

Roen's Tale

Chapter 9

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Waking with first light, I crawl out of the tent and shake, letting sleep fall from me like dust from my fur. I've never been one to sleep in, especially while on a job. After dropping a handful of tinder on the coals from last night's fire, I stretch.

Something strikes me as odd, and it takes me a moment to realize what. There's only three tents setup, Rami's is collapsed, laying flat on the ground. "Rami?" I call out, as I step over to his tent.

Seeing that all the stakes have been haphazardly pulled from the ground, I quickly look around for evidence of predators. "RAMI!?" I shout, hoping to hear an answer. Sarn and Amsel both crawl out of their tents, awakened by my calls.

"Where is he?" Amsel asks.

"I'm not sure, his tent's collapsed, and I can't find evidence of predators."

Sarn looks around at the ground. "Too many of our own tracks to sort out," he mutters.

Amsel quickly darts over to the jata, "Only his weapons are gone. None of the supplies."

"He still had those with him after Moonstorm last night," I state. "He stayed out a little longer than I did, and his tent was still up when I turned in."

Obviously upset, Amsel comes back over to me, "Damnit Rami...let's spread out and do a walk around. See if we can find any tracks that can tell us what happened."

"I'll take west, see if he doubled back," I state. As I start retracing our trail, Sarn takes off to the south, leaving Amsel to head north.

Stepping carefully through the jata trampled grasses, I look for signs of other traffic. While I do find some trails that run crosswise to our trampled path, I can easily tell that those are made by either raptors or drucs. Quickly dismissing those, I keep looking.

After several minutes, I come across the shallow creek that we crossed. After checking the bank for fresh tracks, I catch wind of a familiar smell, and hear a rustle of

leaves, ahead of me. Feeling like I'm being watched, I squat down to refill my canteen and mutter, "Rami, I wish I could go with you. Take care of you and your love." Without looking up, I cap the canteen and head back to camp.

Once there I find Amsel waiting, tears in his eyes. "There's something I need you to see." He leads me south, through a few trees into a small clearing. There, near the middle, I see a divot in the ground, like something large scooped up some of the dirt.

Sarn stands across from us, looking at the large divot. He looks up at me and asks, "Is this, what I think it is?"

I step out into the clearing and slowly walk around the hole. It's over a meter wide, half as deep and nearly three meters long. Kneeling down, I run my hand along the surface, feeling the texture. Seeing something sticking out of the dirt, I dig it out and see it's a chisel shaped rock. No, not a rock, a tooth, nearly the size of my hand.

"Der'ock," I state. "Big one too."

"Great," Sarn growls. "It looks like Rami was here, too."

"What do you mean?" Amsel asks.

"Found his sword."

Sarn tosses it across the pit to Amsel, who picks it up, "Any trace of *him*?"

Not seeing any further traces, I shake my head. "Nothing left to see here. If he was standing here, the der'ock scooped him and everything around him up in it's mouth, which means..." I head up the far end of the divot, and sprint several meters to the edge of the clearing. "If there's anything to be found, it'd be this way."

They both join me as we search the edge of the clearing and a short distance into the trees. We quickly find the dirt that was scooped up, spread out all over the place. Sprinkled amongst the dirt, we find pieces of arrows and some shreds of cloth.

Sarn picks up a larger piece of cloth and smells it, "I smell blood."

Amsel and I both step over and smell the cloth, too. Amsel sighs heavily, "We should bury what we can find of his clothes."

Sarn wrinkles his nose, "Why, he wasn't Manenic."

Amsel gives him a scowl, "Well I am, and I don't want my friend to suffer nonexistence. We bury what we can find."

While not a believer myself, I do know something about that belief. It was started a couple hundred years ago by a dog named Manen, a member of Arroket's council at the time. No one's sure what he actually saw, but he claimed he watched someone evaporate to nothing. Some think that the person who he saw was a human, but Manen never made any direct claims.

Sarn and I nod, and start picking up all the scraps of cloth we can find. With what I learned at the creek, I can't help but be suspicious, smelling each scrap as I pick it up. Some pieces I recognize as part of Rami's cloak, while others just seem to be parts of straps or pouches. They all smell like Rami, which it to be expected, but I notice an odd smell of some of the larger pieces of his cloak, a smell that I know, but can't quite place.

