

..... Enko Seascraper .....

## Chapter 24

**H**unting turned out to be quite a tedious sport, as Enko slowly discovered over the course of the morning. The party trotted along the swamp for hours on the lookout for striped burrowcats. Some areas of the swamp gave the horses trouble, so everyone had to dismount and lead them on foot, often trudging through knee high bogs.

Though it was not like Como and Romo minded. The two men were all smiles since they left Dulrog's Hearth, laughing at everything the other said and galavanting through the woods like children.

Under Enko's orders, Arvin and Borrom had stayed behind with Silma, which they both protested despite the fear they showed the previous night. Hellera walked ahead, ever vigilant of her surroundings, as opposed to Carl, who was still nursing a hangover, and spent the majority of the trek dragging his feet and drinking from his water skin.

Ulric walked around the perimeter of the party, his eyes always trained outward. Como and Romo occasionally shouted good natured jibes his way, which only received Ulric's usual grunts of affirmation. Seemed he was not willing to be social with the Spinners while he was on edge.

Enko remained close to the two warriors, partially as a precaution, but mostly to leach off their conversations. He got a precious few tidbits about their lives; stories of their first battle, several injuries they'd sustained over the years, and boasts of their

state-of-art armor and armaments. Ultimately, while they humored his repeated attempts, they never fully included Enko in their camaraderie.

“Where did you say these things were found again?” An exasperated Carl asked after the fifth bog they passed through.

“The ground,” answered Como.

“Yeah but which ground? We’ve passed a lot of ground.”

“Maybe the ground you’re standing on. Maybe not. The burrowcats don’t have a specific habitat. That’s what makes them fun to hunt.”

Carl sighed. “Well excuse me. I figured the fun part would come after we find one.”

Romo chimed in. “That’s not fun. That’s exhilarating. Patience, Mr Broadaxe. We’re not just wandering blindly. We asked around Dulrog’s Hearth for locations where they were spotted recently, and at this point, we’ve visited most of those spots. We’ll come across one soon.”

Carl scoffed. “Or we’ll never find one. Can we go home then?”

“Carl!” Enko snapped. “You’re spoiling the joy of the hunt for Como and Romo.”

Como laughed. “Yeah. What he said. I appreciate that you’re pretending to have fun, Mr. Seascraper.”

“What? I’m having a great time. Meeting new people, going on an adventure, possibly trying to kill an eight foot-“

“Nine foot,” Romo interrupted.

“Nine foot burrowcat. This is the most fun I’ve had in years.”

“Yeah,” Como said. “I believe that.”

With a gasp, Romo reached over and grabbed Como’s shoulder. He pointed to a small clearing on the other side of a group of trees. Not much could be seen through the thicket, but the meadow beyond seemed to be dotted with deep gouges and piles of dirt.

Enko gulped. “Looks like the signs of something digging to me.”

“Very keen eyes you have there, Enko,” Como whispered. “Now follow us. It’s time we finally got started.”

The two warriors dismounted their horses and began winding through the dense trees. Como nodded to Enko’s horse. “Leave them back here. They’ll be easy targets for the burrowcats.”

Cautiously, Enko dismounted. He removed a spear from Swell's saddle, a very short weapon given to Enko by the two brothers. It felt as though it was given only out of pity, like giving a child a stick to play with while the grown-ups worked.

Carl held his axe aloft. "But what if we—"

"Before you say anything, Mr. Broadaxe," Romo interrupted. "The horses won't be any help. The burrowcats are much faster than them."

"Well where the hell does that leave us then?"

"We are not going to run. We're going to fight."

Hellera gripped her spear tightly. "I've been itching for one of those." It was always a shock when she made her presence known after being invisible for hours at a time.

Ulric unsheathed his sword, and hoisted it onto his shoulder. Enko decided to keep his distance. If Ulric started swinging the massive weapon around, anything in its path would be cleaved clean in two.

The party cautiously entered the clearing. The two warriors took the lead, eyes trained to the ground, focusing on the numerous patches of disturbed terrain.

"Hey," Enko whispered. "Can we start discussing a plan of attack here? If it's not too late."

Como responded. "Yeah. Romo and I will try to kill this thing and the rest of you can stay back and try not to get cut to ribbons. If you can get in a few licks from the rear, all the better, but we didn't need you here to begin with."

Enko tried to control his breathing. "Still, some pointers would be nice."

