

Roen's Tale

Chapter 8

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“I should have stayed with her.”

“Rami, will you *please* stop, it’s been two weeks. Amsel and I, both have mates we’ve left behind, too.”

“I know, it’s just...I’ve never...”

“...been in love before?” I finish for him.

“Exactly.” He sighs heavily, “I’ve never felt that connection like I do with her, and I know she felt that too. It’s hard to let that go.”

“No one expects you to,” I state, reaching into my satchel for the figuring. “I miss my mate, and, as much as Amsel won’t admit it, he misses Nilsa.”

After a moment of silence, I turn to see him poking at the last of his dressings on his arm. “I wonder if she’s had her pup yet?” he asks absently.

A bit surprised, I ask, “How long have you known?”

He shrugs, “Before we left, she seemed...different. I couldn’t figure out why until I heard her and Railu talking.”

“And you said nothing?”

“I heard Nilsa say she wanted Amsel to follow his dream, so I kept my mouth shut.”

“She’s a lot smarter than you first gave her credit for.”

“Yeah, I realized that, that day. Felt like a kick in the face, I’m usually good at reading someone, but she, she hid herself.”

I find myself chuckling at him. “She only let you see what you wanted to see. If you’d seen her any differently, would you have left her alone?”

He sighs heavily, and concedes, “Yeah, you’ve got me there.” He pokes at his bandages some more then asks, “Wonder why she did it?”

I turn back to watch the road ahead, “Hard to tell. Loyalty, love...fear? Have to ask her that some day.”

“You’re assuming we’re coming back from this.”

I turn back to him and see a very sullen look on his face. "What makes you think we won't?" I ask.

He sighs, "Well, let's see. Of the, what, twenty that went before, only six made it back. Of those, only four had any semblance of a normal life after that. What's that mean for us? At least one of us isn't coming back."

"And you've precluded that its going to be you."

He shakes his head, "I ran the numbers, it's what I do. You're a scout with a good head on his shoulders, and great solo survival skills. Sarn's a brute survivalist, can kill almost anything. Amsel's got experience that I don't have. Where does that leave me?"

Not knowing how to answer that, I simply turn back around. I can't deny that he has a point, but I just don't know what to say to allay his fears. Rather than let silence win, I say, "We'll be alright. We'll all be alright."

Arriving at Lorholt, for the second time, we quickly see to restocking our supplies. Having filled much of my own notebook, I head to the markets to pick up another.

On my way their, I'm suddenly hugged from behind, and a nose nuzzles into my neck. Being able to smell her natural musk, I quickly turn and wrap her in a hug.

"Hi there," she says, nuzzling back into my neck. "I wondered if you'd still feel for me."

"I do," I confess, reaching into my satchel, "and I'm sorry."

She pulls back suddenly. "Sorry? For what?"

"Before I left, I forgot to give you this." I open the small box, showing her the fox paw pendant.

"It's...beautiful. Thank you."

As I put it on her, I take the opportunity to nuzzle into her heck. "I've missed you," I whisper.

"And I, you." She wraps her arms around me again, and sighs heavily. "How long will you be here this time?"

Now I sigh, regretting my answer, "We'll be heading out in the morning."

She gently licks my cheek, and coos, "Well, we'll just have to make the most of tonight then, won't we."

With a gentle nip to her neck, I whisper, "I would love that."

She giggles and we head off to the markets. After picking up my new notebook, we head south through the village to a café overlooking the marshes. While not exactly a romantic view, it is a peaceful place, affording us some quite time to sit and talk.

"Did you get a chance to see her?" she asks.

"Sadly no. we didn't have a chance to get to Arroket."

She looks down at the table as she slowly takes my hands in hers. "Sorry to hear that. I was kind'a hoping you could get to see her before you headed out east."

Fighting off my tears, I breath a ragged sigh, "Yeah, me too."

Apparently sensing my feelings, she changes the subject, "So, did you get to watch the Trials?"

Welcoming the change in topic, I smile, "No, they should be starting next month."

She smiles as our waitress places our meals on the table. "Well, you have me for the evening."

I give her hands a squeeze, “We have each other.”

Climbing up on my jata, I find Rami already in the second saddle. “Letting Sarn drive again?”

He smiles, “Yeah, I think I’m getting lazy.”

I chuckle as I sit, and arrange some of my new gear. Niva climbs up and playfully slaps Rami with her tail. “Hiya, Rami.”

He blushes, “Hello Niva.”

She sits on my leg and looks at him curiously, “You’ve changed. What happened?”

“He fell in love,” I chuckle.

She looks between him and me, then states, “Wow, after your first impression on me, I’d not thought that possible.”

He sighs heavily as I turn to look at him. “Yeah, about that. I never got the chance to properly apologize for my behavior towards you.”

