

Roen's Tale

Chapter 5

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As we pack our supplies on our jata, Sarn and I suddenly smell something foul. We both stop our work and turn to see Rami walking up to his jata. From his blood shot eyes and the smell, Sarn quickly makes a conclusion.

“What did you get sprayed with?”

Having realized what the smell is, I state, “I don’t think it’s a what, but more of a whom.”

Amsel comes in from the other end of the stables, and when he gets close enough he suddenly backs up and bellows, “What is that smell!?”

Sarn hollers, “Rami got sprayed.”

“I did not!” he counters.

I climb onto the saddle of my jata, and look down at him, “They why do you smell like that?”

He stops and sniffs himself. “I don’t smell anything.”

Sarn gives him an odd look, “If I smell you too much, I’ll loose my sense of smell too.” He then steps out into the open, just beyond the stable doors and shakes his head.

I prod the jata into walking and guide it out the door. Once there, I blow my nose a couple times, trying to purge the smell from my nose. I turn and call back, “I bet it was that waitress he hit on. What was her name...?”

Rami takes the bait and asks, “Mina?”

I laugh, “Thought so, you got sprayed by a skunk.”

He climbs up on his jata and sits for a moment. As he starts his jata moving, he states, “I don’t remember her spraying me.”

Amsel laughs as he climbs his jata, “Doesn’t have to be a full spray, she could leak a little on you and that’d do it.”

Sarn climbs up on my jata and takes his seat, “Which way we going?”

Rami quickly answers, “Three Lands.”

Amsel looks at him for a moment, “Why?”

I sigh and state, "Because their setting up for the Trials, that means that Mika is currently sequestered, and will be for the duration."

Amsel sighs, "So why don't we go directly to Burrowfield?"

"At our current rate, if we go skip Three Lands now, we'll be going through it during the rainy season."

Rami laughs, "Ever try to swim to the island in the rainy season?"

He holds his hands up in mock surrender, "Alright, I concede. We go to Three Lands."

Rami smiles, and I chuckle, as I turn my jata to the east, onto the road for Three Lands.

Having decrypted the map, and learning that most of its markings are simply numbers, I spent some time copying the painting into my notebook. Now I sit trying to decode it. I've learned quickly that it's not as easy as the map was. This has both numbers and letters, and to make it worse, they overlap.

Taking a break, I sit up and look around, we're a day or two away the halfway point between villages, and I see broken carts. I drop the notebook in my satchel and hop down from the jata. As it keeps walking, I check out one of the broken carts.

Apparently seeing my interest, Amsel asks, "What is it?"

I turn to him and say, "Weapon marks, arrows, swords, even axes."

Sarn stops my jata and turns to me, "So?"

"These carts weren't abandoned because they broke, they were attacked," I state.

Both Rami and Amsel pull their bows and ready an arrow. "Can you tell how many, and how recent?"

After a quick double check, I state, "At least two swords, an axe, maybe a dozen different arrowheads."

Sarn hops down and starts sniffing around. "Two days ago, maybe more."

"Cart's damage is older than that." I look around, and then head for another cart. "This one's older yet." Upon further inspection, I add, "Better add a club to the weapons, too."

Sarn looks around, and grunts, "Great, three or four melee, and I'd bet two or three archers."

"At least," I add.

Rami slowly scans the trees and Amsel state, "Keep your ears, nose, and eyes open."

Sarn takes lead, and I quickly remount my jata and prod it into motion. Behind me, I hear the others put on their helmets, so I grab my bow, and string it. I then put my cloak on, while it doesn't offer much protection, it does hide details of where your armor is and isn't.

We follow Sarn for hours, as he darts from side to side on the road. This is why he's along. He's a hunter, and not in the usual sense. He does bounty work, bringing in criminals or menacing creatures. Every time he darts out of sight, chasing a smell, I draw my bow. Staying ready incase he comes back with something, or someone.

On one such hop into the trees, things seem to go silent for a moment. We only hear the sounds of the wind and creatures until a sudden growl, followed with the clash of swords.

