

Four (Phil) Together Again

When Arat opened his eyes, he threw his arms out as if ready to break a fall. Much to his surprise, he found the world over his head since he was already flat on his back. Standing over him was an elf, just one, not four. His vision came into focus slowly, the colors of the trees and sky growing more clearly, the shape over him as well. When at last his head cleared, he found that the elf looking over him was not one he had come across in the Ilbain, but Rathcar!

"Lor! What is this, did I knock my head on a rock? Am I seeing ghost and visions, or can this truly be?" Arat tried to sit up but when he did, it felt as though his body turned to putty and his head a melon. The world spun before him until he lay back down and closed his eyes.

"Hold easy, my friend. Lay back a moment longer until thy spell wears off. As for ghosts and visions, I would hope that seeing an old friend again holds not such troubled apparitions."

Arat closed his eyes tightly. He raised his hands to his temple and set to rubbing them in a circular fashion. When he opened his eyes again, he found the elf still hovering over him, smiling down at him. His skin was darker than the pale tone of the elves of *Tra'brdyl*. His hair too had not the golden sheen, like that of spun thread, fine and silky. This elf's rather was black, black as night, yet still it shimmered liked polished onyx. The other features were familiar though. The ears that came to a point, and eyes that slanted upward. Eyes that were like mirrors of the soul, were bright and filled with life. It was as if their eyes could look straight into a person, deep inside, beneath the walls and protective barriers. When an elf looked at you there were no secrets hidden, no truths undetectable. These eyes looked down at Arat now, bright as stars they were, twinkling as he smiled. There was something else about this elf, something that made him different from the others. He carried a mark on his cheek, a moon with a star in its heaven.

"Rathcar?" Arat said, his tone confused and uncertain. "Rathcar, can it truly be you?"

"It is truly I." The elf nodded. "How fares your head? Can you sit up?" Rathcar held out his hand in aid. Arat accepted and got into an upright position, being careful not to send his world spinning once more. When he sat up he found his surroundings had somehow changed. At first he thought this spell that had been placed on him was still at work. But his head was clear now and his vision true, true as he could guess rather. For the river he had last been upon was gone, as well as the trees that had surrounded. In its place was a open plain, the tall grasses blowing in the gentle breeze. Patches of scrub grew here and yon as well as an occasional tree that dotted the land. Beneath him was a plush grass, short and green, not the soft mud of the riverbank that he had expected. There was a tall tree towering over the elf, shading this spot and himself from the sun that hung in the sky behind. Also beneath this tree were two steeds, tethered round the trunk. Both were saddled and bridled, both grazed on the grass behind their bits. Arat studied these horses and suddenly realized that neither was his own B'ar. This made him look around him more studiously and then he discovered something else missing from this strange place.

"Nyrin?" He called out, turning about. "Where is Nyrin?"

"Calm yourself, Arat." Rathcar spoke in a calming tone his voice almost musical. "Your *Nyrinugathar* is well." He sat down next to his friend and held out a water skin. "Here, drink some water and I will explain."

Arat looked at the canteen, his brows wrinkled. He reached out a hand towards it but stopped suddenly.

"Come now." Rathcar chuckled. "Do not say that your trust has waned from me? It is but mere water, this I swear."

Arat took the canteen and brought it to his lips, slowly he tipped it back and felt himself relax as the cool water trickled down his throat.

"Ah, that is better, aye? Now, let me settle your troubled mind. It was necessary to have you drink that potion so I could bring you here. For you to travel on horseback would take too long and I need your aid sooner than that method allowed. The band of elves that met you at the Ryn were merely doing my bidding. Since the potion does not allow naught but man flesh to pass, your steed and familiar remained behind." Rathcar held up his hand, halting Arat's impending protest. "Fear not, my friend, they are in sure hands, taken back to *Tra'brdyl* were they will remain until such time as they can join us. Heed me when I say that I wish *Nyrinugathar* could travel with us, I do enjoy the beast so. But our steps must be light and invisible and one such as he does not go without a second glance so easily."

Rathcar rose to his feet and walked towards the horses. Arat watched him, admiring him again. His fine clothing, so elegant yet not too that he seems out of place in the wild. His long curved blade laying at his side, the scabbard plain and unmarked. He wore a long cloak over his shoulders yet Arat could see in his mind's eye what lay beneath that cloak: the secret that his elven friend tried ever so hard to keep hidden. "But where is this place you have brought me, I see no mountains which means this is not Sapford. And what task is it that requires such acts?" "This is place is called... I believe I have heard the name Palchet Ra. The note I sent of meeting you at Sapford, well, let me say simply that it was a false trail laid to any who would show interest. As for our task," Rathcar laid his hand on a saddlebag behind the gelded roan's saddle. "Let us say we are to transport an item."

"Transport an item?" Arat was on his feet now. He walked towards the horses, one hand working a kink out of his lower back.

