

Roen's Tale

Chapter 14

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I hop up on a fallen tree to get a better view of my surroundings. After a moment, I take out the tablet Kyle gave me. With a little effort, I finally remember out how to bring up the map that Railu showed me. To my pleasant surprise, several dots appear on the map, marking each person in the party.

Seeing one of the dots moving towards mine, I look up and see Railu walking up to me. After sitting next to me on the rock, she sighs heavily, so I ask, “You alright?”

“Yeah, just an upset stomach, it’ll pass.” She then looks up at me, “Need any help?”

I sigh, trying to adjust the map to get a better view of what’s ahead. “This would be so much easier if I had my sextant.”

“Here, let me see.” She takes the tablet from me and taps on a few things so quickly I can’t keep up. “Aime, do you know what a sextant is?” she asks the tablet.

“Of course, and I can setup a program so the tablet can act like one.”

I kneel down beside her, “You can do that?”

“Certainly. I will also setup a teaching aid to guide you through your first use.”

“Uhm, better keep it simple,” I state. “I’m still trying to get used to using the map on this thing.”

“I understand. Roen, if you need assistance in the future, just ask the tablet for my help and I will answer.”

“Thanks.”

Railu hands me back the tablet and I see that there’s now a small sextant pictured. I tap on it and the screen of the tablet turns clear. Aime’s voice then comes from the tablet, “Please align the crosshairs on the destination horizon. Then say ‘Mark.’”

Taken by surprise, I fumble the tablet, “Uh, ok.” After recovering, I hold the tablet up and look through it towards the eastern horizon. The first thing I notice is that there are actually two cursors, one on each side of the screen. I align the two over where I think we should be going and say, “Mark.”

“Move crosshairs to target to be measured.”

I turn a little to the south and place the crosshairs where outermost visible ring crosses the horizon. “Mark.” The picture freezes, showing me the measurement over the horizon. I pull out my notebook and open it to the list of measurements to compare.

“If you like, I can copy those into the tablet and plot the course for you,” the tablet says. “That would allow you to check our position much more accurately.”

Curious, I look back at the tablet and ask, “How?”

“Just like you did for measuring the horizon. Just hold the tablet over the page.”

As I pick the tablet back up, the screen clears again. After turning my notebook back to my drawn map, I hold it over that. There’s a quiet beep, then it says. “Would you like to do another page?”

“Yeah, there’s two more, actually.” I turn to the first page of measurements, and hear the tablet click. Without waiting, I turn the page, and it again clicks.

“That’s all. The measurements are all in order of the markings on the map.”

“Understood,” it replies. “What are the readings based off of?”

“The first column is all morning solar readings, the second are noon ring, and the third are nightfall north star.”

“Thank you. Calculating path.” The screen darkens, and I tuck the notebook back into my satchel.

“I told you it’d help a lot,” Railu states.

“I’m used to doing the work myself. This is...almost too easy.”

“Path plotted. Displaying.”

The screen changes to show the overhead map again, this time with a somewhat jagged red line added. I notice right away, that we’re on top of it. “Huh, right where we’re supposed to be. Good.”

Railu looks at the map, “So this is the path they took? They were all over the place.”

“Happens when you’re blazing a trail. For the most part, we followed their lead.”

She rubs her neck for a moment, “Aime, add our path to that.”

A second, yellow line appears, much straighter than the red one, following a similar path. “No wonder I kept losing your trails. You guys wandered back and forth so much, we kept crossing over it.”

I grin, “Now that we’re together, let’s see if we can take a more direct route. Aime, can you project a straighter route to the last marker. That one should be the dig.”

The yellow line suddenly extends, curving gently to the south when it ends. “I would not recommend any straighter route than this, I am not aware of how much the terrain has changed since this satellite image was taken.”

Railu leans in, “How old is it?”

“Around two hundred years. I cannot be more specific.”

“Then we’ll stick to the projection,” Kyle states as he approaches. “Break for lunch everyone.” He gives me a curious look, “Need anymore notes put in there?”

I sit up, giving him a curious look, “How’d you know about the notebook?”

He nods, “Aime told me. She lives inside me, remember? She’s been the one you’ve been talking to with the tablet.”

“Oh, I thought that was the tablet.”

“You’ll get used to it, give it time.”

I reach into my satchel and pull out my notebooks, and offer them to him. "All my notes on our trip, and my interviews. How..." before I can finish my question, he starts flipping rapidly through them, pausing only to switch notebooks.

When he hands them back, he smiles, "That's a nice drawing, she's very pretty."

To my surprise, the tablet shows the drawing I made of Niva. "Yes, she is," I find myself admitting. "And I hope to see her again, too. Railu and I have much to talk about with her."