Romo scoffed. "You want us to teach you how to fight in the next sixty seconds? Maybe you should have spoken up sooner, Mr. Seascraper."

Enko turned to him. "Sorry. I didn't think of it until now. I..." He paused. Behind Romo, a patch of grass, which had already been pulled upward into a small mound, slowly grew in size. "Romo! Look!"

In an instant, the mound exploded. The burrowcat erupted from the earth, launching eight feet into the air. In the few seconds of the

attack, Enko could see its enormous forepaws flexing foot-long talons. Its face, displaying a radial pattern of brown stripes, was contorted into a hideous snarl. It was prepared to bring one of its clawed paws directly onto Romo's back.

At Enko's warning, the warrior's eyes flicked to his attacker. With a sharp swivel, he threw his spear at the beast, which was struck in the flank. The force of the strike threw it off balance, and the burrowcat plunged to the ground well away from Romo.

Everyone dashed away from the fallen beast before turning back and raising their weapons. The creature was writhing on the ground in pain, its claws flailing about unpredictably, creating a protective barrier that none dared to cross.

Como dashed to his brother. "Romo! Are you hurt?"

The other was hollering in excitement. "Did it look like that thing got anywhere near me? Did you see that? It came straight for me. Looks like everything in this swamp knows who they need to take out first." He unslung a halberd from his back. "Let's see how many more hits it can take."

Como, Romo, and Ulric formed a circle around the fallen beast, with Carl and Hellera staying close to Enko several yards back.

The burrowcat ceased its writhing and got back on its feet. Its front paw lifted and began grasping at the spear lodged in its shoulder. The long claws formed a tight grip around the spear shaft, enabling it to rip the spear out of the wound. The beast let out a long and deep growl before slamming the spear on the ground, shattering it to splinters.

Como jumped away as the burrowcat leaped towards him and escaped the circle. He swung his axe, but the beast swiveled mid-air, weaving around the blade. Once it landed, it began to stalk around the three of them. Its upper body was lower to the ground than its lower body, its enormous forelimbs prowling along the grass, digging up small piles of dirt with each step. Its back legs were thinner and taller, and lacked claws. The three warriors turned outward and pressed their backs together, following the burrowcats movements.

Carl took a few steps towards the fray. "Stay back!" Shouted Romo. "We're at a standstill. Let us think for a moment."

Those few seconds were agonizingly long, the beast completing two full rotations around the men in that time. The three warriors barely moved a muscle, with only their heads turning as the creature passed.

Eventually, Como looked at Romo with a sidelong glance, and he responded with a curt nod. The former held his axe in a low stance and dashed out of the circle, directly into the path of the burrowcat. The beast, which had its gaze focused inward, struggled to adjust to Como's headlong advance. It stopped abruptly and tried to scurry backwards, but the axe was faster, slicing upward across the side of its head.

Blood splattered across the grass, but the cut was not deep. The beast was quick to respond, lunging at Como with a series of rapid swipes. He slashed at the creature while advancing backwards.

Romo and Ulric jumped into action, the former jabbing at the burrowcat with the tip of his halberd, and the latter winding up his massive sword for a sideways strike. The creature was able to sidestep out of the way, but as soon as Ulric's sword dug into the earth behind him, he brought the weapon back around with a strained grunt, grazing the beast's flank. None of the warriors landed direct strikes on the burrowcat, but numerous cuts and grazes opened up over the course of the assault.

Enko, Hellera, and Carl remained bystanders. Carl no longer seemed ready to jump into the fray, his face a mixture of amazement and fear as he watched the three enormous blades fly through the air. As the fight shifted around the clearing, they moved closer to the tree line to get out of danger.

Enko picked up a noise over the racket: a low and steady growl. It could not have been from the attacking burrowcat. The beast let out a harsh snarl every few seconds as it fended off the hunters. He turned to the tree line and spotted a new pair of feline eyes watching them from the shadows.

Enko was frozen with fear. He could only watch as the new burrowcat emerged from the foliage, stalking close to the ground just as the other had. Carl was closest to the creature, and thankfully Enko didn't need to yell out for him to notice the new threat. He turned to face the burrowcat and shakily held his axe

aloft. The beast did not pounce. Instead it walked briskly into the open field, slowly gaining speed as it ran straight for Carl.

