

Rami's Return

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Having left Three Lands, Rami sits silently on his jata, thinking. Around him, the others talk quietly about various things, prompting him to look at them curiously.

Roan, a red fox who he's managed to become fast friends with, sits on his jata while Sam, a grey wolf, lounges on a second seat behind Roan. Those two are natural survivors, fighters to the end. They'll have no problem living through this.

Looking to his left, he sees Amsel, the group's border collie leader, and a long time friend of his. Despite being born into richness, Amsel's always worked at bettering himself just like everyone else could. Right now, he's a better ranger than Rami is.

With what they've learned from the surviving members of the previous group, they started out with about twenty, and only six returned. They ran into trouble, at least twice, once with a group of attackers, and again with a karnesh.

Rami sighs hard, he's already realized that if anyone's going to be the first to go, it's going to be him. Normally this wouldn't cause him much concern, but since leaving Pridewyn, he can't help but be preoccupied with thinking of the serval he fell in love with, Rinell. He's never fallen for a female like that before, and now, he doesn't want to be without her.

As he sits there thinking, the shepherd knows that he's running out of time. The longer he waits to make the decision, the closer they get to the Wilds, and the further he'll have to walk back.

When they make camp on the night of first Moonstorm, Rami still hasn't come to a decision. As Moonstorm passes, he realizes that he wasn't really paying attention, and sighs heavily.

Having heard that, Roan asks, "You alright?"

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

He slowly heads for his tent, "You don't sound like it."

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

Roan chuckles, "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."

As Roen disappears into his tent, Rami tosses the stick into the fire and sets his bow against his tent. He walks idly around in the dark, quietly asking himself questions.

“Rami, why are you still out here? Why haven’t you gone back? Is it for the money? Friendship? What?”

Finding a stump in a clearing, he absently sits and looks up at the rings. “Why are you outside at night? The der’ock hunt at night...” He sighs as he studies the rings, and his thoughts change. “Those look really pretty right now.”

He closes his eyes, and takes a deep breath, “Oh, my love, you have left your marks upon me,” he unconsciously starts to rub at the scars that Rinel made. “You’ve stolen my heart, and my thoughts, they always return to you.”

After a moment, he opens his eyes again and looks back up at the rings. A glint of movement to his left catches his attention and he turns to look. After a brief moment, he realizes what it is.

A massive, winged creature, is flying down at him, mouth open. It’s a hungry der’ock, and Rami appears to be on the menu.

His eyes dilate, and his ears droop as he croaks, “Oh, no.”

As Rami kicks off the stump into a run, the creature dips below the treetops into the clearing and scoops out a chunk of the ground with its mouth. In that brief moment; Rami, the stump, and several meters of dirt, all disappear.

As it tries to climb, Rami’s cloak, which hangs from its mouth, gets shredded by the tree branches. Bits of the cloak rain down with dirt and branches as the creature flies away.

It soars for a few minutes, and when it finds a flat rocky plateau, it lands and spits out its catch. Using its wings as arms, it starts to scratch through the pile, looking for its meal. When it finds the stump, it picks it up in its mouth, chews on it for a moment, then spits it away.

It turns back to the dirt, but finding nothing more, it lets out a disappointed screech and then takes flight, resuming its search for food.

Back at the edge of the clearing, a battered and dirty Rami drags himself out of some bushes. He coughs a few times, and gently checks his neck,. His cloak had tore some fur away as it was ripped off him.

Finding only traces of blood, he gasps quietly, “Damn Rami, you’re one lucky bastard.”

As he starts to stand though, he discovers a gash in his left arm, and shooting pain in the same foot-paw. “Maybe not as lucky as I thought.”

After collecting a few scraps of his cloak, he quickly makes a bandage for his arm and a splint for his foot. He then collects a crutch-like branch and starts limping back to camp.

With as dark as it’s become, he trips over his tent, collapsing it as he lands on it. With a heavy sigh, he rolls over and lies there for a moment, and starts to quietly think aloud again.

“Rami, this isn’t worth it anymore. You just used up what little luck you had left.”

Several minutes pass before he starts to pick himself up. After picking up his bow, and having lost his quiver and arrows in the attack, he snags a couple arrows from both

Sarn's and Roen's quivers. He then grabs a spare blanket, a canteen, and a chuko from the medicine kit and starts back along the path they made.

He looks back at the tents one last time, and nods, "Good luck my friends. I hope you find what you're looking for. I know I have."

With his foot feeling better, he quickly abandons the makeshift crutch, and follows the trampled trail the jata made through the grasses and ferns. He tries his best not to disturb how they're laying, not wanting to leave a trail for someone to follow.

When he gets to a creek, he wades out into it and lets the cold water soothe his foot-paws. Feeling the night start to weigh on him, he drinks his fill of water, refills his canteen, and then lies down under a couple short trees for the night.

As Roen carefully picks his way across the trampled grasses, Rami hunkers down flat to the ground under the trees, trying to stay hidden. As he watches, Roen nears the creek and looks along the bank.

With him being so close, Rami starts to fear discovery and reaches for his sword. Not finding it or his scabbard, he looks to find only the hooks hanging from his belt, and they've been broken. Above him in the tree, a small dragon skitters along a branch trying to catch a bug.

