

Roen's Tale

Chapter 2

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Progress is slow, Rami and Amsel spend most of their time relaxing on their jata. Sarn, however, often heads off to hunt, leaving his jata to walk in tow behind another. I make better use of my time by rereading many of the scrolls, or collecting various supplies to sell when we get to Arindell.

After a week, I finally see the Pride River bridge come into view. As I turn my jata south, to follow the river to the shallows, where it's safe for the jata to cross, Amsel hollers, "Strait ahead."

I turn back and look curiously at him, and see both Rami and Sarn also looking at him. "They're not safe for jata anymore," Rami states.

Amsel smiles, "If we go one at a time, we can. Just don't let the jata stop or side step."

I look back at the old wooden bridges, "Are you sure about this?"

"Yep, I've done it before, with heavier jata than these. They creaked a lot, but held."

I sigh, with eight legs, the jata don't sway side to side like most other animals, so his argument has some weight. After a look at the far side, some fifty meters away, and gauging the near twenty meter drop to the water, I look turn back to him to protest, but Sarn growls, "You first."

Amsel rolls his eyes, and says, "Fine. Wait here." He then turns back to Sarn, "And you'll be last to cross."

Sarn scowls as we stop our jata, letting Amsel proceed alone. While still on land, he has the pack animal sidestep a couple times, lining up for a straight walk across the bridge.

Without visible hesitation, he walks the jata out onto the bridge. In response to the weight, the bridge creaks and groans, but seems to hold. After the jata takes several steps, I realize that I'm holding my breath, and let it out as a sigh. I wait till he's all the way across before I move my jata into position. With a gentle prodding, I start moving

forward.

As my jata steps onto the bridge, I hear it creak and groan as it takes the weight. Thankfully, my jata keeps walking, oblivious to the fact it's in danger. I, however, feel my heart racing, and feel myself jealous of the simple minded jata I'm riding.

I turn and look over the side of the bridge. Seeing how fast the water's rushing by, I quickly look up, and seeing both moons together, I mutter, "Great, double high tide, worse time to do a crossing."

With a sigh, I turn my attention back to the creaking bridge and my jata. Feeling him start to slow, I risk a gentle push to the prod peddle. To my relief, the jata doesn't jerk but does slowly pick up his pace.

When I reach the safety of solid ground, I breath a heavy sigh. Amsel looks at me and laughs, "What a trip, huh? And we've just started." I just shake my head as I laugh with him. We quickly turn our attention to Rami as he starts his way across the bridge.

After a few sidesteps, and a couple baulks, he manages to convince the jata to proceed. After that, his crossing the bridge is fairly uneventful, just like mine was. When Sarn start, he proves his lack of intelligence. Instead of going slow like the rest of us, he prods his jata repeatedly.

Seeing this, Amsel stands and shouts, "Stop pushing her, you'll make the bridge fall."

He doesn't listen. When his jata steps onto the bridge, we hear and see the whole thing shift towards us. Some of the boards at our end make cracking sounds, indicating that they're starting to fail.

"Sarn! You loose that jata, your walking!" Amsel shouts.

Suddenly some popping sounds come from the far end of the bridge. I quickly pull out my collapsible telescope and look at the other end of the bridge. "The ropes are breaking!" I shout, seeing the anchored end starting to splay.

"Sarn, get off the thing and run!" Rami shouts.

Sarn gets up and jumps forward off his jata. He lands with a roll and gets up into a run towards us. The jata sees him running and tries to keep up. The sudden shift in its weight causes the bridge to also shift, away from us. The ropes at our end suddenly start popping and cracking as they break.

Still several strides out, Sarn looses his footing as the boards start to shake buckle. Reacting, I grab a roll of wire vine and loop and end over a hook on Rami's jata. With a quick flick, I send the other end flying to Sarn. As he grabs the vine, the bridge buckles and drops. With a deafening, crashing sound; the bridge, the jata, and Sarn, all disappear from view.