Carl tried to track its movements, keeping the axehead firmly pointed at the approaching creature. But then, the beast began to zig-zag, hopping back and forth as it inched closer to Carl. Clearly disoriented, Carl threw a wild downward swing, which imbedded his axe into the dirt. The burrowcat, still moving forward, weaved around the swing and barreled into Carl using its swinging head. He was knocked painfully to the floor with a heavy crash of his metal armor.

The beast did not stop moving. Its attention was now focused directly at Enko, and it returned to a more direct, and swift, run straight for him. *Identify the weak link. I suppose any creature could figure that strategy out.* He raised his diminutive spear, gripping it tightly in both hands. Legs shaking, he looked for a place to aim for as the beast grew ever closer, imagining how it would feel to have its claws buried in his gut. Before he could make a decision, Hellera shouldered him harshly, forcing him to stumble several feet away.

As Enko struggled to remain on his feet, he turned to see Hellera raise her spear at the approaching burrowcat. The beast pounced into the air, and she reacted appropriately, leveling her spear into the creature's center. The burrowcat fell onto her, forcing the spear through its neck muscles. The tip of the spear-head exited through the other side with a thick burst of blood.

Hellera maintained her grip on the spear, but the force of the falling beast knocked her flat on her back. The beast's momentum was ceased, stuck mid-pounce on the end of the spear. It shrieked in pain, briefly writhing wildly before swiping feverishly at Hellera. The space between them was enough for her to avoid harm, but her arms were shaking with the effort of holding the burrowcat's weight.

Enko circled around to the beast's side. He continued to clench his spear as he studied the scene before him.

"Enko!" Hellera shouted. "Get away from the clearing! Go back to the horses!" As the burrowcat pushed into the spear, Enko could see the wood begin to bend and splinter.

In front of Enko was the burrowcat's hind legs. They remained firmly planted on the ground, its thighs displaying a similar pattern of brown stripes to the face. He hesitantly raised the spear, keeping the point aimed at the widest portion of the beast's haunches. With clenched teeth, he brought the spear down onto the burrowcat. The spear-head parted the skin easily. He could feel the resistance as the blade slid through the creature's thigh muscle.

As the burrowcat yowled in pain, Enko yanked the spear out, which required much more effort than going in. Resolving himself, Enko stabbed the burrowcat two more times, opening up new seeping wounds with each strike. As he raised the spear for a fourth, he felt an immense force on his abdomen. In an instant, he found himself lying on the ground, the wind knocked out of him and a blinding pain in his gut. Enko looked at his lower body, expecting to see his intestines spilling onto the grass. He did not see any blood or guts. *The blasted thing kicked me!*

He couldn't find the energy to return to his feet, so he just rolled over to look back at Hellera. Carl had regained his footing, and was running to the scene. With a rage-filled holler, he plunged his axe into the burrowcat's midsection. Using the weapon as a lever, he pried the beast off of Hellera. As the creature fell onto its back, Hellera jumped to her feet and swiftly began stabbing at it. Carl continued to score a few hits as well after he removed his lodged axe.

Enko slowly rose to his feet as the carnage continued around him. Como, Romo, and Ulric continued their assault on the first burrowcat in their half of the clearing, their weapons often too slow to match the beast's speed, though they seemed to be tiring the animal out. There was an air of excitement around everyone that was swinging or jabbing with a weapon, but Enko could not bring himself to share the feeling. Even while he was jamming his spear into the burrowcat's leg, the sights and sounds of the bloodshed made him queasy.

The second burrowcat had managed to regain its footing, and though it was gravely injured, its attacks continued to grow in ferocity. An errant swipe managed to catch Carl in the leg. He grit his teeth and buckled to his knees, blood running freely over his

boot. Hellera stepped in to defend him, forcing the beast back with her rapid strikes.

Enko continued to grip his spear, his strained breaths growing in intensity. He no longer had any confidence that he could aid in this fight. With Hellera's protective instincts, chances were that stepping in would just make things more difficult for her.

As Hellera continued to jab at the beast from the front, the burrowcat suddenly jerked to the side, struck with an unseen force. With a prolonged wail, it lost its footing and tumbled onto its side. Romo had left his position in the first fight and joined Hellera against the second burrowcat. He leaned into the creature with his halberd, forcing it to stay down. Hellera got into position on the other side of the beast, and together they unleashed a flurry of stabs. After more than a dozen sickening blows, the burrowcat stopped moving, a final weak growl passing through its teeth.

