

Roen's Tale

Prologue

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As I make my way through the village, I watch the guards break up yet another fight. I hate this village...no, not the village, the wolves. If I wasn't one of the best scouts here, I'd leave, and I know my mate would come with me. My mate...Railu, such a beautiful red fox, haven't seen her in almost a month.

Heading for my home, I enter the old section, part of the original village, here the huts are old, smaller. On the upside though, you don't have to hand pump the water, and the roofs don't leak. No one's really sure why, but I didn't buy the hut for those reasons, it was cheap. Arriving at my home, I slowly push the door open.

"Roen!" Railu happily wraps me in a hug, rubbing her muzzle against mine. "How was your trip?"

I return her nuzzle and hold her close, grateful to be home. "Boring. I am getting so tired of leading people to places they already know how to get to."

"Well, it still pays."

I sigh, "Yeah, but not enough. If we're going to have a kit, I need to bring in more. You won't be able to work for a while, and I'll need to make sure ends meet."

"We have time, I'll be out of season soon."

I realize what she means, "Didn't take again, huh?"

She sighs, "No."

I chuckle, "Yet another way you take after your mother. She didn't take easily either, did she?"

Railu huffs and turns away from me, "I am not like my mother."

I sigh, wrapping my arms around her, "I am sorry, love, but you are still her daughter."

She leans back into me, "I know, but the older I get, the more I seem to be like her."

I nuzzle into her neck, "Listen, you are not her, you just have some things in common."

She turns around in my arms, "I want to come with you on your next trip,

continue my training.”

“Caravans rarely pay two scouts.”

“Then I’ll be the one that doesn’t get paid,” she chuckles.

“That also means that you’ll need to carry your week’s provisions, too.”

I feel her sigh heavily, “Oh yeah.” She puts her head to my chest and leans into me, disappointed. “I’d have to buy them too. Oh-well.”

I lift her chin to look at me, “I was a good idea, though.” I gently lick her nose, bringing a smile back to her face, “We’ll worry about that when there’s another caravan.”

She starts loosening my chest piece, “Whenever that’ll be, maybe you could do a patrol or two in the meantime.”

After setting my pack aside, I loosen and remove my vambraces and slide them off. Being black, they blend well with the fur on my forearms. After I set them aside, Railu starts pulling at my cuirass, loosening the buckles. After a moment, I lift it over my head and set it on the floor.

Railu wrinkles her nose and puts her hand to my chest, “You get out of the rest of that, I’ll draw you a bath.”

I close the door and start pulling off the leg sections of my armor. Hearing the bath water running, I quickly spray down my armor with leather oil, and put it in the closet by the front door.

Once in the grooming room, Railu gives me a loving look. “Get in. Let me get you clean.”

I take off my loin cloth and step into the tub. The water’s warm, and I sink down into it. “Why are you so nice to me?”

Railu grabs the soap and starts massaging it into my fur, “Because you are my mate, and you’ve been gone for three weeks. I’ve missed you.” She continues scrubbing the soap into my fur, and I relax, enjoying the massage.

I let out a subtle sigh, she’s right. I’ve been gone a lot. This last time was the longest. I lead a caravan from here, Arroket, directly to Lorholt. Nine days walk, one way, not difficult aside from the road being seldom used. “You spoil me too much.”

She chuckles and lightly licks my nose. “You need someone to spoil you. Working all the time is not good for you.”

I pull her wrap off her and toss it aside. She gasps and starts to protest, but I just pull her down into the tub on top of me. Water splashes everywhere, but I don’t care, the room has drains.

Railu squeals and laughs as she settles on top of me, “What’s the big idea?”

I pull her close, nuzzling into her wet fur. “I love you.”

“You better.” She nuzzles back, holding my head to hers. We finish out the bath together and get dried as best we can.

After grabbing my armor, we head off to see Behri. He’s Railu’s dad, and my favored smith.

“Roen, Railu!” he happily greets us. “How was the trip?”

“Long and boring.” I set my armor on the counter, “Need cleaning and a few rivets replaced.”

The burley rottweiler smiles at me, “You know, you could save some coin by doing this yourself.”

“I know, but I can’t ever seem to do it right.”

Behri laughs, "Since you're family, I'll only charge ten."

Railu wraps him in a hug, "You've got a big heart, dad."

"Anything for you and yours young lady. I'll take good care of this, go get what you need."