Rathcar sensed the disbelief in his voice. Much the same tone a prince would take being told he was to scrub the palace floors. "Aye, transport an item."

"Are you saying that you went to all the trouble to have a messenger deliver a false letter, arrange for a band of elves of *Tra'brdyl* to feed me a potion, and then use that magic to send me all the way across the Florik Channel just so we may act as errand boys?"

"Arat, my dear friend. You should know by now that nothing is as it appears when it concerns matters of our destiny." Rathcar set a hand on his shoulder and looked into his eyes. "I ask that you question not what I say and only to trust in my words. This item in which I speak of is naught as simple as you deem. Nay, know that if I sent for you to aid me that it is of far greater matters than you are setting."

Arat's curiosity was now sparked. A single eyebrow rose at these words and he saw a look in Rathcar's eyes that he remembered all too well. A look of stern seriousness, as well as one of great adventure and companionship. And with Rathcar, the latter meant life on the furthest edge.

"What is it?" He probed, having to know what secret Rathcar held.

"In due time, first we must drink. I trust thee brought the *Muirot*?"

By mid morning the two were on the road. Rathcar on his roan, Arat on a dapple gray which had been brought for him. He did not hide his disapproval at this new steed, preferring his own B'ar to any horse he'd ridden in all his years. However, it didn't take him long to settle into the gray's easy gait and in the end he found the steed's disposition quite agreeable. So with his belongings packed onto the gray's back (he found the elves had made sure his personal packs were brought with him when he was brought here), he and Rathcar headed west. He tried on several occasions to pry some information from his friend, but Rathcar would not budge and all he ever managed

from him was “in due time” and “trust me”. Well, trust was not something these two lacked in one another, so he would have to simply take his word and wait until this “due time” came. The revolution grew into a mild one. Being spring, it was not too humid for riding and the steady breeze made it quite comfortable. They continued west, following the path of the sun as it hung over them like a warm friend. Upon high noon they had stopped for a rest and something to eat for both them and their horses. After a repast of *elan* rations and water, they were on the road again, following the grassy plains into the horizon.

When the sun began to sink low sky ahead of them, Rathcar said they would stop soon for the night. Arat was glad and had commented that his backside was not accustomed to these long days in the saddle. As night fell they made camp within a cluster of small trees. While Arat tended to the horses, removing the saddles and tack and brushing them down, Rathcar set up camp. By the time Arat was done, he found his elven friend tending to a hare on a spit and he shook his head, always amazed at how easily he seemed to find game. That evening under the stars, the two would spend their first eve together in five seasons.

The sun hung low in the sky as Rathcar and Arat rode out of the small hardwood forest and into the clearing. They slowed their horses and cautiously circled the open area. Two sets of highly skilled eyes carefully scanned the immediate area and the shadowy woods beyond. Concluding the same thing, their eyes met silently. With a knowing nod, Rathcar spurred his horse. Arat silently watched his friend ride away, holding still until he could no longer hear his comrades' steed. He then dismounted with a slow stiffness brought on by a long day's ride. Stretching with much effort made the man feel better; he joyfully felt free of the saddle. With practiced motions, skilled hands nimbly undid the buckle and fastenings of the black leather saddle. Little thought went into the automatic motions of removing the well-worn riding gear from the gray. Arat fastidiously laid out the blanket and inspected the tack before he ran a brush through the gray's coat. His lower back ached as he bent to check the legs and hooves. Gingerly stretching again, Arat tethered the gray to a nearby oak. Once again he was washed with an overwhelming feeling of freedom. He walked the perimeter of the area, looking for anything the steeds may step on and gathering firewood. When he returned to the gray, he was satisfied this place was safe. He carefully set the firewood near his saddle and stood erect, stretched again, before falling backward into the grass.

The sun had disappeared behind the trees when Rathcar reentered the clearing leading the roan on foot. He saw the gray beneath the great oak, but there was no sign of the human. The grip Rathcar had on his strung bow tightened as he pulled the mare in a semicircular pattern towards the gray. Sharp golden eyes scrutinized the area as he tethered his horse. Elven ears trained intently for any noise. Instantly the grip was once again relaxed. Rathcar strode quietly so that he looked down upon his dozing friend, still lost the aroma of tall, damp grass.

"Are you that weary from the day's ride?" queried the elf.

"Just taking time to remember the good part of long distance travel," Arat replied as he got up to a sitting position, "the stopping."

"I brought you along for company, not for the commentary," chided Rathcar.

"You should be glad that I agreed to come with you at all. I certainly did not need to make this trip. And neither did you. You could have gotten this done very easily by yourself and you know it."

"That has been discussed," Rathcar said closing the subject, "But I do enjoy the company."

"And so do I, friend, so do I. I take it that the area is clear. I heard not the sounds of scuffling."