The rustling catches Roen's attention and he looks toward the tree. After a moment, he stoops to refill his canteen. Rami watches and listens carefully, and to his surprise, hears Roen mutter, "Rami, I wish I could go with you. Take care of you and your love." Without looking up, he caps the canteen and then heads back towards camp.

Rami watches him disappear, then slowly relaxes. With a tear in his eye, he softly confesses, "I will, my friend. I will."

He then collects his blanket, bow and arrows, and heads out, back to towards Three Lands.

* * *

Staggering in though the east gate, again using a crutch, Rami limps his way to see the shaman. Having walked for nearly two days on it, his bad foot has swollen, and it's numb.

When he enters the hut, he's greeted by a young otter pup. The boy looks up at Rami and asks, "Help you?"

Rami looks at the pup and smiles, "I need to see the shaman about my foot."

"Tani, get back here," his mother calls, summoning the boy back behind the counter. She then looks up at Rami, "Sorry, he thinks he's helping. What happened?"

He limps a few steps closer to the counter, "I was attacked two days ago. Not sure how bad I hurt it, but it's swollen and I can't feel anything below my ankle."

She looks up at him skeptically, "Attacked?"

"Oh, sorry. A der'ock."

The otter stands and looks over the counter at his swollen foot paw. "And that's your only injury?" she asks, surprised.

Rami smiles, "It's the worst. It snagged my cloak and tore it from my neck, and when I fell, I was gouged here, by some branches." He points out both injuries as he mentions them.

She sits and looks at her kit, "That's why I keep telling you to come in at night. This male was very lucky to have survived." Rami can't help but smile as she writes down some information. "Where were you attacked?"

"About two days walk, due east."

She keeps writing as she continues, "Your name?"

With no more need to hide anything, he states, "Rami."

"Was anyone with you at the time of your attack?"

"No, I was alone."

When she finishes, she sets the paper and quill on the counter, "Please sign at the bottom, there'll be a fifty coin charge to see her."

Being suddenly grateful that his coin pouch did not fall off in the attack, he places a fifty piece on the counter and signs the paper.

The otter looks down at her son, "Tani, would you please show him in."

The pup smiles, "Come wif me," and holds open a door for Rami to pass through. He then points to a rather soft looking chair and says, "Shaman will be here in a minute."

Rami bows slightly to the pup, "Thank you."

Tani smiles and bows back, "You welcome."

As the boy leaves, Rami slowly sinks into the chair, and almost falls asleep. It's been too long since he's been this comfortable.

"You will require much rest," a female voice says. Rami looks around and sees the shaman, an ermine, enter through a different door. "I will do what I can, but you will need to stay off your feet for several days."

Rami nods, and she holds up her hand, stopping him from speaking. She sets a bucket topped stool in front of him and carefully places his swollen foot in it. From inside her sleeve, she produces some dried leaves and crumples them over his foot. As she starts chanting, she starts to sprinkle a few drops of a red, then a green liquid over his leg.

From a nearby table, she retrieves a small pitcher and pours it's contents over his foot paw. This one he can smell, and knows instantly it is alcohol, and he finds himself glad that he can't feel his foot. As she pours, it mixes with the red and green liquids, becoming a clear brown.

Still chanting, she pours a pitcher of water into the bucket, enough to cover his foot paw. After dropping two white rocks into the bucket, she stops chanting and puts her hands on Rami's knee. "You will soak until the rocks turn black." She then turns and leaves the room.

Rami leans forward and looks into the bucket at the white rocks. "They turn colors?" he absently asks himself.

Suddenly, the otter receptionist comes up and also looks in the bucket. With a sigh she takes the rocks out and says, "Not these."

Rami looks curiously up at her, "What?"

"Let me guess, she also used red and green drops?"

"Uhm, I think so."

She shakes her head, "I swear she's gonna kill someone one of these days. She did at least add the alcohol, I can smell that."

Rami watches worriedly as she starts rummaging through the various bottles on the counter and comes up with two different blues and a yellow. "What are you doing?"

She smiles, "I'm going to fix her mistake...again." She then starts putting several drops of each into the bucket. The water turns a murky blue in response. After she puts the bottles back, she picks up two different white rocks and gives them a sniff. "These are the right ones." She sets them in the bucket and they start to slowly bubble.

Rami looks curiously for a moment, then asks, "What's going on?"

She pulls up another stool and nods, "Fair question. I wish I knew. Lately she's been acting...odd, giving people the wrong treatments, forgetting what's she's doing, where she is...things like that."

"Why is she still a shaman then?"

She smiles, "Because...there's no one to take her place. I won't be able to, I have my pups to worry about." She gently rubs her belly and Rami notices that she's showing a little.

He nods and asks, "How long till she has to find a replacement?"

She blushes, "About a month. I'm already trying to find her one, so I can get them properly trained before I take my leave." She scoots in closer and removes the bandage from his left arm. "Let's get this cleaned, too."

Rami tries to relax as she cleans the wound, picking out the debris that he couldn't see. After a few minutes she puts some salve on it, and his neck where the cloak was ripped off and then wraps his arm with a fresh dressing. She then rewraps the old bandage over top, hiding the fresh one.

"All done." She leans over and looks into the bucket. "Not too much longer. Just relax for a while, and don't let her know I was in here if she comes back."

Rami nods, "I won't, thank you."

She smiles as she stands, then exits the room. He sighs and sinks into the chair to wait for the shaman's return.

