accord, and so shall it be.”

“The ancient accord?” Xoc furrowed her brow, “What's that?”

The chief seemed amused at her question.

“Didn't you know? Long before Ghrkhor'storof'hekheralhr grew to its current size, nar Tamal was a tributary of ocelo Pa'chan. We're stuck between you and the river, after all.”

“Oh,” Xoc said. “I guess that makes sense.”