

“Is it just me,” Xoc said, “or is our western border a lot further than it used to be?”

Not a few months ago, Xoc would have only considered the area around the hill where the Cuorocos Cliffs were as her home. If she was asked about her ancestral lands, they would also include the area around the lake formed by the old dam. Their ship has brought them far upriver of the lake, however, nearly to the shadows of the clanhold three kilometres southwest of hers.

“The people descended from our clan have spread out quite a bit over the generations,” Elder Patli said.

“Beyond the lake, the borders are fuzzy since the population is a mix of different races.”

“And we still claimed it as our territory? How do the other races feel about that?”

“We didn’t officially claim anything,” Patli replied, “but when the troubles began, people started aligning themselves with us, hoping for protection.”

“It shouldn’t be a surprise,” Chimali said. “The city folk have always been quick to seize on opportunities. All we must do is ensure that ocelo Pa’chan offers more attractive opportunities than anyone else.”

His statement was as concerning as it was comforting. Xoc felt good about how far her clan had come in such a short time, but it didn't have much to offer relative to the hundreds of thousands of Beastmen in and around the city. If their markets ever ran low on provisions to sell, the citizens wouldn't think twice about turning elsewhere for their needs. They were quick to seize on opportunities, which also meant that they were quick to abandon former opportunities if it suited them.

“Winter Moon.”

“Yes?”

“You mentioned new packs forming in the city and taking over some places,” Xoc asked. “How large were they?”

“It's hard to say,” Winter Moon answered. “There wasn't any way to differentiate who was a part of the local hierarchy and who just happened to be living in the area.”

“I bet at least a few of them are slumlords,” Chimali said.

“Slumlords?” Winter Moon looked down at him, “I've never heard of those before. Is it a type of Beastman Lord?”

“You could say that,” Xoc said. “They’re gang leaders who lorded over the slums.”

“And now they’ve occupied the dwellings of the wealthy,” Winter Moon said. “That’s quite the jump.”

“I doubt they’ve become anything like the wealthy,” Xoc said. “This might be bad.”

“I say it’s a good thing,” Chimali said. “Better to deal with the workings of the city that we grew up in. If the gangs have taken over, then there is at least a structure that we know well.”

She still didn’t like it. The slumlords were something like a pale imitation of the warrior clans. They carved territories out of the poorest parts of the city and primarily used force to demand payment for security. The issue was that said security wasn’t necessary if the gangs didn’t exist, so they were basically parasites that created problems to profit off of.

When they finally made landfall, they found a group of locals awaiting them. Xoc waded ashore, shaking the water from her legs as she wondered what they were doing there.

“You are Enxoc?” An Ocelo in the group asked.

“Yes, that’s right,” Xoc replied.

A ripple of bobbing heads came in response.

“A Lup runner came to us last night,” the Ocelo said. “He said that you required the land that our homes are on and that you would give us new, better homes in your clanhold in exchange.”

Xoc examined the surroundings. From what she could see, the dwellings in the area were characteristic of most of the city. The majority were lean-tos fashioned out of branches and careworn Nug hides. Three-sided tents were a step up from those, and the most desirable spots were nestled between tree roots large enough to form walls and sometimes even roofs.

“In addition to that,” Xoc said, “you’ll have access to our inner markets and have the protection of our warriors. There’s also plenty of work to be had...is that alright?”

The group immediately knelt before her.

“It is! Please give us time to gather our families and belongings. It won’t take long!”

“Um...sure? We have to unload the ship anyway.”

Xoc remained silent as the group dispersed. Chimali signalled to the ship’s occupants to bring its cargo ashore.

Was her offer really so attractive that everyone immediately agreed to it? Not that she didn’t think life in the clanhold had gotten much better in recent times, but almost everything that she had mentioned was something that came with living there anyway.

“Chimali, can you figure out what’s going on in the area? I don’t want any nastiness to surprise us.”

“Of course, Enxoc. I’ll see if I can sniff out some old acquaintances.”

“Enxoc.”

Xoc turned to find the construction crew’s foreman standing behind her. She gestured for Chimali to begin his investigation before looking at the Ocelo foreman expectantly.