* * *

After sitting at a café table, Rami holds up a pouch to the waitress, a black mink, and asks, "Could I get this filled with ice?"

She eyes the pouch curiously, obviously it's not a question she usually gets.

"It's for my foot," he explains. "I pulled some muscles and need to keep the swelling down."

She smiles, "Ah, certainly. Would you also like something to drink?"

"Please. Garo juice would be nice."

She nods and takes the pouch, "I'll be right back."

Rami slouches back and puts his left foot paw up on another chair. He's been here three days, and he's still unable to put much weight on his foot paw. That said, traveling to Lorholt is out of the question. He needs to there, before he can get to Pridewyn.

The waitress puts his drink on the table, interrupting his thoughts, and hands him the ice.

"Oh, thank you," he says, quickly draping the pouch over his foot, just below the ankle.

She smiles at his relief. "Are you ready to order?"

He nods, "The lunch special, please."

"What would you like for the side?"

“The regulars’ll be fine.”

“Soup or salad?”

“Soup, please.”

“Alright.”

She heads off to the kitchen and Rami adjusts the ice pack slightly. Trying to keep up his exercises, he wiggles his toes a few times and then flexes them all together.

Not too much, he reminds himself, just enough to keep the muscles loose.

With a sigh, he sits back and looks around at the other patrons. This is the first time he’s eaten at this café, a waitress at the other got too friendly with him. Before he met Rinel, he would have been the one coming on to the waitress, now though, it felt uncomfortable, and he didn’t like it.

When the waitress arrives with his soup, he doesn’t even notice her until she asks, “Do you need fresh ice?”

Surprised, he looks at her, then at his foot paw. “Uhm, no. It’s fine thanks.”

She smiles and nods. “Let me know if you do,” then heads off to another table.

He sniffs the soup, letting the savory scent fill him. It’s saimin, made with fresh ma’pai egg noodles and crystal fish. Three Lands has the best variety of fish in all the villages, and is the only place you can find crystal fish.

He eats slowly, enjoying not only the flavor but the texture of the soup. By the time the rest of his meal arrives, he’s only half way through the soup.

He slides that aside as the mink sets his meal out for him. The main plate consists of nakku katsu, and two hearty scoops of white rice. She also sets out a teriyaki dipping sauce, and lastly, a small plate with a cube of vanilla haupai, drizzled lightly with chocolate syrup.

Looking over the meal, Rami smiles and licks his chops hungrily. Seeing him do that, the mink giggles and heads off to her other tables.

* * *

Having been in Three Lands for almost a week, Rami is anxious to get moving. With the shaman’s(or rather her assistant’s)approval, he’s fit to travel again so he’s at the caravan outfitter, offering his service as an escort to Lorholt.

With the unfortunate threat that the bandits along that path pose, he expects picking up work to be easy, however most of the current caravans are headed south, to Burrowfield.

He stays there nearly half the day, waiting, hoping to find a westward group, until finally a group of four, carrying instruments, comes in. When they ask the outfitter, a martin, if anyone else is headed north, he shakes his head.

“With the pass collapsed, you’ll need to head west to Lorholt, then go north from there.” He then nods in Rami’s direction, “That ranger there is looking to head west.”

The leader, a spotted skunk, looks to Rami, then back to the outfitter. “But we need to get to Dendros by the end of next week. We don’t have the time to go around the pass.”

“Sorry, but until the pass is cleared, there’s no other way,” he counters, shaking his head.

“How many nakku do you have?” Rami asks the outfitter.

“Nakku? Why do you want nakku?”

Rami smiles as he looks at the four musicians, “Nakku are rather fast. While they can’t carry much, two teams would be more than enough to get us to Lorholt, and then you could take them north around Garrent to Dendros. The whole trip shouldn’t take more than...ten days.”

The musicians smile, but the outfitter frowns, “I don’t know...it’ll be the last of my nakku.”

The skunk looks back at Rami, so Rami asks, “How much are they?”

The martin sighs, “Fifty a head, another fifty for the cart.”

Rami quickly runs the numbers in his head. “Three hundred per team.”

“There’s eight in a team, three fifty.”

“With the cart?”

“Four hundred, with the cart.”

“Since we’ll need two teams, and carts, make it seven fifty for all. I had two jata outfitted for less than that.”

The martin gives Rami a suspicious look, then concedes, “Alright, you have your two teams.” He then looks to the musicians, “Who’s paying?”

The musicians look at Rami, who smiles and shrugs, “I just saved you your reputation, and a hundred fifty coin, consider it my payment for escorting you.”

As the skunk turns back to pay the outfitter, the smallest musician, a red panda, turns to Rami and gives his nose a bump with hers. “Thank you, very much. You must have a great need to get to Lorholt, to wave a fee like that.”

To his surprise, Rami doesn’t react, just smiles and states, “Yes, but Pridewyn is my destination, and where my heart lies.”

The panda smiles, and adjusts the shoulder strap to her instrument case. “You must love her very much,” she sighs. “Wish I could find someone like you.”

Rami nearly laughs at her comment, drawing an odd look from her. “Before I met her, you would not have liked me. She...changed how I see others, and myself.”

She blushes, and begins to say something, but the skunk interrupts, “Janna, leave your dulcimer here so the outfitter can load it.” He looks up at Roen, “We need to collect our things. Please meet us back here in an hour.”

Rami nods, “I’m ready now. I’ll be waiting.”

