

Roen's Tale

Chapter 6

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The trip to Burrowfield is relatively quiet, at least at first. After I told the others what I learned from both Vit and Saell, all three became a bit distant. I could tell that both Amsel and Rami were considering the necessity of the trip. Sarn, though, seemed more mellow, as if contemplating his own mortality.

Despite that, Sarn was the first to come back around to his usual behavior, darting off to hunt when he felt like it. I've spent most of the time working on Shon's notes. Having only the bottom halves of the pages, I can do little more than just translate the numbers.

By the time we enter the village, Amsel and Rami are back to their normal selves and quickly see about restocking our supplies and tending to the jata. I set out for the market to sell what I've gathered and pick up some supplies of my own.

With no one to see in this village, Amsel and I spend much the evening in the library looking for any relevant information. Unfortunately finding little, we return to the inn and head out in the morning for Lanketh.

While Rami and Sarn stable the jata, Amsel and I set out to find Grere. It turns out that finding an old black and white rabbit among a thousand rabbits and hares is not as easy as we hoped. We spend much of our first two days trying to find anyone who knows him.

On the third day we change tactics. With Rami's help, we head to the office of deeds, hoping he has a hut in his name. It takes us several hours, but we manage to find him. Amsel asks where the home is located, and the officer directs to the north road, to a hut far out in the marshes.

"No wonder we couldn't find him," Amsel mutters as we leave the office.

Rami sighs and rubs his head, "Why would a rabbit want to live in a marsh?"

"I would bet, to be left alone," I state, leading the others to the north road.

"Why?"

“Well, if no one in the village knows him, that means he doesn’t come in. He lives in a marsh, somewhere no one wants to go, that says he doesn’t want company.” I shrug, “Seems pretty straight forward to me.”

“Like Teras?”

“No, Teras just didn’t want to know people,” I state. “He wanted to watch them.”

Amsel huffs, apparently not happy with my assessment. “We’re going to have a problem with him, aren’t we?”

Looking out the north road, I sigh, “Most likely.”

It takes us nearly two hours, but we manage to find his home. It’s a small hut, sitting on a peninsula, surrounded by nothing but stagnant, mossy water, and tall weeds.

Looking out across the moss to it, Rami asks, “Uhg, what’s that smell?”

“Really?” Sarn counters, “You can smell that, but not the skunk that got you?”

“I haven’t slept in a swamp.”

“No, just a skunk,” Amsel barks. He then looks at me, “Why’s there no path?”

I draw my short sword, and start making a trail to the peninsula, “Let’s find out.”

Sarn wrinkles his nose, “I may already know.”

When the weeds give way to moss covered ground, we slowly approach the hut. One thing I find more worrisome than the lack of a path, is that the smell is getting stronger.

When Amsel knocks on the door, it drifts into the hut, proving it’s not latched. He gently pushes the door open and calls, “Hello? Grere? Anyone?”

Not getting a response, he steps in, then comes back out coughing. “He’s in there.”

Sarn grits his teeth and steps in. When he comes back out, he shakes his head. “That’s what I thought. He’s not alive.”

Rami’s jaw drops, “That smell? It’s...him?”

I nod, “Yes. Now it’s going to be really hard to get that information.” With a sigh, I sit on a stack of wood near the hut’s door.

Puzzled, and looking sick, Rami asks, “What do we do now?”

Amsel starts to pace for a bit, thinking, then turns to us. “Rami, Sarn, go back and tell a mediator what we found. Lead them back out if need be. Roen and I will stay here.”

Sarn nods, but Rami asks, “Should we bring anything back for you?”

I check the sun’s position, realizing that it’ll be near supper before they get back, “Yeah, food.”

They nod, and head off back to the village. Amsel turns back to me and sighs, “Let’s see if we can get the windows open, air this place out.”

I sigh, “Alright.” Knowing he won’t be able to go back in it’s aired out, I prop the door open and head in. I’m not prepared for what I see.

The hut is a mess and reeks of decay. There are all sorts of things piled against the walls, up to the windows. Whatever furniture he has, is either buried under or setting on top of the trash. As I lean over some, trying to reach a window, I see some bones, parts of a chair, and even some rotting fruit.