I hand him a ten coin and we head off to the market. Railu pulls out a list and heads for one of the meat vendors. She picks out a ma'pai and a nakku breast, and has the butcher wrap and put them in an ice basket. I shoulder the basket after paying for the meats, and we move on.

Finding a produce stand, she stops and fills another basket with a few apples, tenagos and a decent sized garo. I find myself chuckling, she just has to have her sweets. I grab a loaf of bread and add it to the basket. After paying the farmer, we head back to Behri's. After a brief run through of his work, he send us on our way before the ice in the basket melts.

Arriving home, I put the meat away in the cellar's cold room, and check the condition of the one other ma'pai and what's left of a jata flank. There should be more meat in this room. Two ma'pai and a nakku breast won't last us more than a week, and we've not got much money left. I sigh, and dump the ice in a bucket and hang the basket on the wall to dry, then head upstairs.

Seeing Railu in the kitchen, cutting vegetables from the garden, I give her a nuzzle from behind and ask, "How old's the jata?"

She presses herself back into me for a moment, savoring my touch. "Almost a week. I've been working on it slowly these last few days."

"Well, if we don't eat it soon, we should jerk it before it goes bad."

"I've already started part of it. I suppose we could have some of it tonight, then jerk the rest."

I'm about to start helping her with the vegetables when I smell something. I bury my nose in Railu's neck, and find the source. "You starting," I growl.

She slowly lifts her tail between my legs, teasing me. "Tonight, love. Now we make supper, then eat. We'll have plenty of time after."

I sigh, "I should not have smelled you. Your scent has filled my head and I can't think of anything else, now."

She suddenly picks up the knurro, she's been cutting, and puts it to my nose. Caught by surprise, I breathe its pungent aroma and nearly hit the floor trying to pull away. After the shock wears off and I sneeze a couple times, I groan, "Thanks."

She chuckles and resumes cutting the knurro. "Relax, it'll come back. I've only just begun."

I rub my muzzle, trying to soothe my irritated sinuses. "What would you like me to help with?"

She gestures to a basket near the back door. "You could start the smoker. Put in some of those hickory chips you like so much."

"But you don't like those."

"This batch won't be for me. The next will."

I head out the back door with the basket of meat, and straight to the smoker. It's large, able to smoke over twenty kilo of meat at a time, and while it belongs to the neighborhood, Railu and I do use it the most. The others will often wait till we start it to add some meats of their own.

I set the basket aside on the table and start cleaning out the wood box and trays. Soon, my neighbor Garra, a grey wolf who's house is straight behind mine, pulls out a grate and starts cleaning it, "Glad to see you back, how'd it go?"

"Eh, you know, long, boring walk with so many people talking you can't sneak up on a deaf jata."

He chuckles, grabbing another rack to clean, "Yeah, just got back from Arindell myself. Heard something about them loosing farmers."

I knock some loose ash out of the firebox and put it back into the smoker. "I didn't think wolves were known for the curiosity," I joke.

"Well, you know us, we're more like 'if there's something to kill, I'll be there.'"

I scrape the old smoker chips out the tray and check for rust. "What'd ya find?"

He sighs, and starts putting racks back, "A whole lot of tracks that no one can identify, some blood stains, missing families. No one knows what's doing it."

"So that why grain products are getting expensive. I'd heard they had some problems with farmers going missing, but with what your saying, it sounds like something's eating them."

He nods sadly, "Yeah, that was our consensus too." He sighs as he puts the last rack back in. "What's today's flavor."

"Uhm," I shake my head, getting my mind back on task. "Hickory."

"Oh, good. I have some greys to put on."

I start filling the chip tray, "Gonna go see Roush soon, huh?"

"Yep, he loves his grey fish."

I smile as he heads off for the fish, and put a few chunks of wood in the fire box. By the time he returns, I've got the fire going and the vents adjusted. I pull a few racks out and start placing the jata strips on them.

He grabs a couple racks for himself and starts laying out his fish. I can tell by it's smell that he's had it marinating in some brown sugar and some Burrowfield Whiskey.

"The mice make good whiskey don't they?" I comment.

"Yeah," he chuckles. "One of Roush's favorites."

I set my first rack in place, and start on my second, "When you heading out?"

He sets a rack in place, "In a month or two, depends on when he sends for me."

"Sends?" I ask, setting a second rack in place.

"Yeah, he wants me to join him in some contest. Thinks he can do better than me."

