

Roen's Tale

Chapter 10

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A distant ‘crack’ gets our attention, and we turn and look north.

“Was that a whip?” Sarn asks.

I look back at him, “Sounded like it.”

Amsel stands on his saddle, trying to see through the distant trees to the north.

“Who’d be out here with a whip?”

“Want me to go find out?” Sarn asks.

“Not really, but I am curious.” He then turns to me, “Could they be something that the others ran into on their trip.”

I pull out the notebooks and start flipping through pages. “I’m not sure. I’m pretty sure that the karnesh is one of them, but the other seemed to be a group of some type of lizard.”

Hearing another ‘crack’ in the distance, he turns back to the north, obviously thinking. After a few minutes, and hearing a few more of the sounds, he nods, “Alright, let’s make camp and go find out what they are.”

Having spend the last two hours following the sounds, we finally start to hear voices. Unable to understand them, we quietly approach and find a small group of-what look like-very large, green vipers. This strikes me as odd since vipers are always tan, and never get that big. These four creatures stand nearly three meters tall, half again any of us.

Sarn looks at me, and makes a scout’s sign, ‘Viper.’

I shake my head, disagreeing with his assessment, and sign back, ‘2 large.’ After a moment’s thought, I add, ‘Viper no talk.’

He nods, and we turn our attention back to the four creatures. While three are standing, one is lying on it’s belly, obviously wounded as it’s missing its tail. The three standing over it are bantering and snapping their jaws at each other.

As we watch, the one on the ground starts to slowly back up, however one of the three notices and suddenly whips its tail at it. The strike lands on its arm with a very loud crack, making it howl in pain.

Seeing Sarn curl his lip, I quickly sign, 'Quiet, stay down,' in the hopes that he won't make a move to attack. The scowl I get in response tells me that he saw my motions.

Amsel though, pulls his bow and draws an arrow. He takes careful aim as I try to wave him off his attack but he either doesn't see me or doesn't care, as he releases the arrow. I turn my head, following the arrow to its impact in the neck of the creature to the left. It bleats loudly and falls to the ground, squirming and writhing as it tries to pull the arrow out.

The other two with it, turn suddenly, looking our direction. Seeing Amsel drawing another arrow, they let out cries of their own and charge at him. Sarn and I both draw our swords and wait for them to get close.

As one jumps over the bush I'm hiding behind, I thrust my sword upward into it. Its momentum drives my sword deep into its chest, knocking me over in the process. I hit the dirt and slid as the oversized viper hits the ground just beyond me, its long tail landing across me.

Hearing a yelp, I struggle to my feet and pull my daggers. Sarn and Amsel are parrying with the other from opposite sides with their swords as it whips its tail at them. Sarn takes a hit across his arm, knocking his sword from his hand. Rami dodges in, trying to distract the creature from Sarn, and gets a surprise.

The thing swings its head towards him and knocks him back onto the ground. Amsel tumbles a few times but comes up to his feet, bow in hand. As he draws an arrow, I throw one of my daggers at the creature.

Seeing my sudden motion, it turns towards me and catches the dagger in its mouth. Amsel lets his arrow loose, taking advantage of my distraction. It hits the creature in the side of its head, it drops to the ground, landing on Sarn as he tries to retrieve his sword.

He yelps in pain and screams, "Get this thing off of me!"

We quickly rush to him and lift and roll the creature off him. He grunts as he pulls himself up, and limps to his weapon.

"What are these things," Amsel asks.

"I thought they were large vipers," Sarn growls, then looks at me, "but Roen disagrees."

"I think these are what the others ran into," I admit.

Amsel kneels by the one we pulled off Sarn, getting a closer look at it. "Well, if we hear more whip sounds, we'll know to stay clear." He looks up at us, and seeing Sarn's arm, says, "Better get that taken care of."

I look and see that his arm is bleeding from where he was hit. He pulls a scrap of cloth from his belt and wraps his arm, just above the wound.

Hearing a scuffle and a coughing bleat, we turn and see the first creature get up, and pull the arrow from its neck. It looks at us for a moment, then at the other two that are dead. With a couple head tilts, it starts slowly backing away, heading for the fourth that was lying on the ground.

"Let's get back to our camp," Amsel states.

“Yeah, I don’t want to be here if it returns with others,” Sarn agrees.

Before heading out in the morning, I take a moment to help Sarn redress his bandage.

“This is the last chuko,” I state, as I squeeze its juice over his wound.

“Can’t you find more?” Amsel asks, as he secures some gear to his jata.

“I’ve been looking, but we’re at a higher altitude with rocky ground. Chuko don’t grow well in these conditions.”

Sarn sighs, “Well, I can do without, then.”

“No, you can’t. If this gets infected, you’ll lose your arm,” I state.