Nearing noon, we give up our search and bury all the scraps. After Amsel covers the pieces, he places a large rock on top. "Rami, wherever you are, may you be surrounded by many soft, fluffy tails. I hope that you find them to your liking, my friend."

Sarn lets out a half hearted chuckle, "I hope they find you to *their* liking."

At a loss for words, and feeling confused as to what really happened to him, I simply pull a tuft of fur from my tail and shove it into the ground by the marker. With a heavy sigh, I head back to camp.

After eating lunch in silence, we pack and continue east. I get out the sextant and start checking our position, comparing my notes to those Kurro made years ago. I pleased to find that we're just a little north of where we're supposed to be. I turn my jata a little to the south, and put the sextant away, we should arrive at the Wilds marker in just over two weeks.

During that time, we're all a lot quieter than normal. No one speaks unless needed, and even then, only to say what's needed. Between checking our position with the sextant, I find myself trying to figure out what I smelled on Rami's cloak. Being a scout, I should be able to easily identify it, but for some reason, it's alluding me.

Having spotted the marker through the telescope, I steer the jata to it. Stopping near a large fern, I let the jata eat as I approach the stacked rock marker. After moving a couple rocks, I pull out a small box. I open it as Sarn and Amsel both join me.

Seeing several signets already inside, I drop one of mine into the box, "I was here."

Sarn drops his in, "So was I."

Amsel holds his for a moment, then drops it in. "I wish Rami could have made it here, too."

I slowly return the box to its hole on the marker. "Yeah, me too," I confess turning to the east. I take a deep breath, smelling the air, and calmly state, "Welcome to the wilds, my friends."

"We'll came here for the night, get a fresh start in the morning."

Sarn looks curiously at Amsel for a moment, then states, "I'll hunt up some food."

I nod, "I'll start a fire, then."

Amsel sits on a nearby rock as I start collecting firewood. When I circle back around to him, he's crying softly.

Dropping my armload of wood, I sit next to him, "Are you alright?"

He sighs heavily, and slowly starts to talk to the ground, "He was like a brother to me. We setup so many caravans together, worked a lot of them too. I never thought that..." his voice trails off.

"He feared this would happen," I state. "He told me that he felt he'd be the one that didn't make it."

He sniffs, obviously holding back his tears, "Why'd he stay out too long? Why didn't he get inside like the rest of us?"

"I honestly don't know. When I turned in, he seemed...preoccupied, like something was on his mind. I didn't really think too much of it at the time, but...maybe I should have."

He sighs, "No. It wouldn't have changed anything. If Rami doesn't talk about something without asking, he won't..." he stops, choking back some tears as he corrects himself. "...wouldn't talk about it."

With a nod and a sigh, I get to work on the fire. After arranging the sticks and tender, I squeeze a chuko over it and strike my dagger on a piece of flint, sending a small shower of sparks onto the pile. The chuko's alcohol ignites, sending mineral colored flames skyward.

Conversations slowly return over the next week. Sarn starts spending a little more time hunting, keeping our food supply fresh, while I collect a few medicinal items to keep our other supplies stocked. With no villages before us, I've stopped collecting my usual odds and ends to sell, turning that time instead to checking our position with the sextant.

Being careful to not get into the trees, I adjust our course a little to the north, paralleling the Dero Ridge. Breaking for camp on our third night. We spend the evening cleaning up our gear, and refilling all our water bladders with fresh water from a nearby stream.

After supper, Sarn disappears and I start working my armor, repairing the few busted rivets. I'm beginning to regret not letting Behri teach me how to do this myself. I'm simply not very good at it, and waste several rivets in the process.

Just as I'm finishing up, Sarn walks by dripping wet. Amsel looks up at him curiously, "Where've you been?"

"Soaking," he growls. "My muscles ache."

"That's to be expected with as much running around you do," he jokes.

"I'm calling it a day," Sarn groans, then crawls into his tent.

"That," Amsel states as he gets up, "sounds like a very good idea."

I finish my last rivet, and grin. "Yeah, it does." After putting my armor back on, I realize that the wind is starting to pickup. Not wanting to risk a wildfire, I douse what's left of our campfire with dirt and head into my tent. Not feeling very tired, I lay there watching the light of the sun fade through the tent fabric.

After a while, my eyes start to feel heavy, and I let them close, and just listen to the sounds of the wind, the bugs, and night creatures. Time blurs for me as I lie there listening, and all seems peaceful, until a loud screech pierces the night, telling me there's a der'ock close by, and it's hunting. While the der'ock is an excellent nighttime hunter, almost any source of light will keep it away, so I start to relax.

