

Roen's Tale

Chapter 3

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Nearly half a day out from Arindell, on the southwest road to Dendros, I reach into my pack for the book. “Where’s the book?” I shout.

“You had it last night,” Rami states.

“I know I had it last night, I put it in my pack before supper. It’s not there now.”

“I bet that buck took it,” Sarn growls, from the back of Rami’s jata. “I smelled him in the common room last night.”

“Great, just great.” I quickly check my pack, and find myself relieved. “Well, that’s all he took. The scrolls are all still here.”

“May I suggest we not leave those unattended,” Rami states.

“I have copies of those in my notes,” I hold up my satchel, “and they don’t leave my side.”

“Good, but what happens if we loose you?” Sarn asks.

I laugh, “I have a mate to get back to. You *won’t* lose me.”

I hear both Amsel and Rami laugh. Sarn though, hops down and trudges ahead. Figuring he needs to let off some steam, I reach into my satchel and pull out the box from the carver. I open it and unroll the wrapped statue within.

The miniature Railu rolls into my hand. Giving it a loving look, I sigh, “If you were only the real one.” I grit my teeth, trying to control my feelings, and then carefully put the figurine away.

Pulling out my notes and the map, I start reviewing both, seeing what I can learn.

Sarn grumbles as he lies on the back of my jata. Not having one of his own is really irritating him.

“Sarn, why do we have to suffer the fact you lost your own jata?” Rami chides.

“Why do you keep reminding me that I lost the jata?”

“Will you two cut it out,” Amsel shouts. “You’re beginning to sound like and old mated couple.”

I wrap my hand around my muzzle to keep from laughing, but the sound still comes out, sounding more like a snort than a laugh.

“What are you laughing at?” Sarn growls.

I quickly compose myself, “Nothing, nothing.”

He chuckles, “That’s what I thought.”

Suddenly Amsel stands, draws his bow, and aims at something off to the left.

Rami follows suit, also aiming to the left. Curious, I stand and try to see, but before I can, they both loose their arrows.

From the tall grasses comes a yelp that I recognize as a krindo. It comes running out of the grasses, with both arrows lodged in its back leg. Sarn leaps from my jata and quickly decapitates it.

Amsel smiles, “You kill it…”

“...You clean it,” Rami finishes.

“WHAT!?” Sarn screams.

“Well, if you’d let me kill it, I’d clean it,” Rami states.

Sarn grumbles, “I didn’t want it to get away.”

“I’ll clean it,” I find myself saying, “and I get to keep the scales.”

Defeated, he sighs, “No, I’ve got it.” He sets the krindo on a small cutting platform on the back of my jata, then asks, “Why do you want the scales?”

“Sell them to the jewelers, they love the clear scales.”

“I never would have thought of that.”

I smile down at him. “Having a mate opens your eyes to many things, my friend.”

He chuckles, “If you say so.” He steps up on a foot board and starts field dressing the kill, so I prod the jata back into motion.

After nearly an hour, Sarn hands a small bag up to me. “What’s this?”

“The scales. You wanted’em, right.”

“Yeah. You don’t?”

“Never really needed the extra money.”

I hang the bag on a hook by my pack and ask, “Why’d you take the job anyway?”

He steps back down and I watch as he continues to dress the carcass, “I don’t know, get to kill stuff.” He sighs, and starts to peel the skin off.

Watching him, I quickly realize that he’s planning on turning the skin into a water bladder. It’s not uncommon for someone to field dress a kill, but he’s going the extra and making sure that the creature’s useful for more than just meat. Something I’d normally do. “Really, not for the adventure?”

He stops for a moment and looks up at me for a moment. “No,” he calmly answers, then turns his attention back to his work.

Figuring the conversation over, I grab my telescope and look down the road. I notice right away that the trees are nut bearing, we’re approaching the outskirts of Dendros.

“We’ll be there in a few hours,” I call out. “There’s a grove of oak trees ahead.”

“Good, I’d love a shower,” Rami states.

“And to get one of those fluffy tails wrapped around you?” Amsel adds.

Rami shrugs, “Maybe? What of it?”

Amsel rolls his eyes, “I saw you with that rabbit back at the inn.”

“Hey, she came on to me,” Rami protests. “Besides, I’d rather have a long fluffy

tail wrapped around me.”

“Snow leopard?” Amsel asks.

He smiles, “Maybe, as long as she wasn’t the hardened warrior type.”

Sarn laughs now, “You want a lap cat.”

Rami laughs, “I guess it’d be nice. I do find their purring to be quite relaxing.”

“Did the rabbit purr for you?” I ask teasingly.

“Rabbits can purr?” he counters.

“I’ll take that as a no, and yes, rabbits can purr.”

I hear him sigh heavily, “Amazing how one question can change your perspective on things.”

Behind me, Sarn chuckles, “Thought you showed her a good time, huh?”

“Well, she definitely showed me one.”

We all laugh, and Amsel adds, “Sometimes, it’s not about *you* having a good time, it’s about you proving that you care that she has one too.”