Romo and Hellera took a moment to breath, their weapons still stuck inside the beast. With an exasperated chuckle, Romo put his foot against the burrowcat's body and tried to pull his weapon loose. Before he could, a yellow and brown blur collided into him from behind. He was launched clear over the dead animal, landing on his stomach with the first burrowcat on top of him.

The beast was a chilling sight, with a missing eye and one of its forelimbs a bloody mess. Pinning Romo down, it began slashing at his upper body. Its claws scraped against his pauldrons and the back of his breastplate, causing sparks to fly with each strike. Some of the bone decorations and detailing flew off as the creature clawed at every available surface. Romo used his gauntleted hands to protect the back of his head, burying his face in the soft dirt throughout the relentless onslaught.

Hellera freed her spear and ran behind the beast, stabbing every available surface. The burrowcat didn't appear to feel any of the strikes, singularly focused on Romo.

A series of desperate grunts escaped Romo as he continued to brave each blow. He tried to crawl away, but could not take his hands away from his head for very long without sacrificing the back of his skull. From the edge of Enko's view, Como dashed into the fray, dragging his axe along the grass. With a two handed grip and a



rage-filled yell, he swept the blade upward, slicing straight through the beast's neck.

The creature went slack jawed and fell off of Romo, blood washing onto the forest floor. It meekly pawed at the wound and attempted to crawl away from Como. Breathing heavily, he walked up to the beast and raised the axe once again. He brought it down, completely decapitating the burrowcat. He stared down at the animal's body, seemingly making sure it was dead, before he dropped his axe and ran back to Romo.

He was still lying on his stomach, hands gripping the back of his head. As Como approached, he peeked to his side before lifting himself onto his hands and knees.

Como reached him and hugged him. "Romo! Did one of the claws get you? Let me see the back of your head. And your gauntlets. Take them off. Let me see your hands."

Romo managed another chuckle, his breath wheezing. "Como, I'm completely fine. You made this armor yourself, remember. I could have lasted all day under that thing."

"You would have lasted another thirty seconds... maybe."

"Exactly, you didn't have to come running. Could have sprained your ankle, Raiturro forbid."

Como helped Romo to his feet. "I'm making you a helmet the second I can get my feet inside a forge. One with a thick faceplate. I swear, no one will see your handsome face ever again." He then grabbed both sides of Romo's head and gave him a passionate kiss.

Enko's iron grip on his spear finally released, and the weapon fell into the grass. He stared slack jawed as Como finally released Romo from the extended kiss. "Wha... That's... You two aren't brothers?"

Ulric walked next to Enko and removed a rag from his pack, which he then used to clean blood from his blade. "They're married, Enko. They do that in Raiturro's Spine."

"But... You're both... You're both men. I don't..."

The couple strode over to Enko, and both of them gave him a pat on his shoulders. "Mr. Seascraper," said Romo. "That was some top notch stabbing. I honestly did not think you had it in you."

Como grunted. “Whatever was in you, I hope the female burrowcat didn’t kick it out of you. You’re lucky those beasts don’t have claws on their back feet.”

Enko opened his mouth again, prepared to further question what he just saw, but he instead clamped it back shut and inhaled deeply. “I’m sorry. That was rude of me. I didn’t mean to be so taken aback by your relationship.”

Romo laughed. “You watchlings have always been cooped up in your corner of the Peninsula. We didn’t mean to startle you, Enko. There’s work to be done. Help us collect our kills, and we’ll give you a nice history lesson along the way.”

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The married couple took their time cutting apart the dead burrowcats. Too heavy to carry, the bodies needed to be split apart between the hunting party. They were almost as skilled at butchering as they were killing.

The pair lifted one of the burrowcat’s hind limbs and began tying it onto the back of Swell, talking to Enko as they worked.

“In Raiturro’s Spine, everyone of adult age is paired with a war partner, bonded by marriage” explained Como. “Usually of their choice.”

“Unless they’re particularly picky,” Romo interrupted. “You wouldn’t know anything about that, right Como?”

Como ignored him. “These pairings don’t always involve fighting. Often one partner will wield weapons and run to the front lines, while the other provides repairs, medical aid, and tactical support. For a long time, the tradition went about as you might expect. Men went into battle and women stayed behind defenses supporting their husbands. Husband and wife fighting duos were not unheard of, but a women with the physical prowess necessary was a rarer thing to find.”

Romo gave Como a loving smile. “Eventually some men had the bright idea to partner up with other men, to become the ultimate war duo.” He sighed. “It started out as completely utilitarian, a business relationship, if you will. But it didn’t take long for some

men to realize that they were enjoying themselves more than expected. They soon shared houses together, and public affection, then eventually a bed.”