We step to the edge and look down. The bridge and jata are being swept away, together, by the water. With it's hooks caught on the wood, the jata doesn't roll much, instead it gets drug along under the water. The few times it does roll, we see that all the equipment has been stripped off.

Amsel snarls, "Great, just...great."

From below, we hear a moan like growl. Looking down we see that Sarn is just hanging there, with his hand wrapped in the wire vine, keeping him from falling.

"Help him over the edge," I say as I start to lead Rami's jata forward, pulling Sarn up the cliff side.

Despite it being midday, they setup camp. I start tending to Sarn, while he's still

unconscious. I find myself wondering if he wrapped his hand in the vine on purpose or if it was accidental. With his hand properly bound, I start applying some scareen sap to his cuts to stop the bleeding, I normally use it for glue, but it makes a good bandage in a pinch.

After an early supper, I turn my attention back to the scrolls, while Rami starts inventorying the equipment and supplies, finding out what'll need to be replaced.

When morning comes, Sarn's still unconscious, so we rearrange the load on my jata and lay him across top and head out. Somewhere about noon, I hear him groan. I let my jata walk as I check on him.

"Sarn? Can you hear me?"

He groans, and opens an eye. "Yeah. Thanks for throwing me the line."

"Yeah, you may change your mind after Amsel has a word with you."

"How mad is he?"

I glance up at Amsel, then back at Sarn. "His hackles still haven't settled, but they no longer reach his tail."

He sighs, but doesn't move. "How long have I been out?"

I start checking his bandages as I answer, "Nearly a day. How does your arm feel?"

"It's dislocated."

"I thought it might be. Any other pains we should be aware of?"

I see him start moving slightly, checking for pains by flexing muscles. "Nothing major. You should fix my shoulder now."

"I know." I take his right hand and help him position his shoulder. As I put my foot-paw on his chest, I nod, "Ready?"

"No. Just do it."

I nod and take a deep breath. With a sharp jerk on his arm, he lets out a loud, pain-filled yelp as his shoulder pops back into place. I give him a moment to recover before I sit him up and strap his arm to his body, immobilizing it. I then move my bedroll behind him, allowing him to sit up slightly.

"You should eat something," I say, as I set a pouch of jerky, and a water bladder by him. He nods solemnly and grabs the jerky, and I return to my saddle. Behind me, I hear him sigh heavily.

As we near the village, we start passing through deserted farms. I hop down from my jata, taking the opportunity to collect some of the grains as we walk. After filling my first bag, I hand it on the jata and start on a second.

"What's that?" I hear Sarn call. I look up and see him pointing ahead. I hang the second bag with the first and sprint ahead.

A wide swatch of trampled ground stops me in my tracks. From the direction the plants lie, it's easy to tell which way it went. So I stoop to examine the ground where its path crosses the road.

The footprints I find are completely new to me. Whatever made this path, has four large, circular, featureless feet and drags a large, wide tail. "This must be what Garra was talking about."

I quickly get a pencil and my note book and draw a sketch of the foot print, when

Sarn comes down from the jata and kneels next to me. With his right arm still bound to his chest, he uses his left to check one of the foot prints. "Couple days old. Ever seen these before?"

"No, but I know whatever made 'em is not a friendly creature."

He looks at me, puzzled, "How so?"

I look at him dryly, "According to my friend Garra, it's been eating the farmers."

By the time we ride into Arindell, Sarn has agreed to take the loss of jata and equipment out of his share to compensate. The guard directs to the jata stables, and then Sarn and Rami set out to replace what equipment they can, as Amsel and I set out to find more information on the Dig.

Our first stop is the council, who surprisingly won't see us. I guess the problems with the disappearing harvesters is taking a lot of their time. Instead, I spend the day in the library, copying what little information I find from the few scrolls they have. Amsel sets out to talk to the villagers, who are mostly deer, to see if anyone knows about it.

Late in the day Amsel comes back to the library. He sits next to me and leans in close, whispering, "I found someone who says their grandfather was there. I've arranged an interview with him for the morning. He was a scout, so you'll probably need to ask the questions."