“Or worse,” Amsel adds. “Keep that wound clean. We need you healthy.”

“We *all* need to be healthy,” I correct. “You just need to heal.”

With his arm cleaned and wrapped. We secure the rest of the gear and head out.

I spend much of the day searching for more chuko as we travel. While not finding any, I do come across some aloe, which I rub onto my burned hand. The burn itself isn’t bad, but my skin is exposed in places, and is easily irritated. After collecting a few leaves from the aloe plants, I resume my search for other medicinal plants.

“Roen! Get out of bed! Sarn’s got a fever.”

Hearing Amsel, I climb out of my tent and dart over to Sarn’s. Amsel sits holding the flap open and I see Sarn lying on his bedroll, shivering. “Shit! I bet it’s infected.”

I quickly grab his bedroll and use it to drag him out of the tent. Amsel quickly uncovers him as I get a water bladder. As I pour the water over Sarn, he yelps, shocked by the water.

“That’s not very cold. We need colder water to break his fever,” Amsel states.

“All the bladders are the same temp,” I state.

“Then we need to find a stream or something.”

“There aren’t any near...” I stop abruptly, and run back to my jata. After rooting in my pack for a moment, I find the spigot I found at Garrent. After looking at it skeptically for a moment, I turn the cold water knob, and just like before, water comes out. I spray my hand, and find the water pleasantly cold, so I quickly start soaking Sarn down with it.

Amsel takes a sudden step back in shock, “That’s...What...?”

“Relax, it’s just water.”

“Yeah, but how...w-w-where’s it getting the...”

“I don’t know, and right now I don’t care. Help me get Sarn’s dressing off his arm so we can try to clean it.”

He baulks a couple times, before actually kneeling back down and helping me. As he quickly cuts off the bandage, I see that Sarn’s wound is indeed infected, and it’s bad.

“That doesn’t look good,” he states.

“It’s not. It needs to be cleaned, uhm...do you have any liquor?”

He shakes his head, “No.”

I find myself suddenly wishing we’d picked up another bottle of whisky before heading out from Three Lands. Handing Amsel the spigot, I pull my dagger, “Keep rinsing the wound while I see if I can clean it.”

He takes the spigot while I grab Sarn's arm and start shaving his fur from around the wound. Amsel keeps rinsing as I work, while also running the cold water over the rest of Sarn, hoping to break his fever.

Once I have the fur cleared, I start scraping at the scab of his wound, slowly peeling it away. Once that's off, it starts oozing a greenish white fluid. Amsel rinses that away as I start squeezing more out of his arm.

"I hope the infection's not too deep," I state, squeezing more fluid out.

Amsel turns his head and gags. "I didn't need to see that," he groans.

"Then don't look. Just keep him cool."

Suddenly Sarn jerks his arm, knocking my dagger from me. It lands harmlessly in the dirt as he groans, "Owww."

I let his arm go, "Sorry, big guy. I needed to clean out your wound."

Amsel turns off the water, "How you feeling?"

"Cold, wet." He manages to sigh, "Why am I wet?"

"You have a fever, your arm is infected."

He sighs, "Yeah, I know."

Amsel nearly stands. "Why didn't you say something?" he scolds.

He licks his lips, then says, "Wasn't sure what could be done, we're out of chuko."

"But we can still flush it. Looks like you haven't even tried to clean it."

He groans as his body shivers again. "Didn't want to wash off the chuko." He closes his eyes and sighs heavily as he falls asleep.

Amsel drops the spigot and stands up. "Great. Now what do we do?"

I sit back on my feet and look around. "Well, we need to find some chuko. There isn't any around here, so...we keep going forward and hope we find some."

Amsel paces for a moment, thinking, then turns to me, "We should get him back to the villages, he needs a shaman."

I shake my head, "If we turn back now, and the infection worsens, he'll die. There are no chuko between here and the border of the Wilds, and that's nearly two months away."

He sighs and starts pacing again. "So you'd rather we head forward, knowing that if we don't find any chuko, he'll still die?"

"Amsel, we're heading back downhill as we head east. That means there's bound to be some wetlands or marshes, and that's where the chuko grow. It's closer, and he stands a better chance of living in that direction." I sigh, "But since I'm the scout, it is *your* decision, I can only make a recommendation based on what I know."

He sighs, "I'm going to need to think about this for a bit," he sighs, then heads off past the jata.

I grab Sarn's bed and drag it, and him, back into his tent. After wetting him down again with cold water from the spigot, I turn my attention to refilling the water bladders. As I finish, Amsel walks back into camp and into his tent. I drop the spigot in my back and lean against the jata and just watch his tent, wondering what he's going to do.

When he finally comes out, I'm seated by the fire, so he walks over to me, and sits. "I've made up my mind."

