

Chapter 3 Realm of the dinosaurs

Through the forest the two trek, the green raptor in front pushing aside low growing undergrowth and the pale traveller in blue and gold walking calmly behind. They travelled over a wide river across some large stones, which Shern'aath explained that his people long ago laid to cross the deep waters, and up a tall hill covered in shrubs. From the hill, they could see a wide valley with two rivers flowing through its valley. In the middle, on of a small mound of red earth was a huddle of small round tents covered in markings, surrounded by a fence made of branches. Even from this distance they could see tiny figures moving amongst the tents.

“That’s it, my home. I told you it wasn’t much.” Shern'aath grunts.

“I think it is beautiful,” replies Altallo “And you all live inside those things?” he points to the tents.

“Yes, where else would we live? We need to keep out the wind and the predators,” Replies the raptor “It won’t take us long to get there. Just keep quiet though.”

The two make their way down the hill, following a pathway of earth that twisted around trees and boulders, worn down with age and the footsteps of many raptors. They cross a narrow part of the river which had sandy banks, Shern'aath wondered whether he would have to carry Altallo, but to his surprise, the little creature wades casually through the water with apparent ease and joy, beaming at the raptor when he climbs out of the river, legs dripping wet.

Soon they reach the borders of the settlement. From the cover of a huge mass of ferns they can see other raptors behind the wall and a few outside it on the banks of the river, with nets and spears. Two raptors would stretch a net out across the river and leave it for a few minutes before reeling it in and taking it to the shore, emptying their catch onto the shore, where they then put it into wicker. The spear carriers waded out into the shallower areas behind the nets, stabbing at passing fish and hanging them on nearby racks on the shore. Closer up the raptors looked different, each one being unique. There were some with stripes across their bodies and some without, a few with feathered crests on their heads and tails and others smooth like Shern'aath. Their body colours ranged from sandy yellows, greens and browns. Each had a red and blue symbol like Shern'aath, some on their snouts, across their chests, around their necks or down their backs and tails.

“Right,” says Shern'aath peering around “We’re going to have to be quick about this so no-one sees you. We’ll wait until there are fewer raptors around.”

An hour passes by until the raptors by the river gathered up their baskets and carried them towards the settlement, chatting and laughing, until their voices grow quieter.

“Now’s our chance, come on!” whispers Shern'aath, grabbing Altallo’s arm and leading him to the main entrance, pressing himself and Altallo against the wooden wall. They both peek around the wall. Inside the raptors that had been by the river were gathered around a large fire with other raptors. The fishers looked rather young, around Shern'aath’s age, with smooth scales and bolder colours. The other raptors looked older and a few were taller than the younger ones and a few were smaller with more faded scales. Around the legs of these adults were small juvenile raptors, running around and chasing each other.

The whole tribe were preparing fish over the fire, spearing them on sticks and rotating them over the flames until they were warm and brown, before being passed out to each raptor. The raptors were talking merrily amongst each other. The young ones played around and joked with one another with, the elders talking deeply with each other.

Wordlessly, Shern'aath beckons Altallo and they slowly slip around the gate and quickly dive behind one of the circular tents.

Shern'aath takes a quick look back at the raptors.
"Ok we're all clear" he says "It isn't far to my tent, just keep low."

The tents were arranged into neat lines and curves around near the walls, all entrances facing the fire. Each was unique in its own way just like the raptors, with paint and patterns across the material. They soon come across a tent with wavy blue lines and a green band on the roof.

"That's yours?" asks Altallo, bending down and peering into it.

"Yes. It's not much, but its home." Shern'aath replies vaguely, looking around at the nearby tents. To his horror, he sees a female raptor, in similar clothes to Shern'aath emerge from a tent from the row in front of them. She turns and sees Shern'aath, not noticing Altallo. She grins at Shern'aath and waves. Shern'aath hitches a smile on his face and gives a small wave back. The female raptor starts making her way over to Shern'aath, who starts panicking, his claws on his feet tapping the ground.

"Oh no she's coming here! What am I going to do?! What to do what do?" he mumbles, his eyes laying to rest on Altallo. "Get in there!" he whispers suddenly pushing Altallo, who tumbles into the tent, looking thoroughly confused. Shern'aath quickly covers up the tent flap as the female raptor approaches. She has dark brown scales with tawny feathers on head and a blue and red ring painted around her neck.