“How should we set up the market?” He asked.

“Didn’t Master Leeds tell you what needed to be done?”

“He listed some requirements,” the foreman replied. “We need space for the pier, a clear, stable route for cargo to the pier, and a good location for the market. He also said to ask you about defences and the like.”

“Defences...”

She examined the ancient trees standing all around them. Like most of the city, the canopy was a good fifty metres above. The shadowed undergrowth had been long trampled flat by the residents, affording a good view of the surroundings so long as a trunk wasn’t standing in the way.

“Ocelo-style construction would be best, I think,” Xoc said. “We need to make efficient use of the space that we have. Also, we have a good riverfront for growing jute, so make sure nothing’s built there if you can help it.”

“How many levels?”

“Just one, for now. As for security, we can have reinforced walkways above the market area that can double as sentry posts.”

“What about the boundaries of the market?”

“Can we build a wall like Master Leeds suggested?” Xoc asked.

“We have more stone than we know what to do with back at the clanhold,” the foreman answered. “It’ll be easy to ship upriver.”

“Great,” Xoc said. “We’ll run a walkway above the perimeter of the post and build the wall a few metres inside of it. That should make it next to impossible for anyone to climb over without being noticed so long as the sentries aren’t sleeping at their posts.”

“Understood, Enxoc,” the foreman bowed slightly. “Building what you ask for may take a while, but the finished product will surely be something to see.”

*Maybe I asked for too much.*

She thought she had asked for something simple, but it sounded like the foreman had something grand in mind.

They went to a clearing on the way to the riverbank, where a makeshift workshop was already being set up. He gathered the workers to issue instructions, which primarily revolved around building a new pier. Most of its construction materials were included in the first shipment, so all they had to do was assemble the thing.

“Enxoc.”

“Yes?”

This time, an Apprentice Merchant came before her. She had a feeling that people would come to talk to her whenever she didn't appear to be preoccupied.

“Have you seen Chimali? It looks like he's disappeared somewhere.”

“Oh, I sent him to contact a few acquaintances in the area. Is there something I can help you with?”

“He was supposed to be organising us, but...how should we arrange the market?”

“Just use the main path for now,” Xoc said. “There's going to be a lot of construction, so you're going to have to move your stands around as it happens.”

“I hear you, Enxoc.”

Xoc escaped to the riverbank before someone else could pounce on her. There, many of the locals-turned-migrants gaped at the wealth of construction materials, provisions, and furniture parts being offloaded as they waited to travel to the clanhold.

“Enxoc.”

*Argh...*

This time, it was the mate of one of the workers. Her mottled cub stood timidly behind her, clutching at his mother's spotted tail with a paw.

“Yes, what is it?”

“Where should we pitch our tents? We don't want to get in the way of anything...”

“Let's see...set them up at the top of the riverbank for now. We're building a residential level in the trees above the market, so you shouldn't be there for long.”

“Thank goodness. I already miss our old place.”

The cub looked up at Xoc with his big blue eyes as his mother led him away.

*Hehe, so cute...*

“Enxoc.”

“What?!” Xoc roared.

Chimali stepped back as she rounded on him, as did the Urmah at his side.

“She looks taller than when I last saw her,” the Urmah said.

*“Hgrost?”*

“The one and only,” the Urmah’s mangy mane shook as he chuckled. “You’re much feistier outside of the fighting pits.”

“Sorry,” Xoc said. “I’m endlessly answering questions these days.”

“I see the rumours about you becoming a lord weren’t mistaken.”

“...what are they saying about me?”

“Just that, really. Oh, and there’s a strange one about you training monkeys to do work. A waste of good food, I think.”

“Hgrost says that you aren’t the only one raising a clan,” Chimali said. “Xigaoli has taken over the clanhold on the hill near here.”

“Xigaoli, huh...did he move his whole gang up there?”

Chimali exchanged a look with Hgrost. The Urmah shook his mane.

“What’s wrong?” Xoc asked.

“Oh, you know how it is,” Chimali’s eyes narrowed in amusement.

“How do you not have money on you?” Xoc said, “I’m pretty sure I gave you some on the way here.”