As I start laying out more strips on a third rack, I chuckle, "That old cat thinks he can out do you?"

He sets his last rack in place, "Yeah, surprisingly. I better see if Lilan has anything she wants in here."

"There's gonna be room, why not." I start on my fourth rack as he heads over to the hut to my right. Lilan is an elderly shepherd mix, and has to walk with a cane. Garra and I watch out for her now that her mate's passed.

As I put my last two racks in place, Garra returns with a small basket and starts arranging the meats on a rack. "I swear she won't last another year. Sad really, she's such a sweet old dog," he groans.

"Yeah. She called me Tarek before I left. Doesn't he come see her any more?"

"Not that I've seen. If I ever have a son that ignores his mother like he does, I'd

disown him. His loss really.”

“Sadly, it’s hers too.” I sigh and put my last rack in the smoker. I wait as Garra lays out the last few strips and then hands me the rack. As I put it in place, he takes the basket back to Lilan.

With everything in place, I close the smoker and open the baffle, allowing the process to begin.

Garra picks up his own basket and says, “I’ll check on it just before dark, alright?”

“That would be great, thanks.” I check the firebox and add another small log, making sure it’ll last past supper.

Heading back into my home, I find the table’s been set. I quickly wash my hands, and help my mate set the food on the table.

Supper finished, smoker checked, I relax back on the small couch to let my food settle. Railu sits on the couch, and leans into me. “We’re alone.” She starts teasing me by running her hand across my chest. I find the contrast of her dark hands against my white belly fur appealing, and gently run my fingers down her arms.

“My young, beautiful vixen,” I tease, feeling my desire return. “What am I going to do with you?”

She giggles, and takes my hand as she stands. “Come on. Spend the night giving your mate the love she’s missed.” She leads me to the bedroom and then turns to me. “Where shall we begin.”

I pull her close and unite the strings of her gown. As her cloths fall away, I push my nose into her neck and growl, “Right here.”

She lets out a squeal as I rake my teeth across her neck, letting my primal desire assert itself. After untying my sarong, I lay her back on the bed, and start to gently lick her neck.

She grains her neck, exposing her throat to me, and then rakes her claws down my belly as I nibble at her neck. With a playful laugh, she wraps her legs around me and pulls me into her. As I sink into her heat, I hear her laugh turn into a moan.

I pull back for a moment, and then thrust into her. She lets out a gentle hiss as she tries to pull me in tighter. Not wanting to disappoint, I pull back and thrust again. She counters with a thrust of her own and takes me all the way in. My knot swells, and her body clamps down on me, holding me in.

“Ahhh, yessss,” she moans. “Now I’ve got you.”

I sink down into her arms as her body starts to rhythmically contract, sending waves of pleasure through us both. Now at her mercy, I roll us onto my back and hold her to me, as he body continues to stimulate me.

As her body starts to tighten, she pushes herself up, and starts to rock, changing the angle, and increasing our stimulation. It works, and I feel myself quickly approaching my climax.

I let out a growl as I release inside her, making her let out a squeal like howl, but her body doesn’t stop. She keeps her rhythm as she slowly sinks down into my arms. Then, with one last, weak squeal, her body contracts one last time, holding me tightly inside. Her body relaxes on me, but doesn’t let me go.

She lets out a quiet sigh, “I’ve missed you, my love.”

I pull the blanket up over us, not an easy thing to do while still locked to her, and then give her a nuzzle. "And I, you, my love."

The next morning, I walk into the Officer of the Guards' office, and head to the captain's desk. Finding her sitting behind her desk, and not busy, I approach.

"Captain, reporting for patrol duty."

The grey fox checks some papers, then turns and looks at a chart on the wall.

"Sorry, patrols are booked for the month, wolves got them."

"Any open slots for escort duty?"

She sighs as she checks some other papers. "Sorry Roen, all taken."

I sigh, "Anything at all?"

She shuffles her papers again, then pulls one aside, "There is a prolonged trip that no one else wants."

Feeling disappointed, but trying to hide it, I ask, "How prolonged?"

She looks at the paper, then says, "Several months, minimum." When she looks back up at me, she adds, "May want to check with the smiths, see if they need any of the harder to find supplies. I know you're good at those, too."

I sigh, "Well let me see that, and I'll check with the smiths, too."

She hands me the paper, "I hope you find something. I know you're hurting for work."

I read through the paper real quick. "Yeah, thanks."