Como grunted. “All the while the General never saw a problem with any of this. The male war duos were proving to be an excellent advantage on the battlefield, with the fighting prowess of the warriors strengthened by the love they had for their partner, who they’d kill hundreds to protect.”

Enko could only manage to nod along as the warriors explained their history. “That’s... certainly quite the extraordinary circumstance. I’m happy that you two found each other. Forgive my shock. I don’t think there’s anyone quite... like you in Coello’s Watch.”

Romo shook his head and laughed. “Oh, there are. Believe me. Chances are they’re keeping their desires to themselves. The second same-sex marriage was discovered in Raiturro’s Spine, people coupled up in the hundreds. Keep an eye out when you get back to Coello’s Watch.”

Romo’s words got Enko’s mind swimming through every face he’d seen his entire life.

As Como and Romo finished securing the burrowcat’s leg, the ground began to tremble.

Carl, who had been carrying one of the beast’s forelimbs to his horse, spun around in fear and confusion. “Oh, come on! What now!?” In a panic, he resumed dragging the clawed appendage across the ground to his horse, still limping from his wound.

Como, Romo, and Enko shared a knowing look, before running to their horses. The party rapidly finished tying up all the carcasses before congregating in the center of the meadow, all astride their mounts. The married warriors circled the group, eyes trained on the surrounding trees, sweat beading on their temples.

“Which one do you think it is?” Grunted Ulric.

Como didn’t turn to face him. “They don’t have very distinctive footsteps. Could be any one of them. Whichever one it is, it’s coming from the direction of the Hearth. Let’s not panic.”

Carl was struggling to control his horse, which seemed to be latching onto its rider's unease. "Oh, I'm panicking all right! Let's get a move on, boys. Anywhere but here, please."

Como spun to Carl. "I'm not having us get lost out here, Broadaxe. Stay calm and let's come up with a—"

"EEEEEEEEEEEEEEEEHHHHHHHHHAAAAA!!"

The eerie wail cut through the swamp, spreading around the entire clearing, as if the trees themselves were crying out in pain. Everyone turned to the direction of the footsteps, as a dark form emerged from the dense tree line.

The creature's head was first to appear, weaving through the foliage at the end of a snake-like neck. A mane of slimy gray hair was draped along its length, the long strands covering most of the entity's face. All that broke through was a single yellowed eye and a twisted maw of discolored teeth.

The primordial's shoulders came into view, its body hunched as it crawled through the swamp. Its arms, slender in comparison to its spherical ribcage, clambered out of the woods in an uneven gait. The creature's skin was a puke green, covered in mud and vines, as if the beast grew out of one of the mires only moments before arriving. The primordial was small in comparison to what Enko had seen lately, but its head still towered close to the tree canopy as it locked its gaze on the party.

"Oh thank Raiturro," said Como. "It's just Boghag." He turned his horse the opposite direction of the primordial. "Stay close everyone. Looks like it's going to be a chase."

Enko only saw a glimpse of Boghag's forelimbs stretching into the clearing before he turned and spurred Swell into action. The horse had only made it a few feet when the first hand hit the ground, sending particles of dirt weaving between the horses and blurring Enko's vision for a brief moment.

By the time the second hand made contact, the group had exited the clearing and were following Como through the dense swamp. The horses had picked up speed, but with the tightly packed trees and soft ground, they could not manage more than a cautious gallop. Meanwhile, the primordial let out another wail as she took pursuit. Enko chanced a peek behind him and saw the immense

shadowy form weaving through the trees, clumsily but with a frightening tenacity.

He promised himself that he would not look back again. Enko keep his eyes focused on the forms of his companions as they weaved through the trees, the horses' hooves kicking up layers of mud with each step. He had to force Swell to take a hard left as Como suddenly changed course. Soon the sound of Boghag's footsteps fell off into the distance.

Como slowed his horse and fell in with the rest of the party. "We can't stay ahead of her forever. We need to split up to confuse her. Enko and Ulric, you're with me to the west. Romo, take the others east."

Before Enko could ask further questions, Como burst forward and veered off to the right, with Ulric not far behind. Romo, Hellera and Carl swerved to the left, quickly disappearing from view. Slow to react, he kicked Swell a few more times and tried his best to keep up, keeping Ulric's wide back centered in his vision.

