

Roen's Tale

Chapter 11

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Hearing Amsel scream, my jata quickly retracts into its shell, tripping me as I exit my tent. I land headlong on the wet ground, and my nose quickly tells me that it's not just water and dirt, there's also blood. I quickly stand up as Amsel comes staggering over to me, his white fur also stained red from the blood.

"Sss...somm'n...somethin' ate..." he stutters, pointing back towards his tent.

I dart over to look and see that his jata is still sitting on the ground, I notice right away that it's not breathing.

Following the blood flow, I step around the Amsel's tent and discover that something has taken bites out of the jata's shell, and eaten into its side. Whatever did this, has a very powerful bite.

"What the...?" I gasp, and look back at Amsel.

He stands, shaking as he looks back at me, and manages to stutter, "I...I w-want-t t-to g-go b-back-k."

I look back at the jata, seeing just how much damage was done. With a sigh, I realize that he's right. It's just us, we're down to one jata, minimal medicines, and we've no way to replace the equipment that was on the jata we lost.

"Alright. We go back." I start to turn towards my jata when I see something, something very big lying just to the west of our camp. I unintentionally freeze, not sure of what to make of the creature I now see.

"What is it?" Amsel asks, his voice louder than needed.

"Shhh." I point to the creature as I start backing towards my jata.

He gasps, and quickly heads into his tent. I start retrieving my personal gear and put it on. It goes without saying that we're not staying here, and we can't take the last jata.

Amsel comes out of his tent, wearing most of his gear, and carrying his pack. I quietly grab mine from my jata before we head off to the east, away from the creature. Once it's out of sight, Amsel looks curiously at me, "Was that a karnesh?"

"I don't know..." I sigh.

We had thought it to be merely mythical until Kurro mentioned it when we were in Arindell. Its jaws able to bite through anything, able to walk quietly, and hunts both day, and night. I'd never wanted to know if that creature was real. Now, we've had one eat one of our jata, abandon the other, and drive us away from camp with only what we can carry.

This isn't looking good for us.

We waste no time trying to put distance between us and the karnesh. Heading east as fast as we can for a couple hours. Finding a large boulder, I climb up on it and use my telescope to look back for it.

When I find it, I see that it's licking the ground, following our scent trail. "We're not gonna get anywhere with that thing following us."

Amsel looks up at me, "Aren't we moving too fast for it to keep up?"

I look down from my perch and shake my head. "It's only about thirty minutes behind us."

"How can it be so close, we've been practically running for the last three hours?"

I start looking ahead, to the east. "It appears to be tasting the ground."

"What?!"

"Yep, using its tongue to... There we go." I collapse the telescope and put it in my satchel before sliding off the rock. "Come on. There's a stream ahead, we can lose it there."

He follows as I lead the way. "How?"

"Easy. We walk an hour or so downstream should do it. The water'll wash away our scents."

"Then we can head back?"

"We should be able to, as long as we're careful."

"If it means getting home, I'll be whatever you want."

His comment makes me laugh a little, but I quickly turn my attention back to getting to the stream. We waste no time getting there, but when we start downstream, we quickly come across a problem. The stream disappears into a crevasse.

We stand agape for a moment, before we turn around and head upstream. Amsel seems troubled as he follows me. "Will going upstream work as well? I mean, won't the water carry our scents for a while, it was tasting the ground, right?"

"That's a risk we'll just have to take," I admit. "The water's traveling pretty fast though, so it should be gone by the time it gets here."

"I hope so. Damn this water's cold."

"Probably glacier runoff." I dump what's left of the water in my canteen and refill it from the stream. Hearing Amsel do the same, I take a quick drink, "Yep, it's glacier."

We both drink our fill and refill our canteens before we leave the stream. With night beginning to set in, and now without tents, Amsel and I start looking for proper shelter.

Finding nothing, not even a decent tree, I head for a particularly large clump of tall grasses.

"I don't see how this'll help," Amsel states. "It's not going to hide us from anything."

“Not right now, but...” I step into the clump and start pushing some of the grasses down, making a circular bed out of them. I then start collecting the surrounding grasses and tie them together above the bed, making a crude canopy out of them.

Amsel quickly gets the idea, and starts doing the same. “Where’d you learn this trick?”

“My father taught me, he had to use it once or twice.”

He nods as he ties the grass together, then sighs as he looks up at the fading light. “I’d give anything to be home now. This whole thing was a mistake.” He turns and sadly looks at me, “I’m sorry I got you into this.”

Before I can say anything he ducks inside his shelter. I look his direction for a moment, then duck into my own.

After getting comfortable, I reach into my satchel for the figurine. Not finding it, and finding that there’s a hole in the bottom, I start to softly cry. I miss my mate, Railu, and my lover, Niva. As the sounds of the night creatures fill my ears, I start to realize that I may never see them again.

Hearing a distant, pain filled roar, Amsel and I stumble out of our grass shelters. We look through the early dawn to the west, where the sound came from, expecting to hear more.