"Take it with you, no one else has been interested in it. Just let me know so I can tell Amsel."

I quickly double check the client information on the page, "Amsel, the collie?"

"Yep, that'd be him."

"I've worked for him before, I'll talk to him later." I hand her back the paper, "Thanks."

She nods and I head out to speak to the smiths. I start with Behri, knowing that if he doesn't have any needs, he'll have an idea of who does. Despite not needing any supplies, he does direct me to a couple others that have tried to buy some of his. I return home with requests for handle shaped sticks, lacrylic, and various berries for stains.

Railu takes a look at the list, and sighs, "This is a waste of you abilities. Foraging, like this."

I sigh and take her in my arms, "It's an income, and I'm not above getting down and dirty to make a coin."

She nods and nuzzles into me. "You be careful out there."

"Come with me. Maybe we'll find a wild nakku or krindo, bring its meat back."

She smiles, showing a hopefulness that makes me smile. "That would be a blessing, but I think the wolves have the area pretty well hunted out."

With the cart loaded, we head out of town in a south east direction. Having been this way just a few days ago, I know some good areas to find the lacrylic and wood.

As we clear the farms, I have Railu scout as I pull the cart. She keeps an eye open for tracks, and we stop often to listen for sounds. Occasionally she'll stop at a trail crossing, waiting for me to catch up.

At one such crossing, she has a perplexed look on her face. "What'd ya find?" I

ask.

Still studying the ground, she points, "I'm not sure."

After setting the brake on the cart, I kneel to look at the tracks. I smile, realizing her dilemma. "This is a viper track, on top of a nakku track." I start pointing as I explain, "See how these toes are thin and long, that's the nakku. Here though, they get thick, but you can still see the viper's claws inside the toes of the nakku...here, here and here."

She nods and smiles, "Oh, now I see it."

"Yeah, happens sometimes, especially on trails like this. What else can you tell from the tracks?"

She studies the tracks again for a moment, "Now that I know what made them, I would say, a yearling viper, maybe fifteen kilo. The nakku though is full grown, about forty five to fifty kilo. Came through, maybe...mid day yesterday."

"Good, but why mid yesterday?"

She smiles, "It rained early yesterday morning, that would have removed any tracks from before then, and it would have left the dirt receptive to any fresh tracks. By night, the dirt would have been too dry to hold tracks this well."

I nod, "Very good. Would this be a good place to camp?"

She looks up and down the trails, then shakes her head, "No, we should be near, but no closer than a thirty minute's walk. The animals would smell us and leave the area."

"Good, let's find a good place to setup."

She smiles and leads me down our path for about thirty minutes. Finding a small clearing with some fallen trees, I set the brake on the cart. We quickly setup the tent and I start cutting up some of the smaller limbs for a fire.

Railu starts setting some traps along the path we crossed, hoping to snare something other than a viper. By the time she returns, I have a decent amount of wood cut, and stacked by our small tent.

"Collecting firewood too?" she asks.

"Why not, already out here, need some for the smoker anyway."

"Any of them any good for handles?"

"Nope, they've been down too long. We'll need to look for hickory, preferably still a little green."

"Alright, where do we find that?"

"Wyrn Forest has a lot of those trees, and there's a good stand of lacrylic trees between here and there."

She smiles and grabs her staff, "What are we waiting for then?"

I chuckle and grab the cart's handle. "Lead on." She takes point, and leads us to the east.

After nearly an hour's walk, we get to the forest and quickly locate a stand of hickory trees. I quickly get out my tree climbing harness and start climbing up one. When I get to a suitable branch, I pull out my saw and cut it off.

As I reach the ground, Railu has already started cutting off the smaller branches. I grab my own axe and start measuring out the cutting spaces. I make a cut every two axe lengths, and then count out how many handles I'll get.

With this one branch, I count out twelve long handles, or eighteen short handles. We use our saws and quickly cut the branch down to the marked lengths and stack them

on the cart. We then sort through the smaller branches and collect much of it for smoker chips.

On our way back to camp, we carefully fill the four bottles with lacrylic. We have to be careful with this stuff, it makes great glue and sealant. Once the jars are nearly full, we top them off with water, and put a lid on it. The water doesn't mix, but just sits on top of the lacrylic, keeping it from drying out.

Once back at camp, I make sure that the logs and jars are secure, and cover them with a waterproof blanket. Railu heads off to check the traps, as I load the firewood on the cart.