I quickly jump to the ground, and approach the area where the sounds of the fighting are coming from. Hearing a sudden yelp, followed with breaking branches, I quickly step aside as a body comes flying out of the underbrush. I turn and watch it land head first on the ground. The first things I notice is that it's a he, he's a dingo, and there's blood on his mouth.

Sarn comes out of the brush, sword drawn and arm bloodied. "Damn dog bit me," he growls. Noticing that the dingo's not moving, he adds, "Is he dead already?"

I drop the bow and get out a dagger. Putting it to the dingo's chin, in case he's pretending, I check for life. Not finding any, I sheath the dagger and pick up the bow. "Dead. Probably broke his neck when he landed. He's just a scout, probably supposed to keep an eye out for travelers, and report back."

Sarn sighs and starts taking the dingo's equipment. "We better keep moving, there might be more." After removing the few pieces of armor from him, Sarn throws him into the brush. "The scour bugs will make short work of him."

After he secures the scavenged equipment, I toss him a green chuko fruit. He quickly crushes it over the bite and then rubs it into his fur, and lets out a low growl. The chuko is poisonous to eat, but makes a great antiseptic. When applied to a fresh cut, it burns, since it contains alcohol.

After wrapping his arm with a strip of cloth, he takes lead, and we proceed forward again.

After three days of being constantly on guard, Sarn climbs up on the jata and takes his seat. "I think we're in the clear now," he grumbles.

"I agree, haven't seen any broken carts since midday."

He sighs heavily as he settles into his saddle, "Be nice to get a full night's sleep."

"I'd normally agree with you, but I haven't been sleeping well anyway."

I hear him lean forward, and whisper, "You slept well enough with that waitress."

I give him a curious look, "How'd you..."

He taps his nose, "I have an excellent sense of smell, remember?"

I chuckle, and reach into my satchel for my notebook. Finding instead a small box, I pull it out and recognize what it is. I sigh heavily, I forgot to give Niva the fox paw necklace I got for her.

I put it back in my satchel and pull out the notebook. Having made little progress over the last few days, I start decoding the painting again. When I get to the third line, I realize that the painting is a series of dates, and after some comparison to the map, I realize that it's just a timeline of when they got to each corresponding numbered point on the map.

I pull out the half sheet that I got from Vit and start decoding what I can of it. Before too long I realize that each line is just multiple sets of numbers, but the symbols between the sets are something I don't readily recognize. Having double checked the original cipher, and not finding it there, I put my notes away and simply relax, enjoying the evening.

With a population nearly double any other village, Three Lands is a very busy place. Knowing our destination though, we head to the center of the village, to the island of River Rock. While it's not a big island, it does have enough room for the elderly that

live there, and their caregivers. Most move there to be left alone, or feel safer, but if you take the time to swim out to see them, most will give you some of their time in return.

As we approach, Sarn stops, "I'm not going out there."

I give him a sideways look, "I'm really the only one that needs to go."

Sarn nods, and Amsel asks, "How you going to keep your notes dry?"

I look at Sarn, and he hands me the wide mouth water bladder I asked him make. "Like this." Opening the top, I drop my notebook inside, and reclose it. I then hand Amsel my satchel. "Keep it safe."

He nods as he hooks it over his shoulder. I tie the bladder to myself as I turn back to the island and state, "I'll meet you at the inn."

While not the best of swimmers, like the flat foots, web foots are, I can hold my own. With a small running start, I dive into the water, and paddle out to the island. After climbing up on the small dock, I turn and wave to the others. They wave back and I shake myself dry.

I turn to the steps and see a young otter holding a towel. As she offers it to me, she asks, "I must admit, we don't get many foxes out here. Who are you hear to see?"

Accepting the towel, I start drying my arms, "I'm here to see Teras, if he'll see me."

She shakes her head apologetically, "He normally doesn't see people, but I will check for you. Your name?"

"My name is Roen." Realizing that he won't know me, I add, "Tell him that Kurro and Vit sent me."

She nods and climbs the steps as I dry my head, and follow. As she heads into the nearest hut, I have a seat on a bench and get my notebook out of the bladder. After I hang the towel and bladder up to dry, I give myself another shake, loosening my fur.

When she comes out, she gives me a curious look, "He wants to know if you have the key?"

