

Roen's Tale

Chapter 1

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Having sold the hickory logs and lacrylic to the smiths who needed them, and the berries to the artisans, I find myself with a fair amount of coin. Feeling in the mood to splurge, I give Railu some coin and a nuzzle, “Find yourself something nice, love. You’ve earned it.”

She wraps me in a quick hug and then heads off to the clothier. I sigh, and watch her tail swish happily as she goes. She deserves more than I can afford, but I can’t say that she doesn’t make me happy.

I sigh, alright, time to talk to this ‘Amsel’ and find out what he’s offering. I head to the wealthy section of the village. All the huts here are larger and usually have some sort of servant.

Finding Amsel’s home is easy, and I approach with a natural confidence and knock on the door. When it opens, I’m greeted by a young, white female chow. I immediately feel out of place wearing my scout armor, as she’s neatly groomed and wearing a formal wrap.

She looks me up and down, “You must be the scout he’s looking for.”

Shrugging off my discomfort, I nod politely. “I am here to speak with Amsel about the details of the position. I would like to know more before I accept or decline.”

She smiles and nods, “Good. Shows you’re smart.” She gestures me in and leads me down a short hall to a sitting room. “Amsel, you have a prospective scout.”

The response is more than energetic, “Ah, good! Good, show him in.”

She turns and bows to me, gesturing me to enter. She then pulls the door shut behind me, leaving me looking at a border collie smoking a pipe.

“Roan. I’ve been expecting you. Your guard captain speaks highly of your skill.”

I try not to smile at the complement, “You have me at a disadvantage.”

He gestures to the chair opposite him, “Please, sit. Tell me, have you heard of the Dig?”

“Only enough to know, it doesn’t exist.”

He smiles, and opens a worn leather bound book. As he hands it to me, he says, "Oh, but it does exist, as do the humans that went there."

I take the book and start reading the page. 'The Dig is located far to the east. No one knows how far for certain, but many have tried to go there, including humans.' I look up at him, "You think this proves that it exists? Humans don't even exist."

He quickly flips some pages in the book, and then points for me to read. 'Humans are emotionless creatures, that have provided for us in the distant past. They lack both fur and scales, so their pale to brown skin shows plainly.' Again I look up at him, "You call this proof?"

He smiles, "Everything in this book is true. Everything. I've been doing the research, all the stories in here were told by the same person. She's a cheetess, but not just an ordinary cheetess, she's an oracle."

"Those don't exist either," I quickly counter.

"This one does, I've met her, and she told me something that changed my life."

Unable to believe what he's saying, "That just means she gave you some good advice."

Unfazed, he continues, "It was more than advice, she knew things about me that I never tell anyone, not even my mates. Roen, she knew how much money I had on me, and what I was planning on doing with it. I had told no one what I was doing, and had made sure that no one knew how much money I had with me."

Convinced of his sincerity, I set the book aside, "So what would my part be?"

"You'd be our scout. I already have an outfitter, Rami. He's putting together the supplies needed for the trip."

"Not saying I'm taking the position yet, but how are we traveling?"

"Jata, no carts."

Jata are large, very heavy, turtle-like, eight legged pack lizards. Most of them have shells about two meters tall and wide, and up to five long. When they walk, they keep four of their legs on the ground at any moment, making them very slow, about half the average person's walking speed. The upside, though, they can carry anything and everything, just mount hooks or loops to there shell and hang something from it, they don't even notice it's there.

I've worked with them before, so I nod, "What about pay? Is there an advance, or is it all after the jobs done?"

He nods, "Since you have a mate, I'll pay you half up front, that way you know she's provided for, and I'll cover your expenses during the journey. There'll also be a bonus after, based on how well we do. The minimum you can expect to make is twelve thousand."

I'll get to leave six thousand with Railu. That and the meat we just brought in should keep her set for a few months. "Where will we be heading east from?"

"Three Lands. I've learned that the Dero Ridge continues far east from there, we'll need to follow it."

"Are we going straight to Three Lands?"

"No, well be going to Arindell first. I have a contact there that has more information, but he wants to meet me and my crew first."

I do some quick math in my head, "If we visit each village by jata, it'll be over a year before we head out to the Wilds."