Hearing her gasp, and feeling her weight shift, I put my arm around her to keep her from falling. “I...well, thank you.” She turns and gives me an odd look. Not knowing what to say, I simply shrug.

“Are we going to get moving today?” Amsel asks, obviously annoyed.

“Yep. I’m just riding to the east gate,” Niva says to him. She gets comfortable on my lap as I prod the jata into a walk. After a moment, she nuzzles into me, savoring my presence as I do hers.

As we approach the east gate, I let out a light sigh and she looks up. Seeing the gate, she mutters, “Already?”

I gently nip her ear and whisper, “Yeah, already.”

She rubs her short muzzle alongside mine and sighs. “I will miss you...again.”

Unable to deny her place in my heart, I softly confess, “And now, I have two lovelies that I will miss.”

“Two reasons for you to come back. I would love to meet your Railu, to see if we could be mates, too.”

Giving her a loving hug, I admit, “I would like that, very much.”

With one last nose rub, she slowly climbs down the jata. After stepping to the ground, she leans against the gate post to watch us as we pass. Tears start to run down my cheeks as I turn to watch her, and she occasionally wipe tears from her own face.

Rami puts his hand on my arm and nods, “You’re a very lucky male, to find two worthy of shedding tears over.”

“Not so lucky, I think, that I’m leaving them behind.”

He turns to look at Niva, and says, “The things we do for love and money.”

Seeing the same broken carts we came across last time, Sarn hops down from the second seat of my jata and starts searching for bandits. Like last time, he jumps in and out of the woods on either side of the path, while we stand watch, bows ready. Having been through here several months ago, we fully expect to find more bandits.

After three days, I spot a couple fresh carts. Leery of an ambush, we stop the jata a safe distance back and I sprint ahead to them. Sarn follows, keeping his senses open, while Rami and Amsel cover us at range.

Before examining the carts, we survey our surroundings. Once satisfied that we're safe, I turn my attention to the cart. It's definitely been abandoned recently, the grass hasn't even had a chance to stand back after it was run over by its wheels.

I hear Sarn sniff the cart. "Rabbits," he mutters. "Didn't even stand a chance."

"This is very recent, maybe late yesterday, early today. Bad for the rabbits, good for us." I jog back to the jata and we start making our way through. We keep our guard up, regardless for the next few days, but find only more broken carts.

Nearly two days out from Three Lands, we come across a caravan heading our way.

The cat in the lead, a lioness in green leather armor, calls out to us, "Hello!"

Amsel hops down from his jata and jogs ahead to meet her. By the time we catch up, he turns back to us, "We'll camp here with them for the night. Roen." He motions me over, so I hop down, and approach. "Meet Mirra. She's in charge of this caravan. I'll help with our gear, I want you to tell her what we found on the road."

I nod to Amsel as he heads back to the jata. Turning to Mirra, I ask, "What do you wanna know?"

She digs into her pack, and pulls out a roughly drawn map. "If you could mark where the carts you saw are, and any encounters you had, I'd be a great help."

I quickly mark the one new cart that we passed, "This one was maybe a half a day old when we got to it...ten days ago."

"Any sign of the owner?"

"Only by scent, rabbits, Sarn thinks their were a father and a daughter."

She sighs, "We try to keep'em safe, but if they won't wait for us, there's not much we can do."

"We?" I ask, realizing that I've only seen her, some traders and a family in her group.

"Romo and I, we work these together." She turns and points to a large figure coming out of the larger tent. Seeing he's a St. Bernard, I give him a nod and receive one in kind.

I hand her back her map as I ask, "Anything else?"

She looks around, surveying the camp, then tilts her head to get me to walk with her. "Did you see any of them, of the bandits?"

I stay with her as we sentry the area. "Sarn got one, a dingo. We guest that he was a scout."

"What kind of weapons did he have?"

"That one had a couple daggers, but we saw signs of arrows, swords, clubs, and axes. My guess is, at least, six or seven attackers."

She sighs, looking around again. "At least six. I'm not sure if Romo and I can handle that many by ourselves."

"If you can manage to get the scout before he can report back, I'd bet you could get the caravan through without further incident."

"Could do that," she mumbles. "I'd have to run point, Romo's not much for stealth." I can tell by her tone of voice that she's thinking aloud, so I refrain from further comment and silently patrol the area with her.

As we finish the loop around camp she quietly mutters, "I guess that's the safest way."

“Sounds like your not comfortable with that?”

She smiles, “Yeah, I’ve never been one for stealth. More of a brute force kinda person, you know.”

I chuckle, “All to well. That’s how Sarn usually acts, but he caught the scout by surprise.”

She shakes her head, “That means he got lucky.”

“No, the way I figured it, the scout had very little, if any, formal training. When Sarn found him, he reacted by biting, not pulling his weapon.”