Suddenly, there's a loud crashing sound from outside, followed closely by a 'whump' and a loud cracking sound.

"What was that?!" Amsel screams.

I part the tent flaps and see a very large der'ock looming over one of our jata. "It's trying to eat a jata!" I scream. I draw my sword and start out my tent as Sarn comes out of his. We both charge the der'ock, knowing that it's going to have to let go of the jata to fight us.

When Amsel comes out, he's got bow in hand and releases his first arrow. It skips harmlessly off the der'ock's head as I duck under its wing and start stabbing at its belly. Sarn starts stabbing at it's face, making the creature buck and thrash, trying to get the jata free from it's mouth. It fails to pull free, and unable to pick up the jata, it simply flails it's wings helplessly as it drags the jata around. Unable to do anything about its situation, the jata simply stays hidden in its shell.

Not making much progress trying to pierce its hide from underneath, and having to dodge it's wings as it tries to take off, I start cutting at the wings themselves, as it uses them like legs to try to push itself up off the jata. Having no success, it changes to a yank and twist, while trying to keep it's wings from my blade.

Still having no success in trying to cut through it's skin, I dodge out from under it. With Sarn still attacking it's face, and Amsel shooting arrows at it, I get an idea. I quickly grab a chuko from my pack and stab it with a stick. I then run around to stand where the der'ock can see me.

"WATCH YOUR EYES!" I scream and strike a spark with my blade and flint, lighting the chuko. It erupts into a bright white fireball, sending me to the ground as I reflexively duck, and momentarily blinding me and lighting my chuko juice covered hand in the process.

I start rolling in the dirt, trying to put out my hand. Suddenly feeling water being poured on me, I stop rolling and hold my hand up, letting Sarn put it out. Amsel quickly tosses me a bandage, and I wrap my burned left hand, and let Sarn soak the bandages, to cool my hand.

As my vision slowly returns, I begin to see that the massive winged creature has stopped moving.

Amsel slowly steps over to it, arrow drawn, pointing at its eye, as Sarn steps up to its neck. After a moment, he turns to look at me, "It's dead. How...?"

I pick up the sick with the smoldering chuko on it, and shrug. "I'd hoped it'd blind the thing."

Amsel pokes at the creature's eye, then states, "I'd guess that it died from shock."

"Sensitive eyes," Sarn growls.

Amsel tosses his bow at his tent and retrieves his sword. "Come on, let's get her out of its mouth."

As he starts trying to hack at the jaw tendons of the der'ock, Sarn and I start using some uncut branches to pry the jaw off of the jata's shell. After a few minutes, and hearing another der'ock's cry, we quickly light the fire and set up a few torches for safety, then get back to work.

Before too long, we switch to using axes to cut at the der'ock jaw muscles, and using our hardened staffs to pry the jaw open. Even then, it takes us till the early morning to get our jata free.

Being too tired to pack up, we spend the day tending to the jata's wounds. Aside from the teeth punctures on her sides, her shell has also been cracked along the top, making the saddle and several of the mounts unstable. After unloading her, and finding some lacrylic, we fill the crack with lacrylic and use wire vine to bind her shell together. We then mix some sand in with the lacrylic and use that mix to fill in the holes and gouges that the der'ock's teeth made.

While that dries, I spend some time sketching the der'ock's likeness into my notebook. The thing itself is literally huge. It's head alone is over six meters long, two wide, and could open it's mouth to nearly two and a half meters, the same width as the jata. It's neck is surprisingly short, but it's body and tail are too long for me to measure, as is its wingspan.

The one thing that strikes me, though, is that aside from the smaller fins on it's tail and a shorter neck, the thing is shaped much like the small dirt dragons that some people keep as pets.

When morning finally arrives, we inspect the attacked jata's shell and discover that it's compromised, and that she's no longer sound as a pack animal. We spend much

of the day reworking the loads on the other two jata, and removing what's left of the rigging from the third.

With her shell unable to carry a load, we turn her loose, and when we head out, she follows, keeping with us like she has for the last year. Over the next few days though, she starts lagging behind, only to catch up at night when we make camp. After nearly a week, though, she falls far enough behind that we lose sight of her, and this time, she doesn't catch back up to us when night we make camp.