"Hello Shern'aath!" she says.

"Oh er Ta'arahis!" replies Shern'aath, gently kicking back Altallo who had popped his head out of the tent to see what is happening. "Hello! How are you?"

"I've been taking care Na'alia's hatchlings, they've grown so much," says Ta'arahis grinning "Have you had any luck on your hunting trips?"

"Um, no I didn't." replies Shern'aath, his composure slumping a little. Ta'arahis makes a sympathetic sound.

"Your father won't be happy, you haven't caught something for days—hey what was that!" she suddenly says, trying to look past Shern'aath, who stepped in front of her, blocking her view. Ta'arahis gives a sly toothy grin.

"Shern'aath, are you hiding something from me?" she asks in a sweet, cooing voice, leaning up at Shern'aath.

"H-hiding something? No no! What makes you think that?" the male raptor replies, with a huge smile, but shuffling slightly.

Ta'arahis puts her hands on her hips, giving Shern'aath a cold look.

"I know when you are lying, you stutter a lot and shuffle."

"Wait no I—" began Shern'aath, but he was cut off by a scream from Ta'arahis

"THERE'S SOMETHING MOVING IN THERE! I SAW IT!" she screamed, pointing a clawed finger into the tent.

As if on cue, raptors came running up, looking scared and confused.

“What is it Ta’arahis?” asked another female raptor, with dark green scales and blue feathers, placing a hand on Ta’arahis’ shoulder comfortingly.

“It-it was a...a creature moving about in Shern’aath’s tent!” she mumbles.

All eyes locked onto Shern’aath who stood there petrified. A big sand coloured raptor with the red and blue lines of the tribe across his torso and orange feathers on his head and neck moves forward, looking down at Shern’aath with steely grey eyes, who backs away slightly, looking scared “Alright Shern’aath,” he said in a deep, yet surprisingly soft voice “Let me see what you have inside your home.”

“B-but I...alright.” replies the smaller green raptor, defeated.

He steps aside, and slowly opens the tent flaps, closing his eyes as he does so, waiting. He hears the big raptor stooping down and walking into the tent. After a few minutes the raptor comes out again. Shern’aath hears gasps of shock and awe and he opens one eye slowly, expecting to see Altallo being carried or dragged out. Instead the big raptor was carrying a sphere in one of his hands. Shern’aath’s eyes snap open and he stares at the object. It was a beautiful thing, its smooth dark blue surface covered with hundreds of constantly moving small white dots, symbols and lines.

“Where did you find this?” the big raptor asks to Shern’aath.

“I-in the forest.” Mumbles Shern’aath.

“I see,” replies the raptor “I’ll take this away and speak with the shaman about it. Do not fear Shern’aath” he says kindly and then speaks louder to the rest of the raptors “My kin, there is nothing to fear. Go back to your homes.”

The crowd disperses, chatting amongst each other. The big raptor pats Shern’aath on the head and walks off. Shern’aath lets out a sigh of relief, but the quickly perks up again, remembering Altallo he enters into his tent.

Inside was a spacious area in the middle with a large colourful mat on the floor for sleeping. Around the sides are pots and containers and a few spears bundled together. Shern’aath hears a soft movement and Altallo emerges from near a pile of pots, with a reed mat over his head.

“Are they gone?” he asks, removing the mat.

“Yes, but what in the world was that ball thing?” asks Shern’aath, helping Altallo up.

“It’s a star catalogue. It maps the movements of stars, planets, moons and comets in the local solar system.” explains Altallo, brushing bits of reeds from his robes.

Shern’aath looks nonplussed and scratches his head.

“I’d like it back sometime,” continued Altallo, wandering around the tent and looking at the spears and other objects. “I’ve been building and recording it for a long time and I wouldn’t want to lose it. Who was that big raptor and the Shaman he mentioned?”

Shern’aath blinks and then shakes his head, trying to wake himself from his stupor.