Fighting the need to breath, I quickly open the window. The light breeze quickly brings in much needed fresh air. I quickly start opening the other windows, being careful not to look too closely at the center of the room, where Grere’s remains sit in a chair.

I return to the doorway and take a few breaths, calming my churning stomach with fresh air. After a few moments, I turn and look at the rabbit. Without getting closer to him, I can see that he died in the chair, from what, though, I'm not sure.

My curiosity satisfied, I step back out and sit on the woodpile. Amsel has a seat on a bench by the fire pit and shakes his head.

"What am I going to do now? We can't just sit around and look through all his stuff for a piece of paper...can we?"

I move over to the bench, "That's your call, but I would wait."

"Wait, for what?"

"Grere was the one who said to break up the notes. He most likely put his in a very safe place. Look, Vit had his in a box, Shon put his in a painting, and Teras had his in a picture frame. His is probably in something, too, but let's see what the mediator has to say first."

He nods and hangs his head, "Alright." After a moment, he looks up at me, "I knew there was a reason I wanted you on this. You're better than any wolf would have been."

"Yeah, but at what cost? It's been seven months since I've seen my mate, that half a year." I sigh heavily and reach into my satchel for the figurine. Looking at it, I frown, "That's too long to be away from the one you love." Hearing him sigh, I look over at him.

He sits, holding a figurine of his own, and I recognize it as Nilsa, his chow house servant. "I should not have her alone."

"She's not alone, Railu's with her."

"I know, I've saw them talking before we left."

I look back at my own figurine, wondering if I should tell him. After a moment, I make a choice. "There's something I need to tell you..."

"She's pregnant, I know. I've knew before we left."

"Did she tell you?"

"No. I know her, she wouldn't haven't told me if she thought it would have changed my mind."

"Would it have changed your mind? She she'd told you?"

He sighs again, and I see a tear roll down his muzzle. "Probably, if she's said it. Since she didn't, I know she didn't want me to stay." He hangs his head again, saddened by that confession.

"No, she didn't want you to give up your dream," I correct. "She cares about you too much to let that happen."

He lets out another heavy sigh, closing his eyes. "I wish I would have known that."

"Well, if it's any consolation, I think she wants it that way. she's a lot smarter than she wants people to give her credit for. She has Rami thinking she's a simpleton."

He lets out a short chuckle, "I know, he thinks it's cute."

Having a smile on my face, I reach into my satchel for the bottle of whiskey. Holding up the bottle, I toast, "To our mates." I take a swig and hand him the bottle.

With a nod, he smiles, repeating my toast, "Our mates."

I look up from tending the fire to see Rami and Sarn return. Following them, is a mediator and several guards, all rabbits. As my comrades take seats around the fire, the mediator approaches me.

“What have you done inside?”

I bow to him, “Mediator. The only thing I have done is open the windows, but I would still warn of the smell, it is barely tolerable.”

He nods back, “Please wait out here. I will conduct my investigation.” The guards with him bracket the door as he steps into the hut. I sit back down by the fire, joining my friends.

After a few moments, the mediator comes back out and steps around the side of the hut. After a short moment, we hear him throw up. As he walks back out to us, he’s trembling. He looks at a guard, “Burial detail, please.”

The guard nods and signals to the others, who quickly join him. As the mediator sits next to us, they select a clear area and start digging a grave.

Rami hands the mediator a rag he’s sprinkled some perfume on. “Breathe this, it’ll help.”

The mediator gladly takes the cloth and holds it to his nose for a moment. “Is this one of those tricks you guys use in skirmishes?”

“When needed,” Rami nods.

“What now?” Amsel asks, dreading the answer.

The mediator takes a deep breath of the perfume, then states, “After he’s buried, I’d recommend burning the hut. He built it just for himself, to be left alone.” He takes another breath of the perfume, “Why were you wanting to see him anyway?”

Seeing Amsel baulk, I answer, “We were wanting to speak with him about a trip he took, several years ago.”

He nods, “The dig. I can tell you this; that’s the reason he’s way out here. That trip cost him his family.”

Amsel looks up at him, concerned. “How so?”

