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English 218

Bro. Richards

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A Chance Encounter

Many families called the Great Equivosian Forest home—families of all species. The almighty Crescent River flowed through the center of the wood, and along the embankments, many small villages, towns, and even a city at the joining of the Slipclaw and Tremont rivers into the Crescent. Despite these many settlements, some chose to live on their own among the peaceable, if perilous, creatures of the forest, among the emerald leaves of summer, among the scent of garcei flowers, alone with the wind and one with nature.

The sun had just risen over the canopy, and the plump wellings warbled their songs from their mud nests in the creeks. They sang for the delicious grass growing on the field and between the stones of the creek. Others sung for the delectable spix that floated with the glinting Dust that filled the air. And yet other wellings sang for the Dust that settled on and warmed their mud-brown feathers.

Some abruptly quacked and dove under the water at the rush of paws along a riverbank. A pack of quartolf rushed by and howled at the sight of sauntering ajax, and in their pursuit, separated the sunlight into rainbow streams with their crystalline hides. The ajax broke branches from the trees with its enormous antlers as a means of hindering the quartolf and churned up the soil with its sharpened hooves to trip their paws. After minutes of pursuit, a quartolf lunged, the ajax wailed and tumbled. The Quartolf had their meal.

Deep beneath the earth, a golem slumbered still, turning about and shaking the stones above. Peblud skittered away under their mineral shells, afraid of an earthquake squashing their exoskeletons. A net swept across them and scooped them up. They writhed and squirmed to escape the threads, all to no avail. The net swung level with the squinting eyes of a young boy, no more than ten. He scrunched his nose. "Rocks with legs." He stuck out his tongue. "And Ma wants to make soup out of them." He hitched the net over his shoulder and paced away from the gravel field and toward a glade beyond the next rows of trees. "Those quartolf are lucky..." He hiked up his loose-fitting trousers and stuffed the loose coattail of his red shirt into them, then harrumphed and ran toward the trees, narrowly avoiding stepping on the laces trailing on his shoes. He emerged into the glade and hop-skipped over the pond the pet wellings lounged in.

The cabin beyond the lake stood at a single level, with a loft at the top forming a peak. Greenish smoke drifted from the chimney and spread Dust from the concentrated sparkwood across the glade, causing hundreds of garcei blooms to sprout.

The boy hurriedly ran around back to the wooden slat fence and stone groundwork at the back of the cabin. Curled up underneath a low roof was a ball of sleek, black fur, roughly as large as the boy himself.

The boy peeked through the slats and grinned, pulling a peblud out from the net. "Kairus..." he said in a drawn-out way. The fur stirred, and a V-shaped head shot up from it, revealing a pair of black eyes and a pink nose, just above the small mouth and below the floppy, round ears.

The boy tossed the peblud in the air towards the creature, and it shot out from its hiding place, sprawling out it's full, serpentine length with it's four short legs. It leaped up and snatched the peblud in the air, catching it between its sharp row of canines.

Kairus curled back up on his tail and crunched the shell in a single bite, then proceeded to slurp down the insides. He crept toward the boy and pressed his nose against the slats, standing level with him.

The boy laughed and pet the nose. "Sorry boy, I have to give the rest to Ma."

"Sein!"

The boy spun around and froze while Kairus chirped and ran back underneath his hut. Standing at the back door of the cabin was a bearded man wearing a dark green trench coat and thick leather boots, much like Sein's. His hands were covered in sparkling Dust and grungy soot, which spread onto his cloak as he set them against his waist.

He stomped toward Sein and pulled him away from the fence. "How many times have I told you not to get that close to Kairus? He's dangerous!"

Sein lowered the net and sputtered, "B-But Pa, you ride on him all the time, and he never hurts you!"

Sein's father leered at Kairus' crouched shape through the fence. "I respect him, and in turn, he respects me." He turned to Sein. "Neither of you share that." He turned back around and stomped past his son and back in the cabin. "Come. Your mother's been waiting far too long for

the peblud.” He disappeared into the house, and Sein stood, oblivious to his trousers’ hem sinking to his waist.

Kairus peeked his head out from under the shadows of his roost. Sein forced a smile, then trekked up the stairs, holding up his pants as he went.