“We’ll be back shortly then. Thank you.”

Janna follows as the others head out, Rami though, picks up his few possessions and heads to the back of the outfitters shop to load his gear in one of the carts.

* * *

Rami stops the group for the night before they get to the first signs of the bandits. The skunk, Brae, gets out his instrument, a mandolin, prompting the others to do the same. Janna gets out her lap dulcimer, while Horra, a raccoon, her guitar, and Guelt, a rabbit, his base guitar.

Rami sits at guard, bow ready as they start playing, the first song is one Rami doesn’t recognize, but he does find himself liking it. As he keeps watch, they start to play another song, and he notices that they’re being watched by a lone figure that’s trying to hid behind some bushes. As he watches, the figure lies down to watch the group play.

After their third song, and seeing that the figure hasn't moved, Rami goes to check on it. He makes his way around to sneak up on them from the other side. When he gets there, he sees a young hyena lying on the ground, asleep.

With a sigh, Rami wakes the hyena. With a groan and a sniff, he slowly wakes and groans, "What, is it my turn?"

"Your turn for what?" Rami asks, more curious now than concerned.

"To get the..." His eyes go wide, realizing that he's not where he thought he was. "...food?"

Rami chuckles but doesn't let his guard down, "What are you doing out here?"

The hyena slowly sits up and looks around, "I heard music."

"Yeah, so?"

"It sounded nice." He scrubs his head, clearing some dirt and debris from his fur.

Rami notices that the only weapon he's carrying is a small dagger and his clothes aren't very much protection from anything. "Why are you out here?" Rami asks, trying to find out if he's a scout, or just lost.

"I was traveling east, my group got jumped. I got away...I don't..." He suddenly shudders, closing his eyes, blocking a memory.

"You're welcome to stay with us, for the night," Horra states, surprising both Rami and the hyena. "What's your name?"

"Div."

Horra looks up at Rami skeptically and he shakes his head slightly. Div is not a name; it's an insult, and this pup doesn't seem to even know it. When she looks back at the pup, she says, "Come with me. Let's get you something to eat."

Rami watches her lead the hyena back to the camp and then starts checking out the area. While not a trained tracker, Rami does know a few tricks, and is soon able to determine that the pup indeed came from the west like he stated. Only slightly reassured by that, Rami heads back to the others to keep an eye on their guest.

Rami awakens to find that the pup is sitting outside, scratching at the dirt with a stick. From the glum look on his face, Rami knows that there's something bothering him. As Rami moves to sit next to him, Div starts to slowly talk.

"You're their guide, aren't you."

"Yes," Rami nods, as he watches the hyena poke and scratch at the ground with the stick.

After a moment, the pup says, "Keep them safe. They play nice music." Then, with a heavy sigh, he stands and tosses the stick aside. "I have to go." Rami watches, as the pup walks away to the east, and disappears into the underbrush.

When he looks back down at the ground, and realizes that he drew a crude map in the dirt. After a moment, he realizes it's the road ahead, and he's indicated a danger area and how to avoid it. Roen studies the map for a few minutes, and then rubs it out with his foot-paw. As the others awaken, he feeds the nakku and gives their gear a quick inspection. With everything in order, he helps the others pack their gear.

* * *

The two nakku teams jog along, quickly pulling the carts single file past the scattered broken carts. Their pace is brisk, and they should get through the danger area in less than a day. The only problem is now, thanks to that young hyena, Rami knows there's a trap waiting.

As they travel, Janna moves up to the front of the cart with him and says, "I'm beginning to think he wasn't a lost pup."

Rami glances at her, "What makes you think that?"

She smiles as she watches Rami work the reins, "We passed him an hour after we left camp. He tried to hide, but I saw him."

"Are you sure?"

She nods, "Yep, looked like he was crying, too."

Rami gives her a longer look, then risks a glance back at the other cart. Brae drives that one, with Horra and Guelt riding in the back. He has a choice to make and he better make it quick. Does he trust the pup and take the alternate route, or does he stay on the main road.

He sighs, these people are not fighters, they wouldn't know how to properly handle a weapon if he put one in their hands. As he thinks, he remembers that the pup said to keep them safe, combine that with how much he liked their music, and Rami decides to trust him.

When the split comes up, he veers left, taking the southern, less traveled route. The trail heads downhill, and abruptly narrows, Rami slows the nakku, allowing him to react to the unfamiliar road. While he's traveled the other road a few times, he's never taken this route. The path narrows further as it starts to weave in and out of the trees. Rami risks a look back and finds that Brae is doing a good job of keeping with him.

Before too long, Janna looks curiously at Rami, "Are you sure you know where we're going?"

Rami smiles worriedly, "I hope so, this should join back up with the main road ahead."

She looks around, and sighs, "We'll need to stop for lunch soon."

"I'd rather not stop here if we didn't have to, I don't feel safe."

"Well, I'm getting hungry, and if Guelt doesn't eat something, he gets all shaky and stuff."

Rami sighs, "Alright, but we'll have to be brief."

Finding an isolated spot against a small rock cliff wall, they break for lunch. By the time they've fed the nakku and started a fire, Guelt is already starting to shake. Janna notices this and quickly gives him some garo juice to drink. Guelt eagerly swallows the sugary drink down, and before the food's ready, his shakes are starting to pass.

Rami spends most of the time walking back and forth around the others as they work, carefully watching for signs of the bandits.