Now he sighs, "I know, but Rami doesn't want the hassle of a cart and I agree with him. A positive note, the way he's setting up the jata, we won't have to walk much."

"What are you hoping to find?"

His expression drops for a moment, "Isn't the adventure of it enough?"

I shrug, "Never been one for adventure, myself."

He leans forward, "Tell me that you won't pass this up."

I scratch my head in thought, "I need to think about it, this is a long time to be away from home."

He nods and shakes my hand as we stand. "Take your time, I've got another I need to talk to. He'll make our party four. I would normally say bring your mate, but with Sarn, that wouldn't be a good idea."

I sigh, yet another reason to not take it. "I'll keep that in mind. Thank you for the information." As I head to the door, the chow bows and opens the door for me.

Standing in my cold storage room, I grab a butcher knife and start cutting the krindo into sections. While I'm not a trained butcher, I do know enough to make the cuts properly.

As I cut the portions and set them aside, I contemplate Amsel's offer. Should I take it, or should I pass. I'd best wait till Railu's back before answering those. She'll be the one I have to leave behind if I do this. Hearing the front door close, I sigh, time to tell her.

Before I can make a move, she comes down the steps to me. "What'cha think?"

I turn to look, and she does a pirouette, showing me the new dress she bought. Despite being fairly simple, it flatters her colors well and I can't help but smile. "It's beautiful, just like you."

"You always think I'm beautiful."

I gently rub my nose to hers, being careful not to touch her with my messy hands. "My love, you could make a grain sack work. You're just that good."

She chuckles and sets a wrapped loaf of bread on a shelf. After picking up a few sheets of butchers paper, she starts wrapping the cuts I've set aside. "What's on your mind?"

"That obvious, huh?"

She places the wrapped cut on the shelf and starts to wrap another. "Only to me."

I sigh, "I had a job offer."

She looks curiously at me and starts on another piece. "Why is this one troubling you?"

I finish the last cut, and state, "This one could take more than a year."

She stops abruptly and looks at me for a moment. "Are you going to take it?"

I grab a rag and slowly start wiping my hands. "I don't know. It pays well enough. Twelve hundred coin."

She's quiet for a moment as she slowly finishes wrapping a rack of ribs. "We could really use the coin."

"I know." I grab a sheet and start wrapping another rack, "but a year, or longer? I just don't know if I can be gone that long."

"Then I'll come with, we can use the money to buy my supplies, and we can use the time to finish my training."

"If I go, you'd have to stay here."

"What?! Why?"

"One of members of his party is a wolf. We both know how they can get around a bitch in heat. I would have kill him to protect you, and that would get me fired."

She puts her head against my chest, "That should be my choice, not yours."

I gently nuzzle into the back of her head while not touching her with my still dirty hands. "You would not be able to kill him, at least not until after he had his way with you. If that happened, it would kill me. You are *my* mate."

"But *you* are my mate too. It should be a decision we make together."

I sigh, "Need to actually decide if I'm going or not, first."

She looks up at me with a tear in her eye. "Is he paying any advance?"

"Half, and I would give that to you."

She nods, "Six thousand would hold me for quite some time."

"Between that and all this meat, you'd have plenty of time to finish your training."

She starts wrapping the last of the cuts, "When does he plan on leaving?"

"Soon as possible, I guess. Rami's already started outfitting the jata for the trip."

"No wonder you'll be gone so long. Why not nakku and cart? They're much faster."

"Amsel doesn't want the hassle of a cart. If a jata goes lame, you can kill it, eat it, and move all the supplies to another one. Cart breaks, you're left with a broken cart and no way to carry the supplies."

She nods, and we start to clean up. "How many are going?"

"So far, just four. All males."

She washes her hands in the sink, and then turns back to me. "As much as I hate to say it, I think you should do it."

Having washed up, myself, I take her into my arms, "I will spend my days missing you."

The door opens and I'm greeted by the white chow again. "Roen, nice to see you're back. He's been expecting you."

She leads me into the house and to a different room. I quickly realize that it's a garage, and there are nearly a dozen people working around four large jata. Some are using hand drills to boar holes in their shells, while others are inserting metal hooks or loops into the holes after dipping them in lacrylic. The whole scene reminds me of a carriage shop in full build.