He nods. "I have someone to go back for also..." he pauses for a moment, seemingly saddened by his own words, "...if she'll still have me."

As he slowly walks away, I realize that he has indeed, made this place his home, and these people he travels with, have become his family. Since my mate and Kyle have claimed each other as siblings, they're my family too.

Staggering out of the tent in the morning, I find Larrah the only one already awake. Seeing that she's already started a fire, I grab my tablet and start checking our position. After that, I sit down and start reviewing the map, looking for landmarks.

The others slowly start to emerge from the tent and take on their various morning tasks. Soon there's breakfast cooking, and to my surprise, Oana walks up to me, muttering something in her own language. Unable to understand her, I look back to the map when she unexpectedly puts her nose under my hand.

"What do you want?" I casually ask, rubbing her nose.

She makes a few clicking sounds, then says, "Oana...like...Roen."

I look up at her, wondering why she doesn't use pronouns like everyone else does. She tilts her head slightly, waiting for me to respond. "I like you too."

She nods and heads on, and I notice Railu's walking up to Kyle. She grabs his hand and puts it on her stomach. He suddenly drops his tablet and holds her still.

"I'm WHAT?!" she screams, I drop everything and run to them.

"You're pregnant," he states.

She gasps, "I...I can't be. I wasn't in estrus."

"You certainly smelled like it," I correct.

Kyle nods, "I have to agree, I could smell you too."

"How, I'm not due for another week."

Kyle frowns, then says, "Seems likely."

"What seems likely?" Railu asks.

"Railu, you were in an emotionally induced premature estrus."

She sits, clearly puzzled, so I ask, "What's that mean?"

"It means, her body wasn't ready for this. I'm going to keep an eye on her and your kit, but," he turns towards the mink, "Niku, she'll need prenatal vitamins." He rubs my mate's arm, "We'll do all we can to help you through this."

To my surprise, Tayla states, "You might as well set me up with some too, Niku."

"You too?" Niku asks

"Yeah."

Kyle's jaw drops slightly, "I thought you didn't want anyone to know yet?"

"No need now, not since she is too." The cheetess kneels and hugs Railu. "We will go through this together."

"Together?"

“Yeah, I’m carrying twins.”

“Congratulations.”

“To you too.”

“Well, I feel a small, sensible celebration is in order,” Arru states, “To congratulate the parents to be.”

“No.” I say in unison with Kyle, causing several of the others to laugh.

“You’re out numbered.” Tayla states, sitting next to him.

“So I noticed,” he moans.

I pull a chair over and sit next to my mate. “Never before have I been at the mercy of so many females.”

She gives me a loving look, “Don’t think you’re going to get used to it either.”

I can’t help but smile back, “I doubt you’d let me.”

After a rather filling breakfast, Railu and I sit, trying to come up with possible names for our child, when Kyle places our tablets in our laps. “I hope I’m not interrupting something important, but I need your opinion on what you see.”

He makes a motion and the screen of my tablet comes on showing part of the map. I notice right away, there are paths amongst the vegetation.

Railu leans over to me, “These are definitely paths, but who made them?”

I enlarge the image until I can see the texture of the dirt in one of the paths. “What do you see?” I ask her.

She zooms in on a similar section of the path, and thinks aloud, “Well, the ground is mostly flat, there’s no signs of vegetation trying to grow in them, so they’re still used.”

“Ok, now look at everybody’s feet-paws. What do you see?”

She looks around for a moment, then smiles, “Everybody has claws.”

“Everyone?”

“Except Kyle and Fey.”

Now I smile, “Do these paths look like they were made by hooves?”

“No, more like they were made by someone who rolls their foot-paws as they walk, like Kyle does.”

“What else?” I ask.

Before she can answer, we’re interrupted by Kyle yelling at Fey. Apparently she shoved a chair under him, making him sit abruptly. I turn my attention back to the map, studying the trails.

After a moment, Tayla leans over by me, “What’d you find?”

“Paths, human paths.”

“How do you know?”

“The ground is hard packed, and there’s a pattern to them, like patrols or hunters would use.”

“Could it be Ootuku?” Tayla asks, looking over at Oana.

“Well from what Aime’s taught me, Oana’s people all have claws, three forward and one back. If you look at her tracks, it’s like she grabs the ground as she walks, digging all four claws in. These are all too smooth for that, not even hooves would leave the ground this smooth.”

Kyle smiles and leans back, pulling Tayla in for a kiss. “Looks like we finally have a solid destination.”

Railu and I spend the rest of the day planning out the best route to the trails. The following morning, Railu again complains of discomfort. After checking her, Kyle states that she may be in for a difficult pregnancy.

As we start to head out, Kyle states, "Railu, I'm sorry, but you're staying back with me."