After a short while, Horra comes up to him with a bowl of food. "You need to eat too," she quietly states.

Rami nods, and takes a hard look around before taking the bowl from her. Despite not having his bow ready, he still maintains his vigil, not wanting to be caught off guard if someone should approach.

As the others start to put things away, Rami sees movement along the top of the rock wall. Before he can react, an arrow hits his bowl, knocking it from his hand.

Rami dodges sideways as he draws his bow, loosing the arrow towards the movement he saw. Hearing a yelp, he knows that it found its target.

"We need to go, NOW!" he bellows.

Caught by surprise, the others quickly collect what they can and scramble for the carts. Rami keeps his bow ready, waiting for someone else to appear above them.

"Come on. Let's go," Janna calls, as she grabs the reins for their cart. Rami gives the others a moment before climbing onto the back, and redrawing his bow.

Janna gives the reins a flick to get the nakku moving, behind them, Brae does the same. As the carts pull away, Rami sees a blackened figure jump from the cliff. When it lands in the clearing, near the smoldering fire, Rami sees that he's a wolf, a black wolf.

He takes aim as the wolf starts to chase after them. "Faster, Janna," Rami calls as he looses an arrow. It hits the wolf in the chest, but he just keeps coming.

As Rami draws a second arrow, Janna yells, "BRANCH!" He reflexively lets the arrow fly and ducks down.

The arrow misses the wolf, but seeing as their pulling away, he slows to a stop. Breathing hard, the wolf pulls the arrow from his chest piece, a trickle of blood flows from his open wound. With a maddened growl, he turns back, intent on seeing if anything was left behind.

Rami gets back up and watches the wolf turn away. He frowns as how lucky they were. "That was too close," he mutters as he sets next to Janna.

As he takes the reins from her, Janna notices that his hand is bleeding. "You're hurt."

Rami looks at his bloodied left hand, he hadn't even noticed, but he quickly realizes when it happened; the arrow went through the bowl into his hand. Starting to feel the pain from that, he passes all the reins to his right, and Janna starts to wrap the wound.

* * *

Having returned to the main path, and traveled beyond the unsafe area, they make camp for the night. Janna helps Rami apply some medicine to his hand and then properly dresses it. Once that's done, she joins the others setting up camp for the night.

Rami starts heading back down the trail to set up several concealed trip lines. Some he sets as snares, while others he sets up to be alarms.

After nearly an hour, he returns to camp and Horra hands him a plate of food. "Do you think we're safe here?"

Rami looks back down the trail, and nods, "I think so, but I don't want someone getting the drop on us either." He nods as he takes the plate, "Thanks."

As Rami sits near the fire, Brae asks, "How far are we from Lorholt?"

"We'll be there by tomorrow evening."

He nods, "Then what?"

Rami swallows a mouthful of the stew, "Then you'll take the nakku and carts, and head north, towards Garrent. I'll make my way west, to Pridewyn."

He looks worried for a moment, "Won't we need a guide?"

Rami shakes his head, "That trail's well traveled these days, especially since the pass is closed."

“What about Garrent?” Horra asks, “Isn’t it haunted?”

Rami frowns, “Last time I was there, we stayed in an outlying hut. Nothing really happened, but we did hear some noises from the council hut. Just stay away from there, or you could just go around Garrent, there’s a trail around it.”

Janna gasps, “You went into the village?”

“Yeah.”

“What’s it like?”

He sets aside his empty plate, “Well, it’s just like any other village, the old sections anyway. Just...empty. No people. No furniture. Nothing.”

“The whole village?” Guelt asks in disbelief.

“Who used to live there anyway,” Janna asks.

“The way I heard it, no one,” Horra states.

Rami chuckles, “No, the Moku used to live there, long time ago. I don’t know why they left.”

“The ghost, maybe?” Brae guesses.

“Maybe the ghost is someone that didn’t leave,” Horra states.

“Well, whatever the reason, it’s empty,” Rami states, fighting a yawn. “It’s getting late, and we really don’t want to be out at night.”

Brae nods, and starts pick up his things. Horra and Guelt follow, but Janna sighs and asks, “Have you ever see a der’ock?”

Rami fights the urge to laugh, but manages to answer, “Yes...I have. In fact, I was almost eaten by one.”

All four of the musicians stop what their doing and gawk at him. Horra somehow manages to ask, “How...?”

He sighs and pulls his cloak aside, revealing the scar of absent fur on his left arm. “It tried to scoop me up as I jumped, caught my cloak. When it tore free, I fell into some brush. Got this, and nearly broke my foot.”

“How long ago did it happen?” Janna asks.

He pull his cloak back around him, “Nearly two weeks.”

Brae’s expression turns to surprise, “Shaman fixed you up quick.”

Rami chuckles, “More like her assistant, but yeah, she did a good job.” He picks up his plate, “We really should get inside for the night.”

* * *

Having helped stable the nakku at Lorholt’s north gate, and said good-bye to the musicians, Rami heads to the outfitters to check for anyone heading to Pridewyn. As he passes the café where Niva—Roen’s red panda lover—works, he sees she’s sitting at a booth, talking with a red fox vixen, one that he knows. He quickly ducks behind a parked merchant cart to avoid being seen. That vixen is Railu, Roen’s mate.

“What’s she doing here?” he wonders aloud.