From behind one of the jata, a german shepherd comes over to me. "You must be Roen. I'm Rami, outfitter. So, have you come to a decision?"

I nod, "Despite my mates reservations, I will do this."

He nods, "Never an easy thing to do, leave a loved one behind." His expression changes from somber, to happy and slaps me on the arm, "But it'll be worth it."

"I hope so, I'm not happy with leaving her behind."

He nods, "I can understand that, but I currently have no mate to leave." He waves his hand and the white chow comes over, "Nilsa, would you let Amsel know he's here while I get his jata setup."

She bows slightly, "Of course."

As she heads off, Rami smiles and shakes his head. “Lovely girl, just not to bright. Come on, let’s get your jata setup.”

We spend the next hour arranging how I want the equipment hooks, and selecting the equipment for me. With Amsel funding this, Rami lets me pick out what equipment and weapons I want. That’s something that I find refreshing, since most of the other jobs I’ve had, required me using my own.

After he introduces me to Sarn, a grey wolf, Nilsa comes over to us. “Roen, Amsel would like a word with you.”

“I’ll make sure your jata’s setup like you want it,” Rami states.

“Thanks.” I turn back to Nilsa, “After you.”

She tilts her head curiously, then leads me back to Amsel’s sitting room. When I enter, he’s busy looking at all sorts of maps and documents. “Ah, good. I have some things I’d like you to review. First thing, though, I want you to get familiar with the myths.”

He hands me the book of myths that he showed me the other day. As I take it, I ask, “Why?”

“As a scout, you may be able to glean some insight as to its locale. I also have the scrolls from the library. They could be of help with that too.” He passes me a thick roll of paper, adding to my reading. “We’ll be leaving in five days.”

Picking up the book and tube, I nod, “Anything else?”

He smiles and passes a small bag of coins to me. “Your advance. There’s seven thousand in there, I hope it helps.”

Unable to hide my appreciation for the extra, I smile widely. “It will, thank you.”

“What’cha doing?”

I look up from the roll of papers and see Railu standing in the hall, just outside the bedroom. “Studying, I need to learn all I can about this place. Do the best I can for this.”

She comes over and sits next to me on the couch. “Where will you be going?”

“Near as I can tell, straight east from Three Lands. After that, not too sure.

Amsel’s sure that we’ll find more clues in the other villages. One of these papers mentions a small group that came from there, and scattered through the villages sometime before humans disappeared.”

She snuggles up against me, “So?”

I put my arm around her and lean back with a sigh. “So, it means that we *will* need to go to each village before we head east. It’ll probably take a year just to get to the wilds.”

I hear her let out a slow breath, “So, you’ll be gone longer than a year?”

“Yeah.”

“Still want to go?”

“Too late to back out now, we already spent some of the advance, stocked up on things.”

She nuzzles into my chest, getting comfortable. “Hmm, I know.”

I realize that she’s tired and wanting to go to sleep, and give her a loving lick on top of her head. “Why don’t you go lay down, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

She tries to snuggle in closer to me, but doesn’t answer.

I let the papers roll up and put my pen in the inkwell. After scooping her up, I

blow out the lamp and carry her to bed.

We're leaving today, having packed some of my own equipment, Railu and I head to Amsel's house. Nilsa greets us warmly as she lets us in. "Roen, everyone's in the garage. Last minute preparations. Railu," they hug, having become fast friends these last couple days. "I would like to ask you something."

I smile and head to the garage, leaving the girls to talk. Finding my jata, I add my pack to the already present equipment and supplies. I then start checking all the gear, making sure that everything I think I'll need is here.

After a once around, I stop at the jata's head and start rubbing its chin. "Are you ready for a lot of walking?"

It coos softly as it chews on some hay, apparently liking the gentle affection.

"Yeah, that's it. Just eat your food, don't worry about anything." I sigh, realizing just how much time I'm going to be spending on his back.

A deep gruff voice from behind me asks, "Are you ready for this, pup?"

I turn and face him, seeing him dressed in his full battle armor. "Sarn, let's get this straight, I never take a job I'm not ready for, and I'm older than you."