He immediately entered a small mudroom, where a collection of old boots a heap of firewood stood on the floor, illuminated only by the light of the window on the door. Beyond the entrance to the left was a kitchen—or what could be called one. A mess of shelves, a chest of food, and a bucket of water lined the walls, with a rickety table and a trio of chairs in the center. To the beyond that, simple wooden frames were draped with coats of fur, making some semblance of couches surrounding a hardwood table. Antlers, horns, and heads from a myriad of beasts adorned the walls, with a hulking, shining musket as the centerpiece, missing only its crystal drive to deliver killing blows.

Sein threw off his boots in the mudroom and shuffled across the kitchen to the woman stirring a pot above the fireplace at the far end of the living room. She wore a simple brown dress and held her hair in a braid as she worked at the meal. A coat of bright orange fur hung over her shoulders, tied together with a leather string.

Sein held the net out towards her with a glum expression. She turned to him and inspected his haul. She sighed and stopped stirring the pot, then held the net. “You know what to do, son.”

Sein grabbed a large, square brick in the corner and hefted it with a grunt, while his mother set the net on the floor, held up slightly to prevent the peblud from escaping. Sein lifted the rock over the net and dropped it without care, instantly crushing the rock crabs.

He slid back the rock, and his mother unceremoniously dumped the remains into the pot, then continued to stir. Sein sat back in the couch and groaned, "Why do we have to eat rock soup? Why can't we just go hunting for an ajax or something?"

His father emerged from a door connected to the living room, wearing only a filthy brown shirt and black leather pants. He threw a large sack over the other couch and said, "Because I don't want to be wasting crystals on small game." He dug through the bag, and amidst the clatter of metal, he added, "Found a new plowff hill a few miles out, and it's a right big one. I sent word to Vice earlier this morning. They'll be meeting me there tomorrow." He grinned at his wife. "Then we'll have some proper meat again!"

She smiled and stood away from the pot, crossing her arms. "High time I get to make a proper meal again. You haven't had a good hunt in over a month, Rorik."

Rorik chuckled and hugged her close. "Aye, that I haven't, Gina."

Sein shot up from his seat and landed next to the sack, aiming to peek inside. "Can I come with you? I'm old enough now!"

Rorik frowned and folded his arms, eyeing Sein. "I'm not so sure, Sein. Plowff are dangerous, and besides, we might lose track of you in the heat of the moment. I'd rather not have you squashed under a plowff's backside."

Gina held the pot with a cloth and set it on the table. "Rorik, you know how long he's been wanting to go with you. It's dangerous work, but it's better for him to get experience out there than for him to stay here, risking fingers to Kairus and hunting peblud every day."

Rorik tossed his head back and forth, wrestling in his mind as he and Sein sat at the table with Gina. As the bowls were being passed out, he finally slapped the table and said, "Fine! You can join the crew." He held up a finger and narrowed his eyes. "But I'm warning you: plowff are nothing to mess around with. I want you to stay close no matter what, alright?"

Sein nodded excitedly as Gina poured the soup into the bowl, scraping the rocks at the bottom of the pot. "Do I get a rifle?"

Rorik sniffed and pointed at the bag. "I'd figured you wanted to come this time, so I packed a light oil one in there. You can put your training to good use."

Sein gawked at the bag and stood up, only to be forced down into his seat by Gina. She gave him a stern look and said, "Finish your dinner first, then you can get the gun."

Sein hung his head over the pale-yellow soup, eyeing the floating carapace and antenna amongst the scraps of pale meat. "...Fine."

As they finished dinner and went to sleep that night, all Sein could think about was the thrill of the hunt he thought would come the next day.

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Sein watched as Rorik laid a long, flat saddle across Kairus' upper back, securing the straps underneath the ferrun's legs. He then threw a bag of supplies on the back of the saddle and tied it down with his rifle.

Sein had tied a rough length of rope around his waist in an effort to keep his pants from slipping. He slung the musket his father had gotten for him over his shoulder, which despite

running from his neck down to his knees was far shorter than the one Rorik wielded. To complete his hunting gear, he wore a thick green jacket and a flat brown cap on his head, sitting neatly between his ears.

Rorik yanked on the belt under Kairus' chest, causing him to snarl and bare his teeth. Rorik growled back and shouted, "Shut it! You and I both know it has to be tight." He pulled himself on top of the saddle and muttered, "Don't want to be dragged on the ground for half a mile again..." He paused, then stared at Sein. He looked behind him at the empty space on the saddle, then at Sein. "What are you waiting for? Get on!" Sein blinked and shook himself out of his stupor, then scrambled onto the saddle with a grin.

His boot scraped against Kairus' fur, pulling at the ferrun's skin. He growled and leered at the new passenger, whose grin fell into a cringe as he looked away. Kairus growled low and faced forward again.

Rorick took a deep breath, then turned back to Sein. "Before we go, there are a few things you must know." He held up a finger. "One: stay behind me. Trained or not, plowff can strike quick and hard, and I'd rather be hurt than you." He held up another finger. "Two: don't waste your ammo. I'm giving you only one bottle of oil to use, so make every shot count." He held up one more. "And last, but not least: never, and I repeat, *never* enter the tunnels. That's Kairus' job." He lowered his hand onto Sein's shoulder. "Do you understand?" They locked eyes, and Rorick's grip grew tight. Sein quickly nodded.

Rorick let out his pent-up breath and held up the reins around Kairus' neck. "Good." He gave them a flick, and Kairus yipped and shot forward, setting into a brisk, bounding pace despite his short legs.

Rorick kept himself tilted forward as Kairus sprinted through the forest, his beard bristling in the wind. Sein held tight to the sides of the saddle and clenched his teeth, squinting his eyes shut as spix beat against his face. He braced his feet into the saddle belt to provide even more stability, despite his father not doing the same.

After an hour of the rush, Kairus slowed to a trot, and finally to a saunter as they came to a large mound in the middle of a cluster of trees. No vegetation surrounded the gaping black pit, and a distant scrabbling could be heard within.

Rorick hopped off and pulled his rifle off the saddle. "I collapsed the other holes the yesterday with some oil bombs; his only way out is here." He frowned and looked about. "I was hoping Vice would be here by now, but I expect he'll be around before long." He turned back and said, "Go on and get off; I have to send Kairus down." Sein nodded and pushed himself up on the saddle and swung his leg around.

The sudden movement threw momentum into the now-loosened saddle, and Sein went around with it. With the weight suddenly off his shoulders, Sein yipped and bolted toward the hole. Sein screamed and scrabbled at the ground, but with his foot still caught in the saddle, he got dragged with him.

Rorick leaped toward him and grabbed his hand. "*Sein!*" He kept hold of his son's hand for just a few moments before he was dragged below, screaming.



Rorik lay on the ground, grasping the air above the hole. He clenched his teeth and squinted his eyes shut. He slammed the ground with a closed fist and said under his breath, "*Solus save him.*"

Down below, Sein shielded his face from the sharp rocks and moist soil as he got dragged further and further below with Kairus. He felt himself turn left and right through the tunnels, so far into them that the air grew stale and no light penetrated the darkness.

Finally, the saddle came loose, and Sein tumbled across the rough dirt floor, finally coming to a stop. He groaned and pushed himself up, and only moments after remembered his father's warning: *never enter the tunnels.*

Sein paled and groped about in the darkness, finally snatching his rifle from the ground. He stood up and fumbled for the refill valve and trigger. The walls rumbled and sweat beaded on his brow.

A deep, guttural roar echoed through the tunnels, and Sein nearly dropped the rifle. He panted as he twisted the valve. Oil filled the ignition chamber, and with the final gurgle, Sein shut it, holding the butt of the rifle up to his shoulder.

The tunnel rumbled once more, and Sein's heart hammered in his chest. The roar echoed once more, alongside a screech from who Sein guess was Kairus, but he barely thought on that. He spun around in place, struggling to find the origin of the sickening sound.

Dirt fell all around him, and a limb scraped his arm. Sein screamed and fired his rifle, sending a burst of white light jettisoning from the barrel. In the split second of luminance, he saw a

colossal, matted brown coat, with blind, soulless eyes paired with monstrous incisors. And in front of that were two razor-sharp pairs of claws.

The burst met the beast with a squelch and boom, followed by another roar. A claw buffeted Sein to the wall, making his ears ring. He gasped and winced at the flare of pain in his chest. The plowff roared again, raising its claws for a final blow.