When nothing happens, I pull out my telescope and take a look. From our slightly elevated position, I can see a few trees moving erratically in the distance. Suddenly, one falls, disappearing from sight. I wait a few moments, listening for the sound. Hearing nothing, I sigh.

Amsel worriedly looks at me, “It’s out there, isn’t it.”

“Yeah, it knocked down a tree.”

He looks back to the west, then turns to the east, and shakes his head. “We’re not going to make it if we head back now, are we?”

I quickly survey the area both to the north and south. “Well, we’re in a pass, between the ridge and a desert. Can’t survive the desert, not with the few supplies we have.”

“Wish that spigot thing you found still worked,” he mutters.

“Doesn’t matter, I couldn’t find it when we left the jata.”

“Do you still have your notebook?”

I nod, “Mine, yes. Lost the others, and the sextant,” I sadly admit. “Not that it really matters. We really only have one safe direction we can go.”

He sighs, and shakes his head. “Further east it is.”

With heavy hearts, and hungry stomachs, we head out. Needing more supplies, and with the karnesh far behind us, we take our time, and search for anything that we can eat. With larger prey hard to find, we turn our attention to finding whatever’s edible. We start flipping rocks and logs, looking for roots, fungus, and even bugs. Every time we find water, we take the opportunity to drink our fill before refilling our canteens.

After a few days, the pass narrows, with the ridge on the north, and a cliff to our south, and the area starts to fill in with some trees. Now constantly hungry, and running low on water. Amsel tosses his empty pack and his bow, having used his last arrow trying to kill a small dirt dragon.

He staggers for a moment, then sits on a fallen tree. "I don't know how much further I can go," he pants. "I'm getting pretty weak."

Knowing how he feels, and not wanting to lose my friend, I sit next to him. "Come on, let's keep moving, once we're past this cliff, we can head back on the down side of it. definitely more fertile ground down there."

He sniffs, fighting back tears. "I don't know if I can make it that far."

"You have to. What do I tell Nilsa if I come back without you?"

She'll be alright, the pup'll inherit everything."

"What will she tell your pup when it asks about its father? How will she say you faced the end? Does she say that you quit, or does she say he followed his dreams to the end? Or, do you get to tell the pup your stories yourself?"

He swallows hard, but nods, "You're...right. Just give me a minute to rest."

The sudden sound of a breaking tree gets our attention. "Oh no..." I mutter. I grab his hand and pull him up off the log. "Come on. Time to go." He follows, not so much by choice, but rather because I'm dragging him.

"What was that?"

"The karnesh."

"WHAT?! HOW?!"

"I don't know, it should be farther behind than it is."

We head across a small clearing and through a rather thick stand of trees, only to come to the cliff's edge. I nearly fall off, but Amsel quickly pulls me back.

"If I'd had to explain to Railu how you died, I'd never near the end of it."

We follow the cliff's edge at a near run for several minutes, as the crashing and tree breaking gets closer.

Amsel suddenly grabs my satchel off me and smiles, "I've got an idea."

He stops suddenly and starts packing his cloak into my satchel. I stop a few decameters away, hiding behind a tree to watch, wondering what he has in mind. When he has the satchel full, he ducks behind a tree to wait.

When the karnesh gets within sight, Amsel watches it carefully as he waits. When it gets a few hundred meters away, he steps out into the open and starts swinging the satchel and mutters, "Come get it, you bastard."

He throws the satchel off to the creature's left. The cloak both affords it weight and a tail that flaps, drawing the creature's attention to it. As he turns to run back to me, he slips, landing face first on the ground.

"Get up, come on!" I call out, as I start towards him.

He scrambles to his feet and we resume running, taking advantage of the momentary distraction. Unfortunately, that's all it is, the creature turns towards us and lets out a deafening roar. Both Amsel and I stumble back into a large rock, holding our ears.

As we recover, I watch the creature slowly approach, swinging its head from side to side as it does. I hear it breathing, as clearly as I hear my own, and it scares me.

Beside me, I see Amsel grin, "On three, you run left, I'll go right."

Feeling very pinned, I look over at him, "What?!"

"On three, run." He winks, "Trust me." Without knowing what else to do, I nod, so he begins to count, "1...2...3"

We both start to run, but I don't get three steps before I hear him let out a terror filled yelp, that suddenly stops. I turn in time to see the creature throw Amsel's limp body into the air.

"Amsel!!" I shout and the creature turns to me.

Knowing I'm near the cliff's edge, I take my last few steps, backing up to it. As I do, I start taunting the beast, waving my arms to get its attention.

"Hey, over here, come on."

It turns to me, letting out a subtle grunt.

"Come on, you haven't got me yet."

It starts to charge at me, so I take my last step back and hear someone scream, "NO!" Everything seems to happen in slow motion.

The beast, still charging straight at me, turns its head. My foot slips from the ledge and I start to fall.

"Roan!!" the voice screams.

Too late, I'm falling, and I see the beast come over the edge of the cliff.

Then blackness.