All went according to plan, until Enko picked up the sound of footsteps rapidly getting louder. Directly in front of Como, a tree came topping down, with an enormous skeletal hand pushing against it. Boghag had cut them off.

"Shit!" Yelled Como. His horse skidded to a halt, and he quickly changed course to the left, jumping into another bundle of trees. Boghag emerged from the forest and swiped at Como as he dashed away. She then adjusted its attention to Ulric, who was riding directly towards the primordial. The beast brought her foot up and prepared to stomp on Ulric, but he deftly swerved around the falling appendage.

Enko, seeing the primordial off to his left side, swerved to the right, just as the creature's head shifted to his position. As Swell jumped into the dense forest, the beast let out another wail. Keeping his gaze forward, he raced past dozens of trees until the wail decreased in volume. When he could not hear any sign of the primordial anymore, he skidded to a halt and surveyed his surroundings.

Enko could not say which way was which even if he had a sword pressed to his throat. All was the same every where he looked. He

jerked on Swell's reins in a panicked state, turning the horse in several directions as he tried to get his bearings. He wanted to yell out to Ulric, but he knew the primordial was always within earshot.

From behind him, the sound of beating hooves appeared and rapidly grew in volume. Enko turned to see Como racing towards him.

"Keep up, Seascraper. The beast isn't far behind."

Enko did as he was told and kicked his horse into action, eventually falling beside Como's. He could hear the faint sounds of the primordial's footsteps growing closer.

Como forced out a chuckle. "That bitch hasn't shown an ounce of indecision since she showed up. She knows I have the male burrowcat's torso strapped to my horse. I think we can use that determination to our advantage."

Leaning back in his saddle, Como unslung the torso and retied the rope around it. His horse expertly weaved between the trees as its owner modified the knot so the rope was only tied around one side of the body part. He then took another rope from his pack and tied it around the other side of the torso. Riding close to Enko, he held out the contraption.

"Take one end and hold on tight!" Once Enko did so, he lengthened the gap between them, allowing the torso to be suspended between the two riders a few feet from the ground. "On my signal, I'm going to let go! Pull in the slack as fast as you can and break right! Ride back the direction we came from and follow the signs back to the Hearth!"

Enko shook his head. "Wait a fucking minute! Where are you going!? I don't want to be stuck with this thing!"

"I need to get the timing right or this isn't going to work at all! Get ready, Enko! I can guarantee we'll only get one shot at this!"

Enko looked behind him and saw Boghag's head weaving through the trees, bobbing in time with her galloping hands and feet as she closed the distance between them at a terrifying pace.

Enko grit his teeth. "What the fuck am I doing here?" He picked up speed and held the burrowcat's torso aloft, keeping it taut between him and Como as they rode.

With another cautious peek, Enko could see that Boghag was shifting her attention to the space between the riders, slowly drifting towards the center of the path. Enko grit his teeth until they hurt, using all of his willpower to stop himself from bolting into the tree-line as the primordial inched ever closer. In his peripheral vision, Enko could see the beast's neck stretch as she reached for the morsel, her yellowed teeth parting in anticipation. A low growl passed through her lips as her hands struck the ground with an extra burst of force, about to launch the primordial's body towards the torso.

"Now!" Shouted Como as the same moment he released his end of the rope.

Enko did as he was told, pulling the torso towards himself and bundling up the rope in the process. To his left, Boghag's jaw closed around nothing, her teeth slamming together with a damp crunch. Her mind mired by confusion, the shocked beast lost her balance, helpless as her head careened to the floor of the swamp.

Swell was quick to swerve out of the way as the primordial plowed into the dirt, though Enko could not control the horse to turn it away from the collision. He watched as the creature toppled end over end, her spindly arms flailing wildly as she rolled through the swamp. Trees flattened like blades of grass under the primordial's immense weight, casting fresh sunlight onto the newly created clearing.

Enko finally forced Swell to canter to a stop as Boghag came to a halt several dozen yards away from him, collapsing into a heap at the end of her trail of destruction. Shrouded by the cloud of dirt she had kicked up, Boghag laid motionless, with only a weak grumble escaping her lungs indicating that she was still alive.

From the corner of his vision, Enko spotted Como riding away through the trees, but he could not unstick his gaze from the injured primordial. Hesitantly, he urged Swell forward a few steps. *Could that fall have... killed her?*

With a grunt, Boghag shifted, and one of her hands appeared from under her body. She pushed against the ground, slowly lifting the primordial back to her feet.