“Gone feral, maybe? That would explain some of the reports.” She abruptly turns to me, and nods, “Thank you, for the information and insight.”

I return her nod, “Simply performing my duty as a scout, to make the way safer for others.”

“Nothing simple about protecting lives,” she counters.

“I know, but that’s one of the reasons I became a scout, to do my part so those stronger than me, can do theirs for effectively.”

She gives me an odd look, “Never devalue what you do. In Pridewyn, scouts are in short supply, and good ones are even harder to find.” She puts her hand on my shoulder. “You would do well there, you’re comfortable around cats, smart, and not afraid to offer your opinion. Admittedly, I’ve only met you, but first impressions are everything, and yours will stay with me.”

I give a slight bow, “Thank you. After this trip is over, I may look into that. I’ll need to check with my mate first, she may not be as willing to move as I am.”

She nods, “I can appreciate that, seeking the council of your loved one is always favored.” She starts to turn away but stops abruptly. “Where are you headed?”

“After we resupply at Three Lands, we’ll be heading east out into the Wilds to find a place called the Dig.”

“Can’t say I know what that is.”

“Don’t worry, most people don’t know about it, either.”

“Well, I don’t really need to know that, not my responsibility.” She sighs as she looks around the camp again. “*They*, are.

Having packed the last of our fresh supplies on our jata, Rami stands in the evening sun, looking out across the eastern fields. I walk up beside him, and seeing the look on his face, ask, “Are you ready for this?”

Being deep in thought, his answer comes quietly, “I don’t know if I can do this. I don’t know if I can go out there, not this time.”

“Do you want to go back?”

A tear rolls down his cheek, “Truthfully, yes. Part of me wants to go back to Pridewyn and settle down with Rinel. I don’t need the money, never did. I just wanted the adventure, to see something that no one else has.”

I nod to him, “And now that you’ve found love, that’s what you want. I can understand that, I really do, but what are you going to do; are you coming with us, or are you going back to her. You don’t have much time to make up your mind, Amsel wants to get going first thing in the morning.”

“Yeah, I know,” he whispers.

As I turn to leave, I give his shoulder a squeeze, "I know how you feel, my friend."

He suddenly turns to me and asks, "How do you do it? How do you leave'm behind?"

Feeling a tear come to my eye, I reach into my satchel and pull out the small box. Opening it, pull out a sketch of Niva, and the carved rock figurine of Railu to show him. "I don't," I sniff. "Once you find someone who catches your heart, you carry them with you from then on."

He nods as he sniffs back some tears, and I put my things away as I slowly make my way back to the inn. Once there, I slowly strip out of my armor, and set the figurine and sketch on the nightstand. With a heavy, ragged sigh, I quit holding back my tears, and let myself miss them.

It's the night of First Moonstorm, the beginning of the new year. This will be the first one in three years, that I've not spent with Railu, who I wish I was with now. Having failed to talk Amsel into staying in Three Lands till after this, we now sit three days travel from the home of the best Moonstorm celebrations on Arcania.

I recline back on a fallen tree and watch as the moons draw near each other. The two moons, Nai and Terr, orbit in opposite directions, so they line up twice a month. The storm, however, only happens once a month, when the moons' orbits bring them close enough to generate the storm.

The night creatures know what's going to happen, they're all quiet, still hiding. Nothing comes out until after it's over, not even the massive, flying der'ocks. They don't like the light, and that's what Moonstorm brings, light. I take a sip of whisky, straight from the bottle, and watch as the moons start to overlap, the smaller moon, Terr, moving in front of larger, Nai.

After a few more minutes, the show starts, the flashes of light start off subtly, but quickly intensify, in both brightness and in number. Not being able to see the lightning directly, the larger moon reflects the light in localized areas, making it appear that the light is rippling across it like water. This is a particularly strong storm, and it's still getting stronger. As Nai brightens, Terr seems to darken, being with out any direct illumination.

Suddenly, as the moons hit there closest, Nai brightens considerably, and Terr seems to disappear in to blackness. For almost a minute, they appeared to be one large, rippling, ring of light, almost as bright as the sun.

Sadly, as the moons start to part, and the storm quickly subsides, having used up much of its energy. There are still a few dim flashes, but as the moons move apart, they don't last.

As my eyes adjust back to the darkness, I hear Rami sigh heavily. I turn to look at him, and ask, "You alright?"

"Yeah," he moans. "Just dandy."

I get up and start for my tent, "You don't sound like it."

"Well, just like with any good show, it's disappointing that it has to end."

I chuckle, "Yeah, well, I'm going to bed. The creatures will be out soon."

He sighs again, and pokes at the fire with a stick. "I'll be there in a few."

“Alright. G’night.” I crawl into my tent, and my bed roll. With a heavy sigh of my own, I close my eyes. Sleep comes quickly.