The mediator sighs heavily, “No harm in telling you his story now, I guess.” He sniffs the perfume again, then starts. “He was hired as a cook, and because of the size of the party, he brought his mate and apprenticing son along.

“Somewhere, on the way there, they were attacked by a group of oversized viper lizards—at least that how he described them—several of the group lost their tails, others worse, his son, one of them.”

He sighs, taking another sniff. “Some time later, on the return trip, a very large creature found them one morning. It ate nearly half the remaining party before they escaped. Some died after that, lack of food and medicine. He watched his mate die from an infection.”

He uses his sleeve to wipe a tear from his eyes, “Are you sure you guys want to go there?”

Amsel nods, surprising me. “Yes, I do. I know the found the Dig, but I’m looking for the humans that were supposed to be there.”

The mediator looks skeptically at us, “Just the four of you?”

“Yes, but knowing what they learned will help us, and a smaller group can sneak past some of the things. Besides, we’ve got the best scout in Arroket to lead us.”

Realizing how much responsibility he just put on me, I smile nervously.
“Thanks.”

The mediator nods, “I’ll wish you luck then.”

Amsel nods, “Thank you. Would you happen to know if he had any keepsakes, or something he seemed to guarded?”

The mediator shakes his head, “Not sure really. I do know he used to have a drawing of his family, but I didn’t see that in there. You’re welcome to look for it, as long as you agree to burn that down. I can’t allow it to stay like that.”

Both Amsel and I nod, “We’ll make sure to cleanse it when we’re done.”

He nods, and hearing a scuffle, we turn to see the guards carry Grere’s body, now wrapped in a blanket, out of the hut. We all sigh as they lower him into the freshly dug grave, then start to fill it in. After a moment, the mediator walks over and says a few words. After one of the guards positions a crude marker, they all bow to us and head back to the village.

With a sigh, we turn and look at the hut. Amsel shakes his head, “Guess it’s time to start looking.”

“I’d let it air out over night, start fresh in the morning,” Rami states. “It’s already starting to get late, and I’m not sleeping in that hut.”

Amsel nods. “Alright. First thing in the morning then.”

We spend the next two days pulling out all sorts of garbage, putting most in separate piles outside. Near the bottom of the piles, some of the things have composted into dirt, so we spread that around over the moss and weeds outside. Finding very little salvageable items, most of the furniture gets busted up, before being added to the wood pile.

Taking a break, late in the day, I wander around the water’s edge. Tripping over something, I turn and see a braided strand of wire vine. Curious, I pull it up. It unburies itself, one end leading to a post near the hut, the other heads off into the water. Trying to pull it from the water, I find that there’s a lot of resistance.

“Sarn, come give me a hand with this.”

He comes over, “Watch’a got?”

“Wire vine.”

He takes hold of the vine, “Braided?”

“Yeah, help me pull it out of the water.”

Together we pull, and other quickly join us, helping. It takes all four of us, but we manage to get the thing it’s attached to broke free from the bottom. From that point, we can tell it’s heavy, but it doesn’t take long to get it out of the water. We pull it up the bank a little ways before I start scraping the thick layer of mud and silt off it.

“It’s a trunk,” I state, as I throw handfuls of muck aside.

“Can you open it?” Rami asks.

Rubbing away some more of the mud, I find a lock, “Anyone find a key?”

“No, not yet.”

I sigh, “Alright, how about a chisel and hammer?”

They immediately go looking for the tools as I continue to clean off the top. It’s soon obvious that the chest cost a bit to make. The wood is tightly fitted, with metal

straps binding it together. I push it a few different ways, seeing if it's loose in any way, but the whole thing is still tight.

Sarn comes over and drops a hammer by me. "Haven't found a chisel yet. Anything else you want to try?"

I sigh and look closely at the lock. "I'm not sure, a punch maybe?"

"I'll see if I can find something."

"Thanks." I pickup the hammer and start tapping at the chest.

Rami sits next to me and asks, "What'd ya think's in it?"

"I'm not sure. The lacrylic's still intact, so it should be dry inside, but I have a feeling we'll need to take it into a locksmith. This is still too solid to break into."