“Coin’s no good,” Hgrost told her. “The price of food goes up every day.”

Xoc looked around for a Merchant, then she remembered that Chimali was supposed to be one.

“Food it is, then,” Xoc said. “I hope the information’s worth it.”

Chimali fetched a bag of preserved meat from the ship. Hgrost received a metre-long strip of smoked Nug and sniffed at it experimentally. He let out a satisfied snort, then held up two claws.

“Xigaoli’s moved his whole gang and more,” the Urmah said after he received two more strips. “He went with all the toughs he could pick up coming out of the slums.”

“How do they feed themselves?”

“It’s the usual arrangement.”

“Then doesn’t that mean he’s still just running a gang and not a clan?”

Hgrost shrugged.

“It’s all the same to us. Tribute for ‘protection’, yeah?”

Xoc bristled at the flippant comparison.

“It’s not the same,” she told him, “I’m leading a *real* clan, not a swarm of parasites.”

Chimali held up his paws in a calming gesture.

“Everyone will see this in time,” he said. “How aggressive has Xigaoli’s gang been? Has he attacked the ranchers in the city?”

“All of the ranchers in the city around his new clanhold have come under his rule,” Hgrost replied. “They say he went around with his best people and most of the ranchers submitted ‘willingly’.”

“What sort of arrangement does he have with them?” Xoc asked, “Is it like what he forced on people in the slums?”

“Hmm, the answer is complicated...”

Another strip of smoked meat went into the Urmah’s paw.

“They’re doing things in a roundabout way,” Hgrost said. “In the slums, people scratched up what they could by working, scavenging, or raising small animals. The ranchers, they’re different. Their work is, hmm, dependent on the herds? Xigaoli’s thugs can’t come

around once a week to demand some arbitrary payment. If they do, it threatens the food supply. For now, they're having the ranchers sell to them exclusively. They use the money extorted from the citizens under them to pay for meat to feed their muscle, then sell the rest. It's just like a warrior clan, no?"

"The warrior clans defend people from *real* threats."

"Ah, but the hungry and desperate *are* a real threat. Especially in times like these. To that point, hmm..."

Hgrost held out his paw again. Chimali scoffed.

"You'll find this useful, I swear!" The Urmah said.

Xoc nodded. Another strip of meat was placed in Hgrost's paw.

"Xigaoli's gang is being...how should I say, *proactive* about the threats that face them. They are driving anyone that they deem useless out of their new territory. Some say that they have even started expanding, displacing the citizens to create more grazing areas for their ranchers."

“That’s terrible!” Xoc cried, “The flooding is already driving so many out of their homes, now this?”

“They have the strength to do so,” Hgrost shrugged, “and no one can stop them. For now. You and they are not the only new clans on the rise. Word has it that this is happening in the abandoned clanholds across the city.”

Her shoulders slumped. Hgrost’s words were in line with what Winter Moon had observed on her way back through the city from the south. Would Ghrkhor’s storof’hekheralhr become a city ruled by gangs?

“How far has Xigaoli expanded?” Chimali held out another strip of meat.

“Up to the river.”

“This one?”

“This one. I don’t know whether they plan on coming across, but this side of the river is filled with people who were driven out of their homes by Xigaoli’s gang. You have either good or bad timing and, personally, I’m leaning toward bad.

Xoc considered her strategic situation. Did they have a fight on their hands? The gangs were highly intolerant to perceived challenges against their influence. On the other hand, the river was a convenient border, allowing them to more easily keep all of the ‘useless people’ they had driven out on the other side.

“What are we going to do, Enxoc?” Chimali said, “Will you summon the warbands to put down Xigaoli?”

Her gaze flickered to Hgroth, who was watching them intently.

*Chimali doesn't trust him. No, it's not a matter of trust...*

The Urmah wasn't a member of ocelo Pa'chan, so she would be hard-pressed to claim that anything he did counted as a betrayal. Chimali had found Hgroth fairly quickly, so it was likely that he had noticed their arrival and was snooping around for information to sell any interested parties, including Xigaoli.

“There's no need for that so long as they don't make any threatening moves,” Xoc said. “As much as I hate to admit it, Xigaoli has stabilised his side of the river and that's what we wanted in the first place. We need to focus

on what we have going on our side – it sounds like chaos is about to break out at any point.”