"All was clear," Rathcar replied. "I did find some carra root to supplement dinner. There were bear tracks nearby, but they were not fresh." Rathcar tossed the roots to Arat.

"Bears this far south and east?" Arat had a quizzical look on his face. "Odd... I do not recall ever hearing of bears in this part of Arth."

Rathcar had begun to unsaddle the roan. "This I'll say, Arat, that in all my years I have heard and seen many things. A bear going for a walk is of little concern to me. I know to a man of the woods, such as yourself, that this is a mystery well worth your time. But hear me, brother, we should not worry about the beast lest he crosses our path." Rathcar dropped the saddle as if to emphasize his point.

Arat was on his knees using his camp knife to cut the sod, "Do not take me wrong, Rathcar. I swore to you my service just as you did for me. I would not divert my attention from the matter at hand over a bear." He removed the sod and tossed it to the side. "Well, unless the bear presses the issue, of course. But I cannot help to wonder if the animal is ill or lost to have wandered so far from his domain." Arat was placing wood in his signature campfire pattern. "If we see it, I will be sure to mention your concern." Rathcar's gold eyes shined with laughter. Arat laid his last piece of wood and stood-up. "You forget, elf, that I can *speak* to the beast in his own language," Arat said indignantly. "I will speak for myself." After a brief pause, the two broke out in laughter.

Rathcar put both horses on a long tie and joined Arat. The elf settled gently in the grass opposite the fire hole from Arat, placing his saddlebags next to him. The human gave Rathcar an expectant look.

"Are you going to light this thing," Arat asked, "or do I get out the flint and steel?"

Rathcar smiled softly. He said a few words so that they were barely audible to the human. An elven finger then pointed at the wood. Flame sprang forth and the campfire was alight.

Conversation lagged as the two ate a hearty meal of salted meat, dried fruits, *elan* and carra root. They each drank their fill of water and shared with their steeds. Arat secured the horses for the night as Rathcar checked the contents of his saddlebags before making himself comfortable. When the man returned, he brought with him a wineskin.

"I thought that we should share this," Arat held up the wineskin, "A rare red from the Court of King Isbehn. Twenty epochs old if it is a turn. It has been saved for just such an occasion as this."

"And what would that be?" Rathcar questioned as he made himself comfortable.

"Two old friends sharing a pipe, some fine wine, a few tales, and yet another indurating adventure. And believe me, it should be no other way."

"Well spoken," Rathcar said as he reclined against his saddle. "Since you brought the wine, allow me to provide the smoke." The elf quickly produced his pipe, long and delicate, and a rather large, overstuffed pouch from his vest. "*Ghutn*. The best the seven elven kingdoms have to offer." Delicate fingers untied the pouch. The pungent aroma immediately hit Arat. The human smiled, knowing he was one of a very elite group of non-elves who are allowed to partake of *ghutn*, a plant cultivated and harvested by elves who say that smoking it expands and sharpens your senses. Arat had smoked *ghutn* on three times past. He had fond memories of each experience. The man came back to the fire, handed Rathcar the wineskin, and rearranged his saddle and bedroll. Arat positioned himself so that his head was near his friend and feet extended along next to the fire. Once positioned, Arat reached into his jacket and produced his own pipe. It was of small folk origin, beautifully hand carved and a true work of high craftsmanship. The elf was taking a long draught from the wineskin, so Arat was going to reach

for the *ghutn*, but decided it would be wiser to wait until Rathcar offered.

The elf lowered the skin, wiping his mouth as he did so. "That is exquisite nectar, my friend." Rathcar handed the wineskin to Arat, saying, "Enjoy some liquid delight while I fill your pipe." "Words I could not refuse for my weight's worth of gold," Arat replied while making the exchange.

"It would take a sight far less than that, I fear." The elf joked as he packed the aromatic leaf into the delicate wood pipe. "That is unless you have changed radically since our last adventure together."

Arat took a good drink of the smooth wine. A small trickle of red ran from the corner of his mouth as he lowered the skin. He dabbed at it with the back of his hand. "Not likely, elf. I take great care in preserving myself just as I am."

Rathcar lit Arat's pipe using a burning twig and handed it to him. "Consider yourself chosen, human. It is few outside our bloodline that is allowed this privilege. You are more than elf-friend... You are my brother." Rathcar extended the pipe toward the human, gold eyes shining. "Thank ye." Arat replied as he accepted the pipe. He raised it to his lips and took a gentle drag. "I am indeed honored," the human said as he exhaled. "I have no other friend I would rather travel with, save my panther... You are as close to a brother as I have ever known."

The two sat quietly and smoked for a time.

"It is a wonder, considering how we met," the elf said. "Such intense hatred... I am glad you turned out to be a reasonable man." The sharp golden eyes snapped to the right and peered into the night. Arat looