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English 218

Bro. Richards

05/01/2019

Old Warriors

Hereb, at dawn, lay still. Few roamed the streets save those retreating to their homes, or to the local pub. Stray tiktoks hooted overhead as they returned to their hivenest, ferrun mewled in their stalls as they waited for their masters' coming for the night.

The setting sun shone through the dusty windows of a little shop in the corner of the walls of Hereb. Swords, spears, axes—weapons of all sorts stood against the racks along the walls, each shining, some brand new, and others chipped and battered. Opposite the solid oak door was a walk-around counter, and beyond that intricately decorated rifles sat on pegs along the walls, each proudly displayed. Some small, some large, others with empty oil canisters, and others more with crystal chambers waiting to be filled.

A grizzled man wearing simple clothes beneath a grease-stained apron sat in front of a desk in the back. On the weathered desk sat a long drawer set filled with coils, gears, rods, ignitions, along with a scattering of other bits and bobs across the desk itself. In the center of it all was a tekna pistol in the midst of construction, with the barrel disconnected from the handle and all the delicate insides out for the world to see.

The man squinted his eyes and set a pair of spectacles on the bridge of his nose. Using a pair of tweezers, he wove a narrow rubber tube into the workings and connected the oil canister with the ignition chamber. He then pulled an opaque white crystal from a drawer and slid it in front

of the firing pin. He set down his tweezers and put the cover plate over the insides, then clicked the barrel into the stock. With that, the pistol was whole.

The man grinned and disconnected the empty oil canister, then replaced it with a full one on the desk. He turned the fill valve and after a second, turned it back. He aimed it at the wick of an unlit candle across the room, then fired. The firing pin struck the crystal, sending activated Dust into the oil. The oil boiled and exploded, shooting out of the barrel and forming a thin bolt of light. It shot across the wick of the candle, lighting it, then the bolt struck a ceiling beam and left a smoking black scar.

The man chuckled and began polishing the barrel with a dirty rag. "Fine shot, as always."

A bell rang, and the man turned around and absentmindedly said, "Welcome to Old Folks Weaponry, finest selection of new and used weapons, including handcrafted—" He stopped upon seeing the customer. He pulled off his spectacles and stared in amazement at who had just walked into his establishment.

His head was in the shape of an otter's, complete with the short ears, large nose, and long whiskers, down to the sharp canines in his mouth. Slick, grizzled fur coated his body, from his large barrel chest to his stout tail. He wore a coarse linen kilt, an open green vest and a necklace made of numerous sea shells and trinkets. A pair of large axes hung from a thick leather strap across his shoulder, the handles nearly scraping the ceiling as he paced around the room.

The orna inspected the weapons racks curiously, rubbing his scruffy chin as he scraped his bare pads on the floor. His tail hung back as he pulled a sword out from the rack and swung it, twisting it around and getting a feel for its weight.

The man set the pistol down at the desk and crept toward the counter, still amazed at the sight of the orna. He leaned against the counter and watched him set back the sword and continue studying it, crossing his arms.

Finally, he smirked and said in a bass voice, "I would feel sorry for anyone who bought a blade from here. While they look fine enough, they have an uneven edge. Even a slice of bread would turn out uneven."

The man leered at the orna, then he studied the axes on the orna's back. He smirked and snidely said, "Indeed, but any of mine would be better than those rusted bits of metal you call 'tools'."

The orna laughed boisterously and turned to face the man. "Even after twenty years, you're as sensitive as ever, Cairyn."

The man beamed as he walked around the counter and laughed. "Oh, Nix, you old sea dog!"

They gave each other a strong pat on the back, with Cairyn's hand barely reaching midway to Nix's. They stood away from each other, each smiling.

Cairyn scratched at his stubble and said, "Has it really been that long?" He stared at the orna's belly and chuckled. "Then again, it would explain the fat."

Nix frowned and poked at Cairyn's chest. "You aren't the leanest ringbean anymore either, friend. And unlike me, you haven't had to wrestle thundsarks on a regular basis."

Cairyn hmphed and pulled at his shirt collar. "Wearing proper clothing at least hides that."

Nix looked down at his vest, then turned his head in the air. "Shirts cause too much drag." He slumped his shoulders and added, "I...also haven't found one large enough for me."

Cairyn shrugged sighed, smiling. "Anyway...what brings you around here? I thought you were still on the Great Coast handling mercenary calls?"

Nix shrugged as well and said, "Well, I wanted some time away from all that. It's rather tiring beating bandits senseless every other day, even if it pays well." He stroked one of his whiskers and added, "Also, I wanted a chance to catch up with an old friend after hearing that he settled down here in Hereb." He clapped him on the back and waved toward the door. "Let's have a drink at the Sleeping Gatzel! We can talk about what we've accomplished over these long years."

Cairyn looked down for a moment, then back up to Nix with a half-smile. "Actually...why don't we talk here? It gets rather chaotic in there late at night, what with all the drink going around."

Nix looked down, puzzled at first, but he nodded turned around. "Very well, I see your point." He smacked his lips and added, "Still, I could use a drink. Had to walk a week just to get here, and I ran out of water a day ago."

"Of course." Cairyn led the way to the back with Nix close behind. The orna sat on the desk chair as Cairyn quietly went up the stairs hidden in the corner. Moments after, Cairyn returned with a jug and two wooden cups on a platter.

He set the platter on the desk and poured them each a drink from the pitcher, then pulled up another chair and sat across from the orna.

Nix raised the cup and said, "Thank you." He took a sip, then frowned and looked inside.

"Cloudfruit cider? What, can't hold down your liquor in your old age?" He shrugged and took another sip. "Oh well, still good."

Cairyn forced a smile. "I've just come to realize over the years that I don't act the best when drink's involved." He leaned forward, hovering over his cup. "So, what have you done since we parted ways?"

Orna blew out a breath and scratched the side of his face. "Well...after getting rid of the golem, I took my reward money down to the coast and bought myself a proper ship. Not an orna-made craft, unfortunately, but it does fine." He set his cup down on the desk and leaned back in his seat. "I just take it around and look for deeds that need doing. Hauling cargo, catching bandits, killing beasts—as we did together." He tapped a finger on his chest. "I've garnered a name for myself, and while it may not look it, I have gathered quite a fortune as well. Could live well off for the rest of my life if I retired right now."

Cairyn gave him a curious look. "Then why don't you? We aren't spring wellings anymore. I'm considering stepping away from my business as well."

Nix leaned forward like Cairyn and replied, "There's still plenty to do on the Great Coast, for one thing. And even if I did retire, what would I do? Fish alone in a hut for the rest of my life?" He shook his head. "No...I'd rather go down in a blaze of glory, make myself a legend in some sense." He stared for a moment, then smiled slightly and nudged Cairyn's arm. "Well, what have you done? I take it you opened this shop with your half?"

Cairyn nodded. "Sure enough. As you know, I got tired of the mercenary life and settled down here. I decided I'd follow in my father's footsteps and become a tekna mechanic—more specifically, a firearm craftsman." He sighed and added, "Don't get the most business, I will admit, but I at least earn enough room and board."

Nix hmphed and inspected the pistol on the desk. He looked down the barrel and muttered, "Never understood man's liking of guns..."

Cairyn quickly took back the pistol and shook his head, smiling. "Same as always, aren't you?"

Nix shrugged. "Don't see any reason to change. I act as I please, and if someone has a problem, cheers to them—I don't care."

Cairyn set the pistol down on the floor and tapped the side of his cup. "You said you *bought* your ship."

Nix stared at him for a moment, then scratched the back of his head and said, "Well...I did try to find a girl to settle down with. Never did, even after I started getting popular on the coast. Either they didn't care for me, or they were too strong for me." He shook his head. "I've never liked

that custom anyway. Giving all the ships to women is unfair to us bachelors.” Nix narrowed his eyes. “Why’d you ask?”

Cairyn stood up and shuffled to the wall. Several pictures hung from it, all of various sizes and ages. He lifted one from its hook and offered it to Nix. The orna studied it and saw a younger Cairyn standing with a woman in front of the shop. A young boy and girl stood in front of them, with a baby in Cairyn’s arms.

Nix looked up and saw Cairyn smile. He pointed at the picture. “My wife, Lynn, is staying in Saunte for my daughter’s wedding. My oldest son’s there with his wife, and my youngest is there to help with the ceremony.” He set his hands on his hips and gestured all around him. “I stayed behind to make sure the business was in good shape. I don’t want to miss a customer, after all.”

Nix stared at him for a moment, then back at the picture. “So...that’s why you don’t drink anymore.”

Cairyn nodded. “A worthwhile sacrifice.” He set a hand on a wall and rubbed the aged wood. “I plan on leaving this place to my youngest after I retire. He’s taken an interest in tekna engineering like me.”

Nix paused. After a minute, set the picture on the desk, then stood up and smiled. “You’ve done well, Cairyn. Made a right good life for yourself.” He took a deep breath, then clapped his hands and turned toward the door. “I suppose I ought to get going. Need to resupply for my trip back home.” He began to walk to the door.

Cairyn set down his cup and quickly stepped to him. "Wait, Nix." He grabbed his arm, stopping his advance. The orna turned back with a curious look.

Cairyn let go of his arm and softly smiled. "How about we go hunting tomorrow? My wife and kids won't be back for another few days, and I'd like to spend some time with you until then. I'd love to introduce them to you if you don't have to go back soon."

Nix looked up for a moment, considering the proposal. He looked back down, then grinned and side-hugged Cairyn. "You might have changed, but you're still a good friend." He separated from him and kept walking to the door. "I'll go find an inn and bed down for the night. Your beds are too small for an orna like me." He held the door and looked back. "What time, and what meat?"

"Seven o' clock, ajax. The quartolf have had a hard time managing them as of late."

Nix licked his lips. "It's been a while since I've had venison." He waved and said, "See you then, Cairyn the Daring."

Cairyn waved back and shook his head with a chuckle. "No one's called me that for years."

"All the better then!" Nix shouted as he shut the door.

Cairyn chuckled again and returned to his desk. He pulled open a drawer under the desk and dug through it, eventually pulling out a dusty frame. He blew it away, and when the cloud cleared, he saw a young man and an Orna, wielding an oil rifle and twin axes respectively, standing atop a mound of rubble, standing back-to-back.

Cairyn nodded his head and propped up the photo on the desk, then took the pistol back from the floor and continued to polish it with his dirty rag. He continued till the sun set, where he hung the pistol with the other weapons he crafted, then bedded down for the night. Elsewhere in the city, Nix did the same, and they both fell asleep at the same time, hopeful for their time together tomorrow.