He smiles, showing his fangs. "Good. I'd hate to get lost."

I laugh, "I've been leading caravans before you learned to carry a sword. Lost is something I never get."

"Yeah, sure you were."

Amsel comes up behind him, dressed in ranger's armor. "Sarn, back off. He's been a scout since he was ten. That'd put you in diapers." With a subtle grunt, Sarn heads back to his own jata, and Amsel turns back to me, "Sorry about that, hired him for his strength, not his smarts."

I start checking the straps, making sure things are secure. "Don't worry about it. I can handle him. I have one for a neighbor, remember?"

"Yeah, I know," he counters, "but Garra's smart, Sarn's not."

I find myself laughing as I secure the strap over my pack, making sure that my notes, and the book of myths are easily accessible. "Yeah, too bad you didn't hire him. I can trust him around Railu when she's in heat."

"Not for lack of trying, but he stated that he already had plans for the next few months."

I climb up the cleats to check the stability of the saddle and its canopy. "He's going to see his friend, Roush, in Pridewyn. They have some sort of bet going as to who'll do better in the Trials."

"They let outsiders in now?"

I sit in the saddle and start checking the reach for my equipment, "Yep, if you're entered by a cat. Roush is going to enter them both."

"I'd really like to see that," we hear Rami state. We both turn to see him coming from his jata. He, too, is dressed in ranger's armor. "A wolf in the Trials. When'd they start letting that happen."

I open the canopy and start rechecking how easy it is to access my equipment. "Uhm, about a year ago, I think. When I passed through on my way back, I heard something about cubs entering Moku and other random travelers. Crazy really."

He abruptly turns to Amsel, "Hey, if we're nearby when it starts, can we stay? I'd

love to watch one.”

Amsel shrugs. “I guess, but it depends on how close we are. I don’t want to hang around for a week waiting.”

Rami pouts and I chuckle, “Relax, they have ’em every seven months.”

Amsel smiles, and pats him on the back, “That’s right, twice a year.”

Rami looks up at me, “Can you try and time it so we’re there when they happen?”

I collapse the canopy and look skeptically down at him. I know how difficult it is to time something like that, but we don’t have a set schedule, or order of destinations.

Rather than tell him that, I simply say, “I’ll see what I can do.”

He nods, “Thanks.” Then heads back to his jata.

Railu comes in from the hall, and seeing me on top my jata, she climbs up to me. “You’ll never guess what Nilsa told me.”

“Oh come on. You know I’m a terrible guesser, just tell me.”

She puts her muzzle to my ear and whispers, “She’s pregnant.”

I go wide eyed and I turn to look at her in speechless surprise.

She nods, “It’s true.”

“Who’s?” I whisper.

“His.” She tilts her head towards Amsel.

I look at him for a moment, watching him checking out his jata much in the same way I just did. “He doesn’t know, does he?”

“And she won’t tell him. If he knew, he wouldn’t go. She doesn’t want to do that to him.” She glances back at Amsel, “She knows how much he’s committed to this.”

I sigh, “So, she’s not the simpleton that he thinks she is.” I chew my lip for a moment, in thought, then ask, “Will you keep visiting her, after we’ve left?”

“She’d like me to, I’m one of the first real friend she’s had in a while.”

“Well, I think it’d be good, for you both.”

Suddenly Amsel shouts from his jata, “Are we ready?”

“And waiting,” Sarn growls.

Rami looks at me, “After you, great scout.”

I quickly pull Railu into a hug, “I will miss you, my love.”

She rubs her muzzle along mine, “I am yours alone. Make sure you come back to me.”

“Not even a karnesh can keep me from you.”

She giggles, “Those aren’t real,” then licks my nose and hops down.

With a bow to her, and a familiar pang in my chest, I press the prodder peddle, spurring my jata to move. “Heading out!” I call. As we start slowly for the garage doors, Railu quickly retreats to the hall doorway with Nilsa.

As Sarn approaches the doors, he lets out a howl, and I hear both Amsel and Rami laugh. I turn and look back at my mate, and see her crying in Nilsa’s arms.

Feeling the pang in my chest grow, I suppress my own tears and lean back in the saddle. I steer my jata to the western road, starting our journey to Arindell.