“Er, the big raptor is a calmkeeper. He and a few others stop arguments and help out during hunting,” he explains, rubbing a leg with one of his feet “The shaman is the oldest and wisest of the raptors. He has seen much, but now his legs are frail, his eyes are tired and grey and his teeth are

worn. He lives in a cave far away from the noise and distractions.”

He places a clawed hand to his head.

“Sorry I’m feeling tired, I’m going to sleep.”

And with that the raptor plumps himself onto the carpet, curls up and falls asleep...or at least he appeared to be. Altallo looks puzzled at the raptor’s bluntness, before sinking slowly to the floor, his blue and gold robes rippling around him like a lake. He simply sat there for a while, as the tent grew darker and the noises of the nearby tents started to grow quiet, before lying down and curling up. A few hours later, light grows on the tent walls and floor. Shern’aath begins to stir, standing up and stretching his arms and rubbing his eyes. He looks over at Altallo, who was lying very still. The raptor crouches beside Altallo and taps him on the shoulder. The Eternal suddenly sits up wide awake, startling Shern’aath.

“Oh its morning now?” Altallo asks brightly, jumping up and peeking out of the tent flap. Outside the settlement was deserted, with all the raptors in their homes. “Right, first thing’s first, I’d like to see this shaman you mentioned.” Says Altallo rubbing his hands together.

“What?” replies Shern’aath, gaping at Altallo “Why would you want to see him?”

“Well first to get my star diagrams back and I’m curious about what he knows,” replies the Eternal, stroking his chin thoughtfully “I wonder if you could show me the way?”

I’m not sure...its a long way.” Shern’aath replies tentatively.

“Please,” asks Altallo, looking directly at the raptor with those piercing green eyes “It is important I get that catalogue back.”

Shern’aath ponders for a second, then sighs and nods.

The two exit the tent, Shern’aath grabbing his spear, and creep quietly and quickly towards the entrance to the settlement. Slipping quietly outside, Shern’aath turns to Altallo.

“The shaman lives in those hills over there,” he explains pointing towards some rocky and craggy hills behind the settlement. “It’ll be a long trek.”

And it was! The walk through the valley was rather gentle; they followed the river keeping to the banks, which were bordered with conifers and flowering trees and bushes. The early morning was fast becoming warmer and lighter. On the other side of the river, a pair of armoured dinosaurs, with huge spikes on their shoulders and down their tail were drinking; they only took a fleeting glance at the two before returning to their drink. Insects buzzed or fluttered around them and in the calm waters they could see fish drifting lazily. Shern’aath waded out into the river, speared a fish and started eating it. He offered to catch another for Altallo, but the Eternal shakes his head.

“Are you sure? You haven’t eaten anything since I met you!” he said, scratching his head.

“I don’t get hungry.” Altallo replies simply, smiling softly.

Shern’aath shrugs and finishes his in a gulp.

Later they start climbing a rocky, spiralling pathway embedded in the hill. The terrain was rough, with patches of twisting trees and wiry ferns. The sun had risen fully now, with a few clouds in the sky. It was hot and dry and despite being high up, there was hardly any wind. Shern’aath began to feel heavy footed and weary. To his surprise and slight annoyance Altallo seemed perfectly fine and

was walking steadily with no signs of tiredness, walking along at a steady pace and even jumping nimbly over boulders and small chasms.

“Don’t you ever feel tired?” he asks irritated.

“Of course I do!” Altallo replies, looking a little startled at the raptor’s annoyed outburst “Just at night sometimes.”

Shern’aath scoffed. “You’re a nice person, but just so weird.”

Altallo looks hurt by this comment and seemed to wilt a little. Shern’aath walks on, Altallo trailing along with his head bowed. The journey was quieter from then on, but Shern’aath kept looking back, and started to feel bad.

“I should not have snapped like that” he thought “What is the matter with me! He’s done nothing wrong to me.”

Little did either of them know or notice something watching them from the cover of some tufty ferns.

Eventually they reach a plateau surrounded more twisted, gnarled trees. In the middle was a large hut, with rough pieces of wood for walls and sticks tied up to form a cone-shaped roof with a hole in it, through which wispy smoke drifted out. A large piece of bark acted as a door. From the plateau, they had a spectacular view of both the raptor valley, where they could just make out tiny figures moving around. Small pterosaurs flew around above, calling to each other

Shern’aath walks up to the door, knocks and whispers.
“Shaman? Are you in there?”