Cautiously he peeks around the cart at them, and watches as they talk. While he can’t hear what they’re saying, he can tell that they’re getting along quite well, as they’re both laugh as they talk. The other waitress, Mina, the skunk he had a fling with, waves at Rinel prompting her to stand. Railu quickly gives her a heartfelt hug and then sits as Rinel returns to work.

Rami quickly heads off down the street, knowing that it would not be a good idea to be seen by either, not now anyway. He starts to wonder if there's anyone with her when he rounds a corner and sees a group of cats talking with a male wearing armor.

He quickly realizes that the male is not a cat, nor a canid, in fact, Rami's not sure what he is and gawks for a moment, until a young doe bounces past him. As she approaches the others, he decides the outfitter may not be a good place to be right now and heads off to the west gate inn for the night.

Making his way back to the outfitter early in the morning, Rami hopes to get there before any caravans head out for Pridewyn. Rounding the last corner, he nearly runs into a female skunk heading the same way. Seeing as she's in more of a hurry than he is, he lets her pass first, then follows.

From the way she's dressed, and the signet on her dress, she's a teacher. Rami finds that the most fetching thing about her is the unusual fact she has three, white, stripes down her back. He almost laughs, realizing that had he not met Rinel, he'd ask her out.

As they approach the outfitter, Rami stops abruptly and backs up around the corner of the building.

He sighs heavily, it'd figure they'd be here early. He peeks back around the corner to see Railu, the cats, and that strange looking male from yesterday talking with some others. Others he quickly recognizes as Mirra and Romo, the two warriors he met on their first trip to Three Lands.

"What is going on here?" he wonders aloud. Discouraged by the presence of so many people he knows, he leans against the building's wall and slides down to sit on the ground and wait.

As he watches the people walk by, going about their daily business, he's startled by a familiar voice. "What are you doing back here?"

He looks up to see Mina looking down at him. He sighs, "Hello Mina."

As he stands, she gives him an odd look. "What's wrong, why are you hiding?"

"That obvious?" He scratches his head, not sure how to explain. "Let's just say that there's some people who I don't want to run into."

She crosses her arms and frowns, "If you talking about Railu and her group, they've gone."

He peeks around the corner and nods, "Thanks."

As he starts towards the outfitter's, she follows him, "Hey, where you going? I was hoping we could, you know..."

He stops and unexpectedly wraps her in a hug. "I'm, sorry. I've found someone, and she's...she's the best thing that's ever happened to me, and I have to get back to her."

She smiles and hugs him back. "She must be something, last time I saw you, you couldn't stop hitting on me. Now look at you; you're...polite, and you seem to have your priorities in order." She sighs lightly and runs her fingers lightly across the scar on his left arm. "I'm jealous."

He gently rubs his muzzle along hers, "I never..."

She puts her finger to his nose, silencing him. "I understand. Go to her."

He nods, and hesitantly heads to the outfitters.

She watches until he's through the door. "Be good to her," she whispers, wiping a tear from her eye. Silently, she leaves, heading back to the café.

* * *

Unable to find anyone to travel with, Rami heads out alone. With no one to wait for, and having started early in the day, he's able to make it to the marshlands before dark.

Standing on a dry peninsula, Rami looks out across the marshlands. He has about five days of walking through mud and muck before he'll be back on dry land. With a heavy sigh, he turns back to the small fire he's made and checks on the small krindo he's cooking. He turns the spitted short, fat lizard over, allowing it to cook evenly, then sits back on a stump, and absently starts humming one of the songs that he heard the musicians play.

Before too long, a rustling catches his attention. He keeps humming as he grabs his bow and an arrow, then slowly moves to discover the source. Drawing the arrow, he approaches a small bush as it rustles again.

"Come on, come on out. Come to Rami," he mutters. As he takes a step forward, something small runs away from the bush, away from him.

He relaxes noticeably. "Damn dragons," he sighs, lowering the bow. As he turns back to the fire, he stops, then suddenly brings the bow back up. There's a viper lizard eating at the cooking krindo.

"Get away from that," he snaps and looses the arrow at the viper, it hits the viper in its rear flank.

The meter tall lizard bolts forward, plowing through the makeshift spit and fire. It screams in pain as it kicks burning wood around and falls into the fire.

Rami readies another arrow, "You just ate my supper, so now you're supper." He looses the arrow and narrowly misses the writhing and flopping viper. Unable to get to its feet, the viper continues to kick and whip its now burning tail around, scattering burning hot coals and ash around the campsite.

A stick bounces off Rami's shin and he reflexively steps back, away from the fire. Drawing a third arrow, he takes aim as the viper gets to its feet. Before he can loose it, though, the burned creature lunges forward, throwing itself into the boggy water. Rami tries to track it, but it slips below the surface, leaving only ash floating where it went in.

Dropping his aim, he yells at the departed viper, "Sure! Hope it was worth it, ya thief!" Upset, and hungry, he grabs a couple sticks and starts to push the fire back together.

Once he has most of it back inside the ring, he adds some fresh wood and picks up the little that remains of the krindo he was cooking. He looks at what little, charred bits of meat that are left, and tosses it aside. It's too burned to eat, so he sighs and sits back on the stump.

With it getting too dark to hunt, he reaches into his pack and pulls out some ma'pai jerky and a couple rice cakes. Not the supper he was hoping for, but it'll have to do till morning.