Tired of writing, I flex my cramped hand. "Beats what I've found here. There's not much of actual use among the scrolls, at least nothing that makes sense yet."

He tilts his head, "What do you mean?"

I sort through, and pull out a scroll, "This one basically says, humans were furless, while this one..." I quickly grab another scroll, "says, that they were always dressed in white robes and stood like statues. I'm really not sure what to make of that."

He scratches his cheek for a moment, "Yeah, I don't get it either. Maybe there's more at the other villages that'll help."

"I hope so. If we don't have better clues than this, this whole thing will be for naught."

"Patience, we have more places to visit yet. Go take care of your trades, and meet us at the inn across from the council hut."

"Thanks." I collect my things and put the scrolls away. After collecting my harvest from the my jata in the west gate stables, I set off to the markets. Finding a baker, I quickly sell the bag and half of grains, and make a nice profit from what little work I did. At the smith's, I trade a couple long pieces of hickory I found for a new staff. The staffs made here are of better quality than the ones from Arroket or Pridewyn.

With new staff in hand, and nearly three hundred fresh coin in pocket, I head to the jeweler to pick a charm and some leather cord. On my way, some rock carvings catch my eye and I stop to look.

"Can I help you find someone?"

I look up at the buck behind the counter and nod, "Do you have a female red fox?"

He turns and points them out. "I have several poses, and if you want, I could repaint the outfit."

I step over to look at the indicated selection, and pick out a standing pose. I notice that it's painted with a rather simple dress. Seeing it's a good likeness to Railu, I ask,

“Can you change the color of the dress?”

He takes the piece and nods, “What color would you like it to be?”

I look around, trying to see the color somewhere, and find it on a doe walking by. I quickly point her out, “Like hers.”

He grabs a pallet and quickly mixes up the red-brown. He puts a touch of paint on a piece of stone and then holds the rock in front of a nozzle as he pumps a foot bellows a few times to blow it dry. He stands and shows me the color, “This is?”

I grin, “Yes, yes it is.”

He nods, “This will be eighty coin.”

I reflexively frown, but realize that I don’t have to worry about food or lodging right now, so I smile and pay him. He then sits and starts repainting as I browse his array of figurines. I find myself quickly amazed at his selection, realizing that every known species on Arcania is represented, even the elusive Moku is represented with a cloaked figure.

The carver interrupts my musings by handing me a small wooden box. “Your piece is inside, wrapped in cloth.”

“Thank you.” I start to leave, but find myself curious, “You wouldn’t happen to have any humans, would you?”

He chuckles, “I don’t do myths.”

I find myself laughing with him, “Just checking. Thanks.”

Amsel leads me through the old part of town, through a neighborhood that looks very much like my own. He’s looking for the buck he met yesterday while I was at the library.

Rounding a corner, he stops, “Ah, here it is.” He steps up to the door and knocks.

After a short moment, an elderly doe answers the door. Amsel bows, and I quickly follow suit, “We are here to speak with Kurro about the humans.”

She nods back, “He’s been waiting.” After stepping back, she lets us in and gestures to the front room. There we see an elderly buck, sleeping in a rocking chair. She steps over to him, and with a gentle shake, “Kurro. They’re here.”

He wakes with a groan and upon seeing us, tries to sit up. “So, you want to hear my story?”

Amsel gives me a prod, so I answer, “Yes sir. I would love to hear the details. One scout to another.”

He eyes me for a moment, then asks, “How long you been a scout?”

“Thirteen years. Started when I was ten.”

He turns to the doe and nods, “Can you get it for him. I think he’s the one who’ll use it.” She nods and disappears into another room. He turns back to us, “Now, get out your pen, son. I’ve got a tale for you.”

As he starts to regale us with his adventure, I listen carefully for mentions of landmarks or natural features and note them down. When I glance at Amsel, I can tell instantly he’s completely enthralled in the story. By the time he’s done, I find that I have a fairly decent list of features to try to follow, and all are east of Three Lands.

Amsel seems somewhat disappointed as he asks, “So, you never got to see any humans?”