“Who’s calling this early!” replies a loud voice, cracked with age.

“It’s...” Shern’aath glanced at Altallo who was looking out at the scenery and then sighs “It’s Shern’aath.”

There was a short pause and then the door bursts open. Standing in the doorway was another raptor, with pale green scales and a skinny body, slightly shorter than Shern’aath. In fact face looked a lot like Shern’aath’s, with similar orange eyes, except paler and blue and red markings on his nose. He grinned toothily at Shern’aath, revealing several missing teeth.

“Shern’aath! How good to see you!” he cries happily “Where have you been? You haven’t visited me in a while and-“

The Shaman breaks off when he spots Altallo. Eyes narrowing he approaches the Eternal, his back arching, crouching in a hunting position, nostrils flaring and teeth bared. Altallo backs away, looking alarmed.

“What is this thing?” asks the Shaman his voice growly, “New prey?”

“No!” cries Shern’aath, jumping between them. “He’s not prey, nor predator. He’s a friend.”

The Shaman looks from Shern’aath to Altallo. He scoots over to Altallo, and looks intently at his face. He occasionally poked at Altallo’s face or sniffed it. After a while he steps back and looks confused.

“Mmm, a right oddity! Where did you find it?” he asks Shern’aath.

“He’s not an it. And we just sort of bumped into each other. He’s really smart and he can talk. Maybe you should ask him.” Shern’aath replies, rolling his eyes, as the Shaman turns back to Altallo, rubbing his chin.

“What makes all life?” he asks suddenly to Altallo

“Fresh water, food and clean air.” Altallo says almost at once in a calm tone.

The Shaman blinks and then laughs.

“Oh this one is smart!” he says to Shern’aath “I like him! Tell my friend,” he says to Altallo “What is the source of all life?”

“The light of the sun.” Altallo says, smoothly.

The raptor looks utterly giddy with joy and giggles, rather childishly.

“Come on in!” he says beckoning to his house, “I’d love to have a talk. There’s so much I’ve not had the privilege of discussing. You come too Shern’aath, you might learn something for once!” he adds to Shern’aath, who looked really grumpy at being ignored.

They file into the rough hut, Shern’aath having to duck through the doorway. Inside, the hut consisted of one room, with a large sleeping mat at the far end. A fire’s embers glimmered in the centre of the room, surrounded by a round wall of stones. The rest of the space was cluttered with all manner of objects. There were pots, jars and vases, small wooden figurines of creatures and raptors and all manner of other things. From the roof hung several strange things, tied to thread. The Shaman shuffles over to the fire and starts poking it with a stick, making the dying fire glow brighter. Shern’aath sits down across the fire on the opposite side of the Shaman. Altallo meanwhile starts wandering around the hut, examining the sculptures and figurines. He looks closely at a model Tyrannosaur. Every scale had been etched in minute detail; there were small painted stones for eyes and it was painted green. Altallo smiled at the Tyrannosaur’s face, which look surprised when viewed from the front.

“Do you like that?” the Shaman asks Altallo.

“Yes, I do,” said Altallo “What are they?”

“They’re models I make in my spare time. I give them to hatchlings and-”
But he soon notices that Altallo had stopped listening and had gone rummaging amongst the models again.

“Does he always do this?” the Shaman asks Shern’aath.

“He’s easily distracted,” Shern’aath whispers “It’s like he’s never seen a pot or something so simple like that.”

He’s interrupted by Altallo.

“Hah! Found it!” he says, holding up the small blue sphere, the star chart.

“Oh that little thing, that young leader just gave it to me yesterday. Does it mean anything to you?”

“It records the movement of the stars and planets and moons.” Altallo says to the Shaman, moving over and sitting next to him.

“Really?” exclaims the old raptor in surprise, “May I see it?”

Altallo hands the star catalogue to the raptor, who starts turning it over and over in his claws. The Shaman frowns sceptically at the orb.

“Mmm, can’t make snout nor tail of it.” He declares.

“Can I have back please?” Altallo asks.