* * *

Having just killed a wild ma'pai, Rami stops to scrape some mud off his foot-paws and realizes he hears humming. He quickly scrapes off the majority of it and then stands on a flattened boulder to look around. Not too far off, he sees a cloaked figure sauntering towards him. Rami knows by it's walk, it's a Moku, one of many wandering traders.

Apparently, the Moku sees him too, as he waves and calls, "Hello, traveler."

Rami knows it's a male, no one's ever seen a female Moku. Knowing they're all friendly he waves back, "Hello there."

"If you could wait there, I'll come to you."

Rami watches for a moment as the Moku slogs through the mud to him, then sitting back down and scraping more mud from himself.

Seeing him do this, the Moku takes off his pack and sits next to Rami. "I have something that can make it easier for you to walk out here."

Rami stops cleaning his legs and looks at the Moku. "Really? What?"

The Moku pulls out an odd pair of leather straps with a foot-paw shaped 'cup' in the middle. "There called shoes. They're for your feet."

Rami looks down at his foot-paws and flexes his toes., "My foot-paws?"

"Yes, you put this part over your toes, and then wrap these around your foot, up to your ankle."

Rami looks skeptically at it, "Sounds uncomfortable."

The Moku pulls up his cloak enough to show his boots. "I'd try them on myself, but they won't fit my feet. They're made for toe walkers, like yourself."

Rami takes one of the straps and tentatively puts the cupped part on his foot-paw. To his surprise, it's a good fit, so he wraps the wide straps around his foot, up to his ankles.

The Moku watches as Rami stands and takes a few tentative steps. "How do you like it?"

Rami nods, "It's more comfortable than it appears."

"Would you like them?"

Knowing the Moku doesn't usually accept money, Rami asks, "What would you take in trade for them?"

The Moku thinks for a moment as he looks Rami over. Noticing the ma'pai he's caught, he states, "I would love some dinner, and some pleasant conversation for the evening."

Rami smiles, "That's something I can do. My camp's just a little ways back."

The Moku nods, "It's a deal then."

Rami quickly puts on the second shoe and leads the Moku to his camp. He quickly field dresses the ma'pai as the Moku sets up his tent. Despite not having planned on sharing the catch, Rami finds the value of trading news worth it.

Rami speaks first, telling the Moku about his last encounter with the bandits on the road to Three Lands, and about the black wolf he saw leading them. The Moku listens intently, occasionally adding wood to the fire as Rami checks the cooking ma'pai.

As Rami finishes his story, he pulls a leg from the ma'pai and gives it a sniff. Finding it to his liking, he pulls the other off and hands it to the Moku.

“Well, that’s pretty much all I know about the roads west. Anything interesting happen in Pridewyn recently?”

The Moku takes the leg, then takes his hood off, revealing his face. Rami looks at him curiously, noting that his face is shaped somewhat like a mouse’s, but he has scales and hints of fur growing out from between them.

Ignoring Rami’s looks, the Moku takes a bite and savors it for a moment, “Hmm, this is good.”

Reflexively, Rami smiles, “I never season ma’pai. Flavor’s too good to ruin like that.”

“Does my appearance offend you? I know I’m hideous.”

Rami sighs and honestly answers, “I’ve seen worse.”

Seeing Rami’s sincerity, the Moku nods, “Not an envious thing, that is. Please, if I may ask, what was it you saw?”

Rami licks his chops a couple times, then states, “The insides of a der’ock’s mouth as it came for me.”

The Moku shakes his head. “Not a fate I would wish on anyone. How is it you are still here?”

“Reflexes, luck...call it what you want, but I managed to stay outside it’s mouth as it tried to scoop me up. Snagged my cloak though, drug me through some trees.”

“Sounds painful.”

He peels back his cloak, pointing out his scars. “It was, but it helped me realize what’s important to me.”

The Moku tosses a bone in the fire and asks, “And what would that be?”

“A beautiful female,” Rami smiles, then bites the end off the leg bone. “Want some more?”

The Moku smiles and sighs, “Thank you but no, I’ve had my fill. Let me tell you a bit of what happened in Pridewyn.”

Rami promptly tosses the rest of the bone in the fire, wanting to hear the Moku’s news.

“There was a stranger in the Trials, and he did so well, he was able to contract two cats. He already had two others with him, a lion cub, and a white cat with odd eyes. I heard that he headed north, where he picked up two canines, then to Arindell where he killed the beast that was plaguing them.”

Realizing he may have seen this group, Rami asks, “This stranger, he has no fur, right?”

A bit confused, the Moku nods. “You know of this male?”

Rami shakes his head. “I have seen him, and the ones you described, in Lanketh before I left. They’re headed east, to Three Lands. I know one of the canines, the vixen, Railu. She’s after her mate, so they’ll most likely head east from there.”

“Ahh, so they’re off to the dig then?”

“Possibly.” Rami takes the spitted ma’pai from the fire, then asks, “What do you know of this male? What is he?”

“He, is a human,” the Moku states. “Legend tells that they were killed off over two hundred years ago. I’d never expected to see one.”

Rami pulls the spit from the lizard, then puts it in a leather bag. As he ties it closed, he gives the Moku a skeptical look, "Yet, we've both seen one. Wonder what he's after."

"Other humans, I gather. I'd been told that there were rumors of more to the far east that may have survived."