A streak of orange light shot from the darkness and hit the plowff across its face. It screeched and turned around, scrambling forward. Another flare met it, and a figure surged forward surrounded by the flame. Sein watched in fearful amazement as the figure met blows with the claws with its own made from the inferno.

Not long after, a silver ferrun burst from the direction the flaming figure emerged from and wrapped its body around the plowff, constricting it and latching down on its neck. It screeched and writhed in its struggles to escape from its grip. Finally, mere moments after the ferrun's attack, the plowff let out one final squeak, its leg only twitching as a sign of life.

Sein remained wide-eyed in awe as the figure held up a ball of fire like a torch to examine the plowff, then toward Sein. He gasped as he saw the figure had a wolf's feet, tail, and head, covered with silver-black fur and wearing leather clothing covered with dozens of black symbols and figures.

The wolf-man paced toward him and held out his free, paw-like-hand. In a gruff voice, he asked, "Are you going to stay in the dirt as this plowff did?" His ferrun kept a hold on the plowff, sinking her canines deep into its neck.

Sein cautiously accepted his hand, bringing his battered rifle with him. The wolf guided Sein up through the tunnels and back into the light, back into the fresh air and surface world.

Upon seeing his son, Rorick sighed in relief, fell to his knees and embraced him. He held his head close and whispered, "I thought I lost you." After a minute or so, Rorick stood up and wiped his eyes, then turned Sein around to face the wolf. "Vice, I can't thank you enough for what you've done for me." The wolf shrugged and crouched in front of Sein. The boy stepped back and held his father's arm.

Vice gave him a curious look. "What? Never seen a lykai before?" Sein slowly shook his head, and Vice stood back up and pointed a claw at Rorick. "I assume you were going to tell him about my kind sooner?"

Rorick grimaced and scratched the back of his head. "I really meant to, but it's been years since a tribe has passed through, so..."

Vice sighed, and as he did, both a black and silver ferrun dragged the carcass of the plowff up through the tunnel, each fighting for it as they did.

Rorick broke away from Sein and shouted, "Oi, so *now* you show up! Why I oughta—"

"Rorick." Vice gave him a cautionary glare.

Rorick groaned and pulled at Kairus' neck. The ferrun reluctantly released his grip on the plowff, and at a snap from Vice, the silver ferrun did so with no such signs.

Together Vice and Rorick gutted and cleaned the plowff, and after bundling it in the canvas Vice brought, he took the large portion for himself and put it on top of his ferrun's back.

Once all was said and done, Vice and Rorick nodded toward each other. "Thank you again for coming when you did," Rorick repeated.

"Not a problem," Vice replied. He narrowed his gaze on Sein. "But you must also thank your son for his own survival. If it wasn't for him firing his rifle, I wouldn't have been able to find him before he got pulverized." Sein grinned slightly and held his shoulders a bit higher.

"Then again, if he just rode Kairus properly, he wouldn't have ended up down there in the first place." Sein's shoulders immediately drooped.

"More discipline is in order, I suppose...*for both Sein and Kairus*," Rorick admitted, averting his eyes.

Vice stared for a moment, then smiled. He gently lifted a bag from a hook on his saddle and held it out to Sein. "Let me help you with that." Sein gave it a suspicious look, and it suddenly wriggled and squeaked. Sein leaped back, shocked.

Vice pressed it closer. "Go on, open it." Sein cautiously accepted it, and upon peering inside, gasped. A pure white ferrun no longer than his arm lay curled up inside, staring up expectantly.

Sein, openmouthed, gingerly reached inside and pet the kit's young fur. After only a single pet, the kit snapped at his finger. Sein yowled and pulled it back, closing the sack and nursing his finger.

Both Vice and Rorick laughed, with Rorick clapping a hand on Sein's back and saying, "I told you they're dangerous!"

Once the laughter died, they all hopped aboard their ferruns, and before they parted ways, Vice waved to Sein and said, “Don’t disappoint me, lad. You have potential, no matter what your old man may be.” Before Rorick could object, Vice snapped his reins and sped off to the west, leaving with his share of plowff meat and Sein’s admiration and promise.

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