"Well, let's see if we can find the key."

We spend another two days looking, but don't find a key. Rather than try to break into the chest, we take it to the locksmith, a blue-grey hare. He looks at the case for a moment, before asking, "*Where* has this been?"

"Underwater, in the marsh," Amsel states.

The smith looks up at him, surprised, "Underwater?"

"Yeah, we're not sure how long either."

He wrinkles his brow in thought as he looks back at the chest, "This could take a bit. I'll have to clean out the mechanism before I can pick it."

"How much?"

He grabs a magnifier and looks into the keyhole. After a moment, he says, "Thirty. Once I have it open, I can make you a key for ten."

Amsel sets some coins on the counter, "Open it." He then turns to us, "If you have anything you need to do, go do it. I'll stay here."

I have a seat on a bench, "I'm staying."

Sarn nods as Rami states, "We'll be back in an hour." They both take off into the markets.

Amsel sits next to me and watches the smith start to work. After a moment, he sighs, "If it's not in there, this whole thing is over."

I look curiously at him, "Why?"

"We're missing part of the story. Can't really guess at what it is either."

I sigh, "Would it help if I told you what all the numbers meant?"

He turns to me, looking hopeful. "Did you figure it out?"

I nod, "Last night, I was doing some measuring with the sextant. As I wrote down all the numbers, it occurred to me that they're all sextant readings. Now all I need to do is figure out what numbers are for sun, star, and ring. once I do that, I should be able to lead us there, even with a half page missing."

He sighs and looks back at the smith. "When I started this, I felt I had to convince you. Now, you're convincing me. Why'd you have a change of heart?"

I also look up at the smith, watching him work at the lock with his picks. "When the ones you love, make a sacrifice like ours have, we should do what we can to not disappoint them."

He nods slightly, and mutters, "Thank you."

I give him a curious look, "For?"

"Perspective."

I nod, and we sit silently until we hear a quiet clunk.

"I do believe I've got it," the smith says. We both approach as he tries to lift the lid. After a short moment he grabs a short pry bar and tries again, it starts to budge. "There we are." He hands Amsel the pry bar, "At your leisure." He then steps away, allowing us some privacy, as he tends to his business.

Amsel looks at me and sighs, "Here's hoping." He pops the lid open and we look inside. There, under a few large rocks, is a notebook. Amsel and I look at each other nervously, and he nods. Hesitantly, I reach in and move the rocks, retrieving it.

Thankfully, it's dry, and I head back to the bench while he looks for anything else among the rocks. As I open the leather cover, it breaks off. No longer wanting to open it here, I pull out my notebook and release its strap. I then bind the two notebooks together and put them back in my satchel.

Amsel, not having found anything else in the chest but rocks, looks at the smith, "What to buy it?" I chuckle as they start to haggle over a price, eventually settling on thirty coin, the same price that he paid to open it. Business done, we head back to the inn.

Rami and Sarn find us before we get there. "What was in it?" Rami asks.

"Notebook. It's too brittle to work on without a table."

"It was still dry inside?"

I chuckle, "Too dry."

He sighs, "Well, if you need help copying..."

"Need to see what's in it first."

Entering our common room, I sit at the table and pull out the notebooks. After setting mine aside, I cut the leather strap binding of Grere's and take off the cover. Fortunately the pages are in better shape than the cover, making it easier to work with.

I start reading through, and quickly learn that it's a journal. He kept a log of major events, starting when they left Three Lands. After a few pages, I start skimming through the pages, looking for anything pertaining to the code.

After setting several pages aside, I find a loose, folded sheet. Picking that out, I move the rest of the notebook aside, and carefully unfold the page. "Found it!"

Amsel sits up suddenly, "Really? Which part?"

I pull out the two lower halves and quickly start comparing them. After a moment, I match the tear to the half I got from Teras. I quickly start copying it into my notebook as I explain, "It's the second page. More important for the notes, but still lacks any symbols as to what the readings are from."

"But it's something, right?"

"Oh, yeah. I can find a way to the first available reading, but it'd be a lot easier with the ones between, and knowing what's what."

He sighs, "Alright, to Pridewyn it is."