“Where’s the fun in that?”

I smile and glance back at him, “Rami, you’ll never keep a mate unless you figure that out. Females have a different perspective on that than we males. Trust me, my mate does.” I use the telescope to recheck the road ahead, and see a few harvesters collecting nuts from the trees. “Not that many are interested in you for money, or the way you look. Some actually want a future, someone who cares about them like they care about you.”

Rami draws a heavy sigh, then suddenly starts laughing. I look back at him and see that he’s holding his stomach, laughing harder and harder.

Amsel looks over at him, “What’s so funny?”

He takes a few breaths, trying to get back some control. After a moment, he manages to point and gasp, “Squirrel fell out of the tree.”

We all turn to look and see a male black squirrel standing in the road. Having heard Rami laugh, he’s curiously looking our way as he brushes himself off. After a moment he heads back into the trees.

“Well, he could have at least said hello,” Amsel states.

“Probably paid by the kilo,” Sarn growls.

I lean back in the saddle, as we start passing under the trees, and notice that there are several squirrels in the branches overhead. “Hello. Do any of you know someone named Vit?”

Receiving several negative responses, I politely wave and thank them. I repeat the question every so often as we come to new groups of gatherers, until a young red squirrel surprises me by dropping from the tree to land next to me.

“What’cha lookin’ for my grampa for?” she asks, cheerfully.

I gesture to the others, “We were hoping he could help us.”

“With what?”

“We’re looking for a place.”

She smiles, “What place?”

“It’s called the Dig,”

“What’s that?”

Sighing, I ask, “Where’s your grandfather?”

She looks up at the Sky, then back at me. “Office.”

“Where’s that?”

“Road to the ice mines.”

“Thank you,” I nod. “Shouldn’t you be getting back to work?”

“Oh, this is my family’s farm. I don’t work.” She suddenly sits on my lap and wraps her arms and tail around me. “You’re really cute.”

I find myself leaning back away from her, somewhat put off by her directness. “Thanks.”

“I’m a fox squirrel.”

I hear Sarn snicker, prompting her to look over my shoulder at him. “Hi!”

“Young lady,” Amsel says. “Would you be kind enough to introduce us to your grandfather?”

“Sure.” She turns back to me, “Can I sit here?”

“You can sit over here,” Rami states.

She looks over at him, and then happily says, “No, I’m good.”

I hear both Sarn and Amsel laugh, either at Rami being declined, or at my predicament. “My name’s Arily. What’s yours?”

“Roan.”

“I’m Amsel, that’s Rami and Sarn.”

She looks between them and then back at me. “So, do you like red. I like red, and black and white and...”

Her voice trails on, nonstop, for the next two hours. I tolerate her presence, mostly because she’s related to who we need to talk to, but also, her voice is actually pleasant, not shrill like most of the other squirrels I’ve talked to.

By the time we reach Dendros’s stables, I’ve heard all about her time in school, two trips to Arindell and her first four love interests. From the details of her stories, and her actions, I quickly deduce that I might be her fifth. Something I find bothersome, yet oddly interesting.

After I collect my needed gear and satchel, Amsel and I follow Arily through the village. She continues talking, telling us about anything that seems to come to mind, whether it be who she knows that lives nearby or something that she saw happen.

When we finally reach Vit’s house, a larger dwelling on the outskirts, she leads us in, and calls out, “Grampa, I got some friends that wanna meet you!” Both Amsel and I sigh, not really the way we wanted to be announced, and have a seat to wait.

After a few moments, an elderly squirrel slowly comes out from a hallway, he gives us a once over before sitting in a lounge chair across from us. There’s no doubt in my mind that he’s seen some action. There are nicks in both his ears and his tail’s obviously been broken in a couple places, leaving permanent kinks.

Vit lets out a tired groan, “Come to talk to the old ice miner, huh?”

“Yes. We were told you could help us,” Amsel states politely.

Vit frowns, “My days as a seeker are long over. All I can do now is talk.”

“That is fine, all we’re seeking is information.”

Arily happily sits next to me with a small bowl of mixed nuts, as Vit asks, “What kind of information?”

“About the Dig.”

I quickly pull out my notebook and the map, “Kurro gave us this, but he said he didn’t have any idea what the symbols mean.”

He leans forward as I show him the map. “I haven’t thought about that place in

nearly fifty years,” he sighs. “I suppose it’s time I talked about it. TEAK!”

From somewhere unseen comes a response, “WHAT?”

“Boy, I need you to go to my office and bring me my strongbox.”

“Gimme a minute.”

“While he does that, can I ask why you’re looking for the dig?”

I look to Amsel, and he says, “I found this book one day. It said it was a book of myths, but I knew one of the stories to be true, the facts were just misinterpreted.”

He nods, then asks, “Why the Dig though?”

Amsel smiles, “Adventure.”

“Hardly a reason to go chasing a myth.”

Amsel tilts his head curiously, “Why’d you go?”

“We were looking for humans. Shon got the wild idea that we should see if they were still there and offer help.”