I smile and nod to her, "Yes, I have Shon's key."

She smiles, "He will see you then. Follow me."

She leads me down through the hut to a patio on the other side. She gestures to a table under an umbrella, where a balding weasel sits.

I nod to her, "Thank you," and step over to the table. "Teras?"

He motions to the chair across from him, and asks, "Show me the key."

I sit, and open my notebook, showing him the copy I made. "I found the original in a painting his son had."

He looks at it for a moment, then waves the otter back over, "Saell, would you please fetch that framed picture in my room for me?"

She sighs, "The one by the door?"

He nods, and she darts off, back into the hut. Teras looks after her for a moment, then sighs, "If I was only forty years younger."

"I'll take that as a complement," she states, coming back out the doors, "but I have a mate already. You know that." She sets the picture on the table and heads off, answering someone else's call.

He slides the picture to me. "Pop that off," he states, pointing to a board on the double frame. I pull a dagger and pry the board off, only to find a rolled piece of paper.

He takes the rolled piece of paper as I press the board back into place. "I think you may already know what this is." He unrolls the paper and looks at it for a moment. With a sigh, he slides the page to me. "Did Vit give you that toy of his?"

I nod, "The sextant, yeah, taught me how to use it too."

"Good, good. Have you figured out what it says yet?"

I look up at him, not sure what he's referring to. "Figured out what, what says?"

"The page that Vit gave you."

"Oh. Yeah, sort of. It's sets of numbers, with an odd looking symbol between them."

He leans forward and taps on one of the symbols on the page, "This one?"

"Yeah."

"I'm not sure what it is, but whenever Shon was making these notes, he was watching Vit play with that toy. Hope that helps you."

I nod, "Thanks."

He leans back in his chair and turns to watch Saell again. "Be careful out there, when we left we had nearly twenty people. Only six of us got back." He then lets out a heavy sigh, giving me the impression that he's done talking.

Not wanting to be ungrateful, I say, "Thank you for your time." Not getting a reaction, I sigh, collect the page and notebook, and rise to leave.

As I pass through the door, Saell meets me. "Did you learn what you needed?"

Caught a bit off guard, I look back at her, "Parden?"

"You're the first he's seen in years," she explains. "The few that have tried to see him, have been looking for information. Why did he see you?"

I sigh, figuring she should know that answer. "Because I've already talked with his friends."

"The two names you mentioned?"

I nod, "Yeah. A long time ago, they went on a long trip together. I'm part of a group wanting to repeat that."

"The three you were with before you swam out?"

"Yes."

She suddenly becomes distant, as if thinking about something. Suddenly she takes my arm, "Come with me. I need to tell you something." She leads me through the hut and back out to the dock where I climbed out of the water. We sit on the bench as she begins.

"Lately, he's been having bad, vivid dreams. He'll start screaming and fighting." She sighs for a moment, then continues, "He's seen something, something that's frightened him more than anyone should be."

Seeing the sincerity on her face, I ask, "Has he talked about it, while awake?"

She shakes her head, "He won't even acknowledge that he heard the question when we've asked."

I slowly take my water bladder from the post and put my notebook in it. "Any idea what it was?"

"No, but I think it was either something big, or a lot of somethings. Sometimes he'll scream things about 'it,' and others he'll say 'they.' I'm not even sure if he's talking about the same thing."

I nod, "Out there in the Wilds, could be both."

Her expression turns to one of awe, "He went into the Wilds?"

“Yeah, to a place called the Dig.”

She looks down, somewhat saddened, “Oh, that. He’s mentioned it a few times, while asleep, but I never thought...”

I gently rub her shoulder, “He’s been somewhere, seen things that not many can say they have dreamed of. Part of what he told me was that the group he was with, started as twenty, only to come back as six.”

She sniffs, obviously feeling sad for the weasel, “He...they lost fourteen people...that’s what he’s been dreaming about, losing them.”

I nod, “I know if I was traveling with that many, they would become friends, and I would regret losing any of them.”

She nods again, wiping her eyes as she stands, “Thank you...and good journey.”

I bow to her, “And I, in turn, thank you.” I pull a few coins from my pouch and drop them in the donation box, before diving into the water.