“But what can we do about that?”

“Once we finish getting the northern tribes under us,” Xoc replied, “we should be able to manage with their herds.”

At some point in their conversation, the foreman reappeared. When Xoc went to speak to him, Hgroth slunk away.

*That meat he made off with wasn't even worth a single copper coin...*

“Who was that?” The foreman asked.

“An old acquaintance,” Xoc answered. “It sounds like we have a lot of work ahead of us. The population on this side of the river is much higher than it's supposed to be. We need to get our trading outposts up as quickly as possible – both the markets and the fortifications.”

The foreman scratched his ear and let out a sigh.

“I thought we’d be able to put what we’ve learned so far to the test by making something nice,” he said. “Guess not. Why are there more people here than expected?”

“The land on the other side of the river’s been taken over by a gang,” Xoc replied. “They’ve pushed everyone that they don’t want to this side.”

“What the...how are they getting away with that?”

“Because even if they’re just a gang,” Xoc said, “they’re organised. Everyone else is hungry, confused, and frightened about the future.”

“...are we going to let them get away with that?”

“Of course not,” Xoc growled. “But our priority is saving lives and most of the ones we can reach right now are on our side of the river. If we can stabilise things here, we’ll have all the people we need and the gangs will have no chance against us when we come after them.”

Xigaoli might have stabilised his ‘territory’ by driving the people out, but they now faced the same problem as ocelo Pa’chan: a hungry city on their borders. They were probably hoping that anarchy and starvation would take

care of the problem for them, but Xoc was determined to prevent that from happening.

“That’s a lot of mouths to feed,” Chimali noted.

“I know,” Xoc said, “but we have to try. It may not be as bad as it seems: once we get the tribes bordering the city working with us, we might be able to scrape by if we carefully ration provisions.”

“The gangs will try to get in our way if they see us succeeding.”

“If they see us succeeding,” Xoc replied, “it will already be too late.”

They returned to the riverbank to discuss their findings with Elder Patli, but they found him already engaged in a discussion in the central ring of their temporary camp. Patli rose to his feet when he noticed her approaching, bobbing his head respectfully as he greeted her.

“Enxoc,” he said, “we’ve gathered what mystics we could find in the area. Everyone, this is Enxoc ocelo Pa’chan.”

There were far too many mystics to introduce personally, so they settled with a collective greeting.

“It looks like the rumours are true,” Xoc said. “Did these mystics come with their communities?”

“They did,” Patli said sadly. “I could scarcely believe their accounts. Many were offered positions in service to this Xigaoli fellow, but they of course declined in favour of taking care of their people.”

“You all did the right thing,” Xoc lowered her head in deference to their wisdom, “thank you. What did I walk in on?”

“We’ve covered several topics,” Patli replied. “Of course, our plans to address the needs of their communities were discussed first. They believe that everyone will cooperate if we show that we can deliver provisions.”

“How many people are there north of the river now?” Xoc asked.

“Estimates range from forty to sixty thousand,” Patli answered.

“...how are they getting food right now?”

A queasy feeling formed in the pit of her stomach at the silence that followed her question.

Ghrkhor's storof'hekheralhr received its food from four different sources. The herds in the city and fish in the lakes and rivers were the most immediate sources, followed by food shipments coming into the city from the surrounding tribes. It was the river trade, however, that made up most of the city's supply.

"Some of us are asking the nearby tribes for help," one of the mystics spoke up. "Families have started to vanish into the jungle and I can't blame them."

"We're skirting the main issue here," Patli said. "Xigaoli's gang has taken control of the food supply and they're trying to sell it to the people for unreasonable prices."

"Selling food?" Xoc wrinkled her nose, "They're not keeping it for themselves? I thought that was the whole point in them driving everyone out."

"Regular shipments are still coming in via the river trade. I'm not sure whether they did this on purpose or not, but a gang and their associates can't eat a city's worth of food. They're selling the excess for as much as they can get."

“Urgh! How scummy can they be? Are they *trying* to make everyone hate them?”