Suddenly, a large black and brown squirrel comes into the room, “Your box.” He sets the small strongbox on the table between us and leaves. Arily sits up and takes interest in the simple, but heavy wooden box.

“Thanks Teak.” Vit then presses a small panel on the side, and we hear a click. After he sets the lid aside, he takes out a small notebook. It’s a simple and leather bound, much like my own, but I can tell that it’s seen a lot of use.

He looks at it for a moment, then offers it to me, “Here, my notes from the trip. Not much about directions, but has some good things about animals and foods we found along the way.”

“Thank you.” Setting my own notebook aside, I carefully take the notebook and start looking through it. A piece of paper falls out and I carefully pick it up.

“You’ll need that,” he states. “It’s part of Shon’s notes. There were two pages, Grere, Mika, Teras, and I each got half a page. Shon kept the cipher, I’d hope one of his kids has it now.”

He then starts rooting through the box again, setting various papers and some trinkets aside as he does. Arily starts picking them up, looking at each one carefully. I put the paper back in his notebook and tuck both my notebook, and his, into my satchel.

He then pulls out small box, and out of that, an odd looking contraption. He then smiles at me, “Do you know what this is?”

I grin back at him, “That, is a sextant.”

“Good, but do you know how to use it?”

I tilt my head, “No, I do not.”

He grins, “Well, my boy, as a scout, you should. If you have the time, I’ll teach you how to use it, then give it to you.” He sighs, turning it over in his hands, “I haven’t used it since then anyway, just been keeping it clean.”

I look to Amsel, who nods, “If it’ll help us find it, it’s important enough to make the time.”

Vit nods at him. “Not only that, it’ll help keep you from getting lost. I believe all scouts and seekers should have one, but the jewelers gripe about how difficult they are to make.”

I nod, “When do you want to start teaching me?”

“If you stay for supper, tonight.”

“Should I get you a room at the inn?” Amsel asks.

"We'll be past dark. I have a room for you here," Vit states. Beside me, Arily smiles, prompting me to sigh.

Amsel grins and pats me on the back, "See you tomorrow."

"Thanks."

He spends the evening teaching me. I take readings from the sun, the moons, and the rings, and he shows me how to translate all that into latitude. He also teaches me how to use it horizontally, to maintain a truer heading. Arily stays close by, watching me as I learn the device.

After the sun descends, he starts by teaching me some constellations and stars. Starting with the northern star, I take a reading and convert that to a latitude. Fortunately, that number agrees with the one I got with the rings, meaning both are accurate.

After several more readings, he nods, "I believe you have what you need now. Go, get some sleep. My notes should be able to keep you close to the right course."

"Vit, why are you giving me this? It's got to be worth a fortune."

He leads me back into the house as he chuckles. "You've met my granddaughter. You know she'd never appreciate anything like that. Besides, you'll need it where you're going."

I carefully place the sextant back in its box, "Aside from thank you, I don't really know what to say."

He pats my shoulder, "Come back alive." He turns and looks into the kitchen, where Arily is. "Someone has a crush on you."

I sigh, "I know. On our way here, I got to hear her life story."

He chuckles, "Yes, she does tend to talk a lot, usually scares off her love interests."

"So I've heard."

He looks her way for a moment, then back at me. With a tilt of his head, he says, "You're not really bothered by her antics, so, that means that you're interested in her, or..."

"I have a mate," I nod. "I don't know if there's room in my heart for her, too."

He frowns as he looks back to the kitchen. "You should tell her you have a mate already."

"I was just trying to figure out how."

He sighs and nods, then heads off to bed. Arily comes out of the kitchen, holding a bowl of berries and nuts. "Wanna snack?"

I sit on the couch and sigh, "Arily, we need to talk."

She tucks her tail and sits next to me, "Bout?"

"I realize that you like me, but I need to tell you that I have a mate back home. One that I'm dedicated to."

Her expression doesn't change, "Ok. Can I tell you somthin?"

Puzzled by her reaction, I tentatively say, "Sure."

She bumps her nose to mine, "That's sweet," and gets up and walks towards her bedroom.

I sigh, pick up my things, and head to the guest room. I lie down and take out the figurine of Railu and look at it. "I miss you, my love." I sigh, and put the figurine away, it's only been a month, and I'm wanting to go home.

A sudden scuffling sound from the hall catches my attention, and I peek out the

door. Seeing nothing, I lie back down and blow out the candle. As I lay there, wondering what my mate is doing, the bed shakes slightly and I feel someone side up against me.

With a quiet sigh, I realize who it is. "What are you doing?"

Arily snuggles into me, "You're comphy, can I sleep with you?"

I look down at her, "What's your fascination with me?"

"You're a red fox. I've never seen one in person before."

"You're kidding."

"No, I'm not. Can we get some sleep now? I'm tired."

"One last question, why are you fascinated with foxes?"

She snorts a laugh, "Duh, I'm a fox squirrel."

I sigh heavily, put my arm around her, and try to go to sleep.