“Humans? Why would you want to see those things? All they ever did was stand

around and watch people.”

“So you know about them?” I ask.

“Only what my grandfather told me.” He leans back and thinks for a moment, “They’d stand and walk kinda like we do, but they have no tails, no fur, no muzzle. Cold creatures as he’d call’em.”

I flip back a couple pages, finding the footprint I sketched, and hand it to him.

“Have you ever seen this before?”

He looks carefully at it for a moment then asks, “How big was it?”

“Half meter,” I state.

He sighs, “It’s a karnesh. I’ve heard rumors of one around here. Where’d you find this one?”

“A day’s jata ride west.”

He sadly shakes his head, “I’ll need to talk to the council, tell them what’s out there.” He turns and looks at the doe, “Meila, where’s my armor.”

“You’re not going to hunt that thing,” she protests.

“No, but I need my armor for this to be an official advisement.”

She scowls at him, but concedes, and disappears again.

He hands me back the sketch, “Keep an eye out for more of those. The karnesh is great hunter; they’re quiet, don’t need to see or hear, and can eat someone in one bite.” He then points to something next to me, “That is for you. You’ll need it where you’re going.”

I look and find a folded paper. Opening it, I see that it’s a crudely drawn map. He smiles and says, “Sorry about the quality, Shon was never a very good artist.”

I look it over, recognizing some of the landmarks, but there are several symbols that I don’t recognize. “What are all these markings?”

“Only Shon knew that, and he’s gone. He had other notes with that, but when we got back, Grere thought it best to split everything up, before we went home. I got the map.”

I quickly flip back to the notes I made from his tale, “Where’s Grere now?”

“Lanketh, I think. He’s a black and white rabbit. Shon lived in Lorholt, raccoon. Uhm, Teras lives in Three Lands, on the island, crafty weasel.” He scratches his head in thought, “Vit lives in Dendros, manages the ice mines, or used to. Mika, she’s in Pridewyn, in charge of the Trials.”

He suddenly stands as Meila comes back with his armor. “If you pups will excuse me, I have to report your finding to the council.”

I stand, “Would you like me to accompany you. I did sketch the footprint after all.”

“Thank you, but no. They already have a number of scouts that have reported those odd footprints. I hadn’t seen one yet and regaling my story to you brought back those memories clear as day. I need to tell them all I know.”

I collect my things, and thank him, as does Amsel, before excusing ourselves. On the way back to the inn, Amsel turns to me, “Why’d you want to go with him?”

“Learn more about the karnesh. Obviously he’s run across one before.”

“It’s in the book of myths, didn’t you read it?”

Nearing the inn, I chuckle, “Not all of it. I was focused on the humans and the Dig.”

He opens the door to our common room, and says, “Well, read the rest, it may help.”

I nod, “I’ll do that.” I grab my pack and have a seat at the table. After pulling out my other notes, I find the book and start reading about the karnesh.

Amsel turns his attention to Rami and Sarn. “How much were you able to replace?”

I hear Rami grunt, “Just some tools, bedroll, some canvas. I stayed away from the more expensive stuff. Check at our next stop.”

“Jata?”

“No, the only one here belongs to the council, and it’s setup for pulling.”

He sighs, “Well, our next stop’s Dendros. Roen and I need to find someone named Vit.”

Sarn lets out a huff, “Vit? sounds like a squirrel’s name.”

“If he is, he’s a smart one, had something to do with the ice mines for a while.”

“He was also a seeker,” I add. “If you wanted something, or someone found, he could do it.”

“How? He never said Vit was a seeker.”

I turn the page in the book, still reading about the karnesh, and say, “I listened to his words, not the story. Vit was always the one finding things.”

“Is that so?” Sarn says. “Wonder what he could find for us.”

“He was part of a party that found the Dig sixty years ago. I don’t think there’s much he can do for us now,” Amsel chides, “except help translate the code on the map.”

Not long after, Janik, the server for our rooms, comes and announces that supper will be served shortly. I put the book in my pack, and follow the others out to the dining room.