

Part 6

‘Is it really that nice where you come from?’ Fray asked, his eyes bright with excitement about the thought of his new home.

The cobbles of the road were too slippery for his hooves after a morning of drizzle; the straps of his harness were chaffing and they had been on the move without a rest for the best part of several hours. Sure he was tired, but the further he got from Katal and the closer to Jared’s homelands the better.

‘Well it certainly is a lot better than this dreary place; I can assure you that.’ Jared said with certainty.

‘Oh come on; tell me what it’s like! Are there lots of horses there?’ Fray asked, keen pry knowledge of his soon-to-be home from the Roo.

‘Well the climate is a lot warmer here, though it still rains as much. Most of the buildings are built to keep the heat out; rather than keep it in and villages are less built up and more spread out than the human counterparts. The best thing about my country by far is the people... In many ways they are like people; some are lazy, some are hardworking, some are tall, and some are short, but in large they are far friendlier and welcoming than any person you will find around here, and that is why I love it, and I’m sure you will too.’

Fray looked over his shoulder. ‘What about horses?’

‘Yes we have as many horses as people do, and they have as many different jobs in the community, probably more.’ Jared Chuckled.

‘What about food?’ Fray asked with a certain longing in his voice.

‘Don’t worry we have good food!’

‘I thought you might, it isn’t hard to see.’ Fray said obliviously.

‘And what is that supposed to mean exactly?’ Jared asked, slightly offended.

‘You do look well fed...’ Fray stammered slightly. ‘I did not mean anything by it.’

‘The food where I come from is fantastic, it is why I learned to cook, but I was thinner when I arrived at Askolov... I didn’t really make any friends there, and with working in a bakery and all it didn’t take me long to get fat.’ Jared gave Fray an enthusiastic pat on the side. ‘Somebody else likes their food as well, and naturally I mean nothing by that either.’

‘Does it bother you?’ Fray asked. ‘The extra weight I mean.’

Jared thought for a moment. ‘Apart from having to adjust my clothing no, I don’t think that it bothers me all that much; though I do worry if it will bother somebody back home.’

‘Oh, you have a mate back home?’

‘Not a mate; not anymore.’ He said with a mild longing. ‘We ended what we had when I moved here; I have missed him ever since.’

Fray though he had misheard. 'Him?'

'Yes, it is common for my kind to take the same gender as a mate; we are mostly born without preference.'

He was young and had yet to be used by his previous owner as a breeding stallion, and though the activity had certainly entered his mind often, he had never considered mating with the same sex. He thought back to the chestnut coloured stallion back in Askolov, and how surprised he was when he had called him 'handsome'; apparently the hay belly had not hindered him in that department.

'Are you all right?' Jared asked, as Fray had gone unusually quiet.

'Yes I was just thinking about that stallion you took the harness from, he called me 'handsome'.'

'Well it is not uncommon in horses either I suppose; desiring a mate of the same sex.'

'He seemed to think that my extra weight looked attractive on me. Do you think that other horses could think the same way?'

Jared had not been asked such a question by a horse before, and genuinely unsure of what qualities horses liked in each other. 'Well in my country horses are not kept on controlled diets, so they do tend to be fatter than they are here; I certainly don't think that one of our saddles would have needed to be extended for your belly like this one did. Perhaps you can answer this one yourself, being a horse. Do you find heavier horses attractive?'

There were indeed not very many plumper horses where he was from, Chess' curiosity back in Askolov had been proof of that, and it was difficult to imagine a fat mare without ever having seen one. The notion was certainly interesting; surely a bigger, fatter horse would be softer... And rounder, especially in the rump. Fray felt a kind of euphoria wash over him at the thought of it, perhaps a fatter horse was a better horse.

'I guess I...'

Jared interrupted him with a pat on the side. 'Hold up there buddy.'

The road ahead narrowed into a stone bridge that crossed a shallow creek, and at the foot of the bridge three men stood ominously; armed with wood shafted spears, there was no way around them.

'Right, let's go slowly here.' And with another pat on his side, Fray nervously trotted towards the bridge.

As they approached; the shortest, most moustached of the men stepped forward and signalled a halt with his hand. 'What is the purpose of your journey?' He asked, abruptly; his hand tightly gripping his spear.

'Hey Rob!' The tallest of the three shouted from behind. 'That's them!'

Jared immediately rallied a defence. 'Look, who we are is none of your business; just let us go on our way, we want no trouble.'

'I don't think so.' Said the Moustached man, waving his spear hazardously. 'If we don't bring you

back to Askolov, that beast will level the whole town!’

‘Look.’ Jared said, reaching into his pockets. ‘I have money, perhaps we can reach an understanding.’

‘Your money is no good to us, I would rather have my home than some petty cash! Now turn yourselves around and we will escort you back to town. How did you put it, ‘No trouble.’’.

The other two men moved to surround the pair. Fray tensed up with anxiety. Perhaps they could make a run for it?

Jared rested his paw reassuringly on Fray’s back. ‘Don’t run, they will hurt us if we do; we’ll think of something when the time comes.’

The journey back to Askolov seemed to take ages, and the weather seemed to worsen with each step; mimicking Fray’s increasingly deep sense of foreboding. Clouds rolled over the sky and covered up what little blue there had been, draping it in a steely grey before opening up in a cold miserable shower.

After a few tense hours they reached the muddy outskirts of the town, and tread into the washed out streets. The few curious people who had been out to watch the commotion early had now retreated to the shelter of their houses. Fray wished he had a house he could go and hide in; out of the rain, the cold, and far away from Katal.

When they reached the town square, the trio of men fell back and gestured them onwards, apparently they wanted as little to do with dragon as Fray. The square was covered in the haze of the falling rain, and rapid streams of water flooded out into the surrounding streets through open drainage.

A large silhouette shifted in the haze; Fray was frozen solid, the men behind shouted and prodded at his rump with their spears, but he could not even force himself to move forward.

A booming yawn easily cut through the heavy splashing of the rain, and Katal’s outline became clear as he groggily sauntered towards the anxious stallion.

‘Well hello there; I almost lost you there didn’t I? How careless of me.’

Emerging in full view, he towered over Fray; eying the horse up hungrily. The town had obviously managed to find enough food for him, his already chunky middle now bulged staggeringly; his precarious gait suggesting he was still adjusting to the weight of his recent meal.

‘Ah, I see you brought a friend.’

The large dragon leaned forwards and eyed up the Roo that Fray had almost forgotten was still sitting on his back.

‘Perhaps he had something to do with your disappearance?’

Jared spoke up with confidence. ‘Perhaps I did, not that it is any of your business; he is after all not your property!’

Katal snorted. ‘I take what I want big ears!’

‘Well perhaps you do, but I know of a few beings just off the top of my ‘big ears’ that came to a sticky end with an attitude like that.’

‘But of course you are right!’ Katal responded with a disturbingly toothy smile. ‘You should be my guests of honour.’

Fray did not like the sound of that. ‘Wait, what?’

‘Oh haven’t you heard? The delightfully irritating mayor of this settlement has offered to bring all the food I can eat right to my cave!’ It was hard to tell, but Fray couldn’t help but notice a hint of genuine excitement in the dragon’s voice. ‘And I’m sure I could spare some for my willing guests.’

‘Well I can tell you now that we are not willing.’ Jared said with certainty.

The dragon’s massive head leaned in close enough that Fray could smell the incomprehensible mixture of food still on his breath; his pupils dilating into a hypnotic stare.

‘I think you will be willing; both of you, and I think that you are going to enjoy yourselves...’