She immediately protests, "Why? I want to help my mate."

"I know that, but for the safety of your child, I need to keep a close eye on you."

I take her hand, in mine, and give her a nuzzle, "It's ok. It's for the kit's safety, and this time, I won't be far."

She hugs him, "For our kit."

I'm awakened by Railu softly saying, "I've been waiting for you."

I hear the curtain open and Kyle softly replies, "Well then, let's see how you and your kit are doing." This is the fourth morning in a row he's checked on her.

I feel her roll slightly, giving him room between us for his hands. "I'm sorry you have to do this," she says sourly.

He chuckles quietly, "Like you could have done this on purpose, stop feeling guilty."

I feel her nod, and swallow, "I'll try."

I wait till he leaves before I start rubbing her back. "He's right, you know. There's no way you could have done this on purpose."

"I know," she groans. "but he's done so much already, and now..."

"...he's doing more." I roll to face her, "Love, he wouldn't do it if he didn't care." I gently rub my muzzle alongside hers. "He's a protector, the kind of person who would make a great guard or shaman, and a good leader."

She sighs and roll over, then snuggles back into me. Knowing she wants to be held, I wrap my arms around her and nuzzle back into her neck. "He is our leader, remember."

"He doesn't really act like a leader. He's more like a friend."

"Or a brother?"

Seeing her point, "Yeah, a big brother."

"He's older than all of us, so yeah, big brother."

My curiosity peaked, I prop myself up on my arm, "How old is he?"

She rolls slightly, looking up at me, "Well, if you go by what Aime says, he's in his early thirties, but if you add the time he's been frozen, he's over a thousand."

This surprises me. the myth never said how long he was asleep. "Over a thousand years old. That's before..."

"Before everything we know." She sighs and lays down again.

With it still being early, I happily snuggle back up to her.

Our progress slows a little each day as Railu's symptoms steadily worsen. Sometimes, when she's unable to walk anymore, Kyle will either call for a break so he can treat her, or just pick her up and carry her. I can't help but feel that he's doing something I should be doing, but she insists that I stay in the lead, and her conviction leaves me little choice but to do it.

Kyle has told me that he expects her to get worse, at least until we get to the humans. He hopes that there should be something there that will allow him to help her better, and allow him to save the one other human he's actually met. For Railu's sake, I hope he's right, but my concern has me looking back to check on her, almost as much as I look forward to scout.

Soon enough, though, we're only a few hours away from where we now know the humans are. After breakfast, Kyle decides to prep us for meeting the humans.

As the scout, and most likely person to run into one, he starts with me. "Roen, be alert so you don't accidentally sneak up on someone. If you see anybody, come back and get me. Be as non-threatening as you can."

I nod, hoping I can do so unseen.

He looks around at everyone else, "When that time comes, I'll step out to greet them alone."

"Alone? Why not together?" Tayla asks. I can't mistake the concern in her voice.

"As much as I'd like to step out as a group, I'm pretty sure none of them have seen anything like you before. I want to prepare them before they see you."

"Weren't they part of the research team, though?" Arru asks.

"This group was all archaeologists, and they arrived shortly before the accident. While the original team may have heard stories, and even seen pictures, these will be their descendants."

"I want to warn you, they'll probably have some unusual questions. Please don't take offence at them. I know if I'd walked into Pridewyn with all my memories intact, I'd have had some myself.

"They'll also probably want to touch you, at least to feel your fur. Again, they'll be curious." He then looks to both Tayla and Railu, "I fear you two may get most of the attention, especially from the females, being pregnant and beginning to show like you are."

He then looks at Oana, the lizard girl. "Oana, they may be afraid of you, your people are the only ones out here that they may have seen. I'll do what I can to allay their fears, but you'll still need to be as nice as you can be."

She bobs her head a couple times, "Oana be good."

"I'll stay with her, incase she gets scared," Fey states, wrapping her arm around Oana's neck.

He nods. "Good. When this happens, I'll go first, then call you out, either by name or a group, depending on how I think they can handle things."

Tayla gives him a loving bump on the nose, "And I'll keep aware of your emotions, just incase you need us."

"I hope that won't be needed," he admits, returning her kiss. While I haven't figured out what, I do know that there's some kind of connection between those two, and I'm beginning to think that, somehow, Sada's in on it too.

With that taken care of, we pack up camp and head out. It doesn't take long for me to find some trails, and soon thereafter, I'm hearing people talking. Cautiously I peek through a clump of ferns and see a few tents, similar to Kyle's, scattered around a large winged structure.

Realizing that this must be the shuttle he was talking about, I quietly head back to the others.

When I arrive, they're taking a short rest. Seeing Kyle standing by Railu, checking her, I nod to him. "I found their tents."

He smiles, "Show me."