When she returns, she's carrying a wingless dragon, and a ma'pai by its legs. "I'd thought for sure that we'd catch something else."

Seeing how big the ma'pai is, I chuckle, "This one's nothing to snarl at. Besides, we caught more than I expected." I give her a nuzzle, "Did you reset the snares?"

"With fresh bait."

"Very good."

With just a couple hours left in the day, we field dress the dragon. As she starts cooking it, I put the ma'pai in a small cage and hang it from a branch for the night.

After supper, we crawl into the tent for the night.

I wake, not long after the sun comes up. Letting her sleep, and slip out of the tent. I take the ma'pai down and pour a handful of grain into its cage. It lets out a quiet whistle and starts eating.

I check the coals for the fire, and finding them still hot, quickly restart it. Once it's going, I put a pot of water on to boil, then start cutting up a tenago we packed.

Railu crawls out of the tent and wraps me in a hug. "Morning, sleepyhead," I joke.

She groans and takes a slice of the tenago. "I don't normally wake up this early."

"Well, if you do a patrol or caravan, you'd need to."

She snarls a little, "Ugh. Maybe I'll pass then."

I chuckle and give her muzzle a lick, "It's a small sacrifice, love."

She takes a big bite of the fruit and sighs, "I guess I'll just have to get used to it."

I take a bite of my piece of tenago and hand her another. She takes it gladly and we finish our breakfast in relative silence.

I slip the last piece of the fruit into the cage with the ma'pai. It whistles and chirps as it happily starts eating it. With it happily occupied, I load its cage onto the cart. I take our knives and other utensils and clean them in the boiling water. As I dry them, Railu dumps the water on the fire, dousing it.

With time pressing, we pack up our things and head off to check our snares. As I pull the cart, Railu sprints ahead, eager to see what she's caught.

After a moment, I hear her call out, "Caught another ma'pai."

"Good," I call back.

She waits for me to arrive, and then removes the snare from its leg. I take the shrieking mad creature from her and put it in the cage with the other. Not finding anything else in the traps, she collects them all and we set off to find the sein berries.

She leads us in a southwest direction and come across a creek. We follow it west until we find its source. There we find a grove of sein bushes, all loaded with berries in

various stages of ripeness. Seeing an opportunity for a variety of colors, Railu and I start collecting about a dozen of each color we can find.

After nearly an hour, we take a break and have a light lunch, and I give the two ma'pai another handful of grains. After several minutes, Railu becomes restless and starts slowly wandering around, looking at the various bushes and trees.

"I've never been here before. Does this area have a name?"

"Not that I'm aware of, but last time I was here, the bushes weren't producing. We should be on our toes, the berries'll bring wild krindos, and they'll draw vipers."

No sooner I finish saying it, than a rather large krindo comes running out of the bushes next to Railu. Taken by surprise, she stumbles and falls as it runs between her legs.

My reflexes being better, I stick a dagger into the back of its neck as it passes me, killing it. I quickly get up to help Railu up, but as I reach her a viper comes out from the same bushes.

The meter tall, tan, upright lizard stops abruptly and looks at us. With a couple tilts of its head, it quickly comes to a decision. It hisses and charges.

I jump over Railu while draw my short sword, but my foot catches on something and I fall to the ground. Thinking fast, I twist and raise my sword, cutting open the viper's belly as it jumps over me. I roll to watch where it lands, and seeing Railu trying to get up, it hits her, knocking her back to the ground.

I scramble to her and toss the viper aside. "Railu? You ok, love?"

She sits up, rubbing her head, "Oww. What just happened?"

"Krindo tripped you, you tripped me, viper landed on you."

She sighs, and takes my hand to stand. "They get away?"

"No, and we have enough meat for a couple weeks."

She hold onto me as she calms herself. Apparently still rattled, she confesses, "I didn't even hear it coming."

I hold her close, "You must remember to keep your nose, ears, and eyes open. Not paying attention to something can cost you."

"Easier said than done."

"I know it is, but as a scout, you must learn it."

She sighs and leans against the cart. "I blew it, didn't I?"

I put my hands to her shoulders, and gently rub my muzzle against hers. "If you were alone, it would not have ended well," I admit to her, "but you were *not* alone. Come on, lesson learned."

She nods her agreement, and we quietly field dress both the krindo and the viper, then load them onto the cart. With our supplies secured, we head home.