Glancing down at the burrowcat torso tied to his horse, Enko's heart skipped a beat and he pulled on his reins, pulling Swell away from Boghag. He raced from the scene, hoping that he was heading in the same direction as Como. Each second, he was waiting for Boghag's footsteps to begin again, up until the sound of the shifting primordial finally faded away.

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By the time the first signs of human settlement appeared before Enko, he could not tell how long he had been riding. His entire body ached, and Swell had slowed to a canter, panting for air. Enko finally allowed his shoulders to relax when he passed the first sign pointing the way back to Dulrog's Hearth.

When he passed through the front gates, he was met with his entire entourage of guards, still on horseback, making their way towards the gates.

"Enko!" Shouted Arvin. "Thank Coello, you made it back!"

The group rushed over and surrounded him. "Como said he lost sight of you when he started riding back," said Carl. "He told us you were right behind him but we all thought he was full of shit. We were just about to come looking for you."

Como and Romo approached from behind the guards. "Should have listened to me," said Como. "I knew he'd find his way back. A hunk of meat strapped to your horse and a hungry primordial makes for a speedy ride."

Enko jumped off of his mount and led her towards the town's stables. Swell located a bucket of water hanging from one of the stalls and drank greedily. With a shrug, Enko grabbed a bucket from the neighboring stall and began chugging it as well.

The married warriors approached him, chuckling amongst themselves. "I'm glad you enjoyed your first hunt," said Romo. "While you survived two burrowcats and a primordial, I think you should fear diseases if you're going to start drinking horse water."

Between gulps, Enko gasped out a reply, his voice dry and breathy. "Let's... make a deal."

Como raised an eyebrow. "I'm sorry?"



“A deal. I came on the hunt because I wanted to form a... mutually beneficial relationship with you two. I did my part. Now I want to make a deal with you.”

Romo laughed. “Yeah. We figured as much once Ulric told us why you were out here. We’re happy to see you finally ditch the persona and get to the point.”

Enko dropped the bucket and leaned against the wall of the stable. “Just... tell me what we can do for you. What can we do to help each other?”

Como huffed and crossed his arms. “Weapons. We need weapons. Can Coello’s Watch do that for us?”

“Raiturro’s Watch needs weapons from us? I figured that would be something your people had plenty of.”

“We go through them pretty quickly,” responded Romo. “Our warriors can be quite aggressive on the battlefield. We’ve tried outsourcing to neighboring settlements in the past, but that made them easy targets of Argops’ Gaze. Now every town in and around the Plains refuses to make weapons for either city.”

Como nodded. “But a city at the far end of the Peninsula would be far too much trouble to attack. Inconvenient as it might be, it may be our only way to supplement our need for weapons. We’ll pay what we can, of course.”

Enko sighed. “Yes. Coello’s Watch can do that. We have a large guild of blacksmiths that are itching for more work, as well as a surplus of ore from the surrounding cliffs. When I find a courier, I’ll work out a plan and send a message to the Watch.”

“No need,” said Romo. “We’ll go ourselves. We’re about wrapped up here in the Hearth anyways.”

Como wheeled on his husband. “Excuse me? Why the fuck would we do that?”

“Because we’re very particular about how our weapons turn out. Best to supervise the work until we can be sure the blacksmiths know what they’re doing. Besides, we’re on an extended excursion until the end of next month. I say let’s go where the wind takes us.”

Enko, having finally regained his energy, found sure footing and reattached his friendly demeanor. “Coello’s Watch is a beautiful city

to visit. I'm sure you two would have a great time during an extended stay there."

Como gave him a disapproving look. "I liked you better thirty seconds ago."

Romo grabbed Como's hand. "Come on, Como. I want to see it. And I don't recall you having any plans on where to head next. I think we've had enough action to last us the next couple of weeks."

"Fine. But just enough time for us to set up this weapons deal with the blacksmiths."

Enko nodded along to the plan. "Excellent. I'm sure you two know the way. Myself and my entourage must continue to Trembletown soon. When you get there, just tell the council that you spoke with me. They will be more than accommodating."

Enko and the warriors said their goodbyes. He returned to his guards, who were all more than happy to retire to the inn and sleep the rest of the day away.

"Hey!" Called Como from across the street.

Enko turned to him,

"You were a real warrior today, Enko Seascraper. Don't keep it a one time thing. If you need to, make sure you step up again in the future."18