“Of course,” replies the raptor “But, before I do, can you show me how it works?” he asks, eagerly.

Altallo picks up the sphere and holds it carefully in one of his palms. He presses a finger on its surface and starts moving it in small strokes. The markings begin moving rapidly. The raptors gasp in awe at the thing. At last it stops and seems to focus on one yellow marking. Around it were smaller coloured dots circling it.

“That is the sun,” says Altallo, pointing at the yellow marking “And we are here.” He points to the third circling dot, which was coloured green and blue.

“We’re on a speck?” remarks Shern’aath, his voice heavy on disbelief
The Shaman however was intrigued.

“So we’re floating on this island in the stars so to say?” he asks

“You could say that,” Altallo replies “It’s also rotating, so when one side faces away from the sun its night and-“

He breaks off, looking down at the sphere.

“What’s the matter?” asks Shern’aath.

“Just spotted something,” says Altallo, pointing to the sphere. A red marking had appeared, it was moving slowly to the blue and green dot. “That’s an asteroid. It’s heading over here!”

“So?” asks Shern’aath. “It can’t hurt the world. The world will go on forever, from Far East sea to the far West sea.”

“What is an asteroid?” asks the Shaman, struggling to his feet.

“It’s a huge piece rock floating in space. They just move random and can hit into anything,” Altallo explains. “With luck this one will just go into the sun or miss us.”

“And if it doesn’t?” Shern’aath asks.

“I..” Altallo mumbles “I don’t know. It could be the end.”

“Nonsense!” the Shaman croaks looking sternly at Altallo “You’re just being gloomy!” he shuffles over to Altallo and places a hand on the Eternal’s shoulder. It felt warm and reassuring. “You just go with Shern’aath and forget about this.”

Altallo looks back at the Shaman, looking confused. But the Shaman looks back kindly and smiles.

“Tell you what, why don’t I give you these models.”

“You mean all of them?!” asks Shern’aath stunned.

“Of course!” replies the Shaman cheerfully “I have no need for them anymore. You grew out of them Shern’aath.”

He shuffles back into his home and grabs a large vase covered in swirling patterns.

“You can take them back in this,” he says, pushing it into Altallo’s hands. “I’ll help you get all these in.”

He starts picking up the models and putting into the vase.

“Come on Shern’aath, help out! I’m not the sprightly raptor I was in my youth!” the Shaman barks at Shern’aath.

Shern’aath rolls his eyes, but starts helping the Shaman too. Soon the vase was full of models.

“Thank you again for the models Shaman.” says Altallo, balancing the vase precariously on his knee and patting the Shaman on the nose.

The Shaman gives an odd chirping noise and smiles.

“It was nothing. You take care and I’m sure Shern’aath will help you out.”

Shern’aath and Altallo start walking back down their path, turning back and waving to the Shaman.

“You sure you have enough room for all that stuff?” Shern’aath asks, a hint of scepticism in his voice.

“Should be,” Altallo replies, concentrating on carrying the vase “Might need to rearrange some things. That Shaman was really nice; I thought he was going to attack me at first though.”

“He’s a right old softy. He’s just a little strange at times.” says Shern’aath.

“He mentioned you haven’t visited him in a long time. Why is that?”

“Erm”, Shern’aath replies “It’s because.....because I’ve been busy and-“

But he’s interrupted by the Shaman who shouts to them:

“Bye son!”

Shern’aath freezes and closes his eyes looking deeply embarrassed. Altallo meanwhile looks puzzled.

“Why did he call you son?” he asks the raptor.

Shern’aath sighs.

“He’s...my father.”

“What is a...father?” asks Altallo.

Shern'aath blinks at Altallo.

“You really don't know what a father is? Or a mother?”

Altallo shakes his head.

“I never thought I'd be teaching anyone about families.” Shern'aath said.

They start walking back down the hillside. From a tangle of rough ferns, a face appears and watches them go. The face had a long beaked snout, with small bumps along it. The head was wide and covered with bony material forming a dome, surrounded by spikes. Like the raptors, its skin is scaly and a soft yellow in colour with light blue markings. Raising a round clawed hand to its chin it regards the two with curiosity.