I nod, "Ok."

"We're going to..."

“...keep going,” Sarn growls, as he staggers from his tent. “I have not come this far to be the one who makes you turn back.”

“But you could die,” Amsel argues.

“I know, but you could find what you’re looking for, or some medicine that could help me. Going back means my death.”

Amsel gives him a shocked look, so Sarn adds, “I heard you two talking, and he’s right, we go back, I’ll die for sure.”

Amsel sighs, and reluctantly relents. “Alright,” he groans. “but we’re now looking for chuko and medicinals.”

I nod my agreement, as does Sarn, so Amsel states, “We’ll head out in the morning.”

With Amsel now on my jata, and his tied to follow, Sarn rides behind him, keeping himself cool with the spigot. Needing to find a source of alcohol, I set out on foot to the south in search of marshes. After several hours search, the grasses quickly give way to cacti and I find myself suddenly dismayed. I had been expecting to find marshlands, instead I find a desert.

I skirt the edge for a few minutes, then turn back to the north to meet up with the others. Before I get there, I find a rather large depression. My first impression is that’s a dried lake bed, but I quickly change my mind as I start to cross it. It’s a marsh, or at least, was a marsh. There are all sorts of reeds and even some wild vegetables, which I quickly harvest.

Not being able to go around, I trudge through the still muddy marshland, occasionally scraping excess mud from my feet. Not trusting the ground, I use my staff to poke at the ground, making sure it’ll hold my weight before I walk across it.

Stopping to clean my feet again, I sit on a rock and look back at my path. It snakes back and forth across the muddy ground, and I notice something else, something I walked right past.

A chuko bush.

Growling at myself, I dart back to the bush and start picking the few fruits that still hang on it. While they’re not ripe, they should still have enough alcohol to disinfect Sarn’s wound.

I quickly head out to meet up with the others, but when I get to where I think they should be, they’re not there yet. Pulling out my telescope, I quickly look around to the east and spot smoke. I set out at a near run to get to them quickly.

When I finally arrive, I’m devastated by what I see. The jata are tied to a tree, Amsel sits by the fire, crying, and there’s a sheet covering something on the ground. As I get closer, I sadly realize that Sarn is under the sheet.

I sit by Amsel and softly ask, “What happened? He seemed to be doing better.”

He sniffs, and wipes his face. “Not too sure, that spigot thing quit this morning, and not too long after he just fell off the jata.” He sniffs again, trying to hold back his emotions. “By the time I checked on him, but it was too late. He was gone.”

I sigh sadly, and pull out the few chuko I found. He looks at them and shakes his head, “That figures, doesn’t it, when’d you find them?”

“Couple hours ago. Headed back when I found’em.”

He shakes his head, "That's about when he..." His voice trails off as he buries his face in his hands.

"Don't beat yourself up, this was his choice."

"I know, but I got us out here."

"We chose to come along. You did not force us."

He sighs again, and looks over at Sarn's body. "Somehow, that doesn't make it any easier to accept."

With the day pressing, we quietly see to burying Sarn. We use some rocks from the nearby riverbed to cover his grave. After positioning a suitable headstone, Amsel and I use some lacrylic to glue tufts of our own fur to it. With night approaching, we call it a day.

Thunder startles me awake. I quickly look around and realize that I've fallen asleep in the saddle. It's been two days since Sarn died and we're still moving east. Amsel follows, on his jata. I sit up and, after adjusting the canopy, get out the sextant and check our position before clouds fill the horizon.

"We need to turn south a little," I call out.

"Actually, we'll need to stop. This storm's catching up, fast," Amsel calls back.

I look behind us and see that the trees in the distance are starting to bend and sway severely. Before I can do anything, a bolt of lightning strikes a nearby tree. The deafening thunder clap scares my jata into its shell, stopping all forward motion and nearly sending me to the ground.

I grab my tent roll and jump to the ground as the rain starts to pour. Knowing Amsel's doing the same, I quickly setup my tent, making sure that it also covers the nuchal plate of my jata's shell. If I don't, the wind could blow water inside and drown it while it sleeps.

As the wind starts to pick up, I add a second set of stakes to my tent, and then climb inside. With the jata filling the end of the tent, it doesn't leave me enough room to stretch out, so I instead curl up and listen to the storm howl.

A low grunt, and a subtle nudge get my attention and I realize that I've fallen asleep, and that my jata's head is now lying up against me, also asleep. With the storm still raging, and the rain starting to come through the tent canvas, getting back to sleep is nearly impossible. Instead I try to find solace in my jata's steady breathing, hoping it's enough to lull me back to sleep.

Fortunately, the storm starts to pass and, as the winds and the rain start to let up, I'm able to relax enough to fall back asleep.