With that selfish move, Xigaoli had his proverbial fangs clamped on the backs of their necks. As promising as the new Blood Antler farms were, it would take time to transition from their reliance on distant imports. She and everyone else involved assumed that the floods would gradually reduce the volume of goods that were shipped to the city, but now it looked like they could be cut off all at once if they crossed Xigaoli.

“I don’t think they care about who hates them so long as they are in control,” the mystic said. “Does that mean we won’t be able to rely on ocelo Pa’chan?”

“We want to help,” Xoc said, “but securing a food supply for so many people takes time. I hate seeing Xigaoli and his ilk extorting the people, but I don’t want to see anyone starve, either.”

“Hold on,” Chimali said. “I have an idea.”

“What is it?” Xoc asked.

Chimali grabbed her by the elbow and dragged her away. He only stopped after they left the camp a few dozen metres behind them.

“Don’t tell me you’re not going to trust those mystics, either,” Xoc said.

“It’s not that I don’t,” Chimali said, “but you know how it is. People talk and it looks like Patli’s trying to get those mystics to organise the people. It’s a good idea, but you never know who will say and hear what and we *definitely* don’t want the gangs to find out about this before we can act. We need to go back to the clanhold – I have to ask Master Leeds about this.”

Their ship was already half-boarded with migrants, so it wouldn’t be long until they could leave. The vessel rocked strangely for no apparent reason after Xoc and Chimali took their seats. She twisted around to look at the empty bench behind her.

“Winter Moon, is that you?”

“Yes.”

The huge figure of Winter Moon materialised out of thin air the moment she spoke. Panic erupted at her sudden appearance and a dozen passengers jumped overboard.

“Do you *have* to do that?” Xoc asked.

“People act out of the ordinary when they know I’m around,” Winter Moon answered. “In my experience, going around unnoticed is the best way to observe a place and its people.”

“Yeah, but if you do it in a place filled with felid Beastmen, you get what just happened.”

“Well, it wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t replied. Maybe I won’t anymore.”

*I’m going to turn into a nervous wreck wondering whether she’s around or not.*

“Where’s Vltava?” Chimali asked.

“I left him back there with the other Druids,” Winter Moon answered, “they had things to talk about.”

“Is that safe? There are a lot of hungry people out there.”

“I’m reasonably certain that he’ll be fine.”

The ship recovered its passengers and drifted from the shore to paddle its way downriver. Xoc kept her eyes on the river’s southern banks, wondering if they were being watched by Xigaoli’s goons.

“What do you think of everything you heard back there?” She asked Winter Moon.

“Nothing consequential,” Winter Moon replied. “Perhaps it will make for a good story.”

“Is that all you Bards think about? I’d be a bit more concerned since you’re stuck in the middle of this ‘story’.”

“It wouldn’t be much of a story if I got involved in your struggles. You’d get relegated to being a side character.”

With the way things were going, she wouldn’t mind that. Whenever it was all over, she promised herself that she would sleep for a month.

When they arrived back at the clanhold, Master Leeds was conveniently at the landing, planning out the new dockyard with a group of Human artisans and their

Apprentices. They bowed in greeting as Xoc waded ashore.

“Welcome back, Enxoc,” the Guildmaster said. “How are things out there?”

“This is going to be harder than we thought,” Xoc replied. “A slumlord and his gang moved into the clanhold southwest of the trading post. They chased most of the citizens across the river and now we have sixty thousand mouths to feed.”

“And I may have a solution for that,” Chimali chimed in. “Master Leeds, when is the next ship coming in?”

“The last pair came in a couple of hours ago,” the Guildmaster replied. “They should be finished unloading soon.”

“Great! I’d like to borrow one of the ships and her crew.”

“The crews are resting. They haven’t been home for a week.”

“It won’t be far,” Chimali said. “Just to the northern part of the lake.”

The Guildmaster furrowed his brow.

“Do you know what this is all about, Xoc?”

“No,” Xoc said. “But Chimali said it might solve the food situation upriver.”

“I am certain that it will,” Chimali said. “All we need is a ship, its crew, and some rope. Oh, and it wouldn’t hurt to bring along some strong fellows, as well.”