As Rami hangs the bagged ma'pai from a high tree branch, to protect it from predators, he asks, "Why'd no one go looking?"

The Moku stands and smiles, "We Moku are not built for adventure." He then stretches, and puts his hood back up. "I am tired. Good night."

Rami watches him head into his tent, wondering if the Moku's really tired, or just ducking out of the conversation. He shakes his head, wondering just how much the Moku really knows and goes back to cleaning up the camp site for the night.

* * *

When morning comes, Rami wakes to find the Moku's pack sitting just outside his tent. Not seeing any sign of the Moku or his tent, he tentatively opens the pack and finds a note.

'Traveler;

Thank you for sharing your meal with me,
and for entertaining this old male in his last hours. I wish
you well on your journey, and may your future be bright.
Mourn not for me, or the past, but rejoice for what you
have and what lies ahead.'

"Last hours?" Rami wonders aloud. Then, realizing what that means, he shoves the pack into his tent and starts frantically looking around.

"MOKU?" he shouts, hoping to get a response. When none comes, he scrambles up on a leaning boulder to look around. Seeing something floating in the marsh, he slides down and runs through the muck towards it.

Rami recognizes it instantly as the Moku's cloak. "Why's this out here?" he asks as he pulls the fabric from the muck. Underneath, he finds the Moku's empty boots. Rami drops the cloak, knowing that a Moku would not leave his cloak and boots behind.

Unless... "Last hours...he was dying?" He looks down at his new foot-paw straps, realizing that the Moku practically gave them to him. He suddenly remembers some stories he'd heard, about Moku passing them things, then disappearing. He'd never really believed any of them, despite how honest the trader was...not till now.

"Conversation and food my tail, you were testing me." Looking back out across the marsh, he sighs, "I guess I passed."

He returns to camp and starts going through the Moku's pack. As he sorts out the contents, he finds several small weapons, jewelry, a few blankets, and some food. He moves the weapons and food to his own pack, then repacks the merchant's things.

* * *

As Rami crosses the Pride River bridge into Pridewyn itself, he sees the scoreboard, still showing the results of the last Trials event. He notes that the entrant with

the most points was named Kyle, and that the two he contracted were Tayla and Larrah. Rami frowns, wishing he'd been here to see the event.

After spending some time in the markets, selling what goods the Moku left him, Rami heads off to find Rinel. As he approaches the café, he somewhat saddened when he doesn't see her. Not wanting to give up hope, he heads in and has a seat, and waits for someone to wait on him.

Before too long, a bobcat comes over to him and places a menu on the table. "Hi, I'm Tari, I'll be your waitress, would you like something to drink?"

Rami starts looking at the menu, "Yes, I'd like some garo juice please."

"Certainly."

Before she can step away, he swallows hard. "Tari?"

She looks curiously at him, "Would you like something else?"

"No, no. Just a bit of information, if you know it. Is Rinel working today?"

She gives him an odd look, as if trying to decide if she should answer.

Sensing her indecision, he nods, "I understand. If she is, can you tell her Rami is here, and would like to see her."

Her look slowly softens. "She doesn't work here anymore."

"Oh." He thinks for a moment, then asks, "Do you know where she is?"

She shakes her head, "Sorry, I don't."

Rami sighs and puts his head on the table, "Thanks." As she heads off, he starts to wonder how he's going to find her. He sits up as Tari sets his drink on the table.

"I asked the cook for you, he thinks she may have got a better job at an inn, but he doesn't know which one."

Rami nods, "Thank you."

She smiles, "Would you like something to eat?"

He opens the menu and slowly nods, "Yes, please."

* * *

Having checked every inn he could find, as well as the other cafés, a sad and tired Rami sits on a bench just outside the council hut. He can't find Rinel anywhere, and this upsets him. Unable to figure out what to do, he tries to fight back his tears.

Silently, almost unnoticed, a cloaked figure comes out of the council hut and calmly sits next to him. "The pain of a love lost is hard to ignore. Would you give up so easily, if you knew where she was?"

Rami looks over at the figure, and quickly realizes that it's the head councilor, a cheetess. "Ma'am? How...?" he stutters, confused.

She pulls her hood back and smiles. "Just answer my question."

Rami looks at the ground for a moment, then states, "No, I would not give up...and I'm not. I...I just can't find her, no matter where I look."

"Maybe, you're looking in the wrong places."

Rami looks up at her, "What do you mean?"

She smiles, and heads back into the council hut. Curious, he follows, hoping to get an answer. When he gets through the door, the councilor is gone, but he comes face to face with a familiar face.

Overcome with relief, he smiles, "Rinel?" Seeing that she's wearing a mediator's gown, his heart drops, but he quickly recovers and bows, "I mean, Mediator."

She blushes and smiles, "Hello Rami." She wraps him in a hug and whispers, "You're the only one allowed to call me by my name now. I claimed you as my mate when they approached, hoping you'd return to me."

Feeling overjoyed at her words, Rami softly rubs his muzzle along hers, "I couldn't stay away. You're all I could think about."

She smiles, tears coming to her eyes. "You'll have to live here, in Pridewyn."

"I know. You're a mediator now, you have duties and responsibilities to the council, and to the village. What kind of male would I be if I didn't accept that."

She gently presses her nose to his, and starts to purr. "I love you, my mate."

"I love you too, my mate." He lets his tears flow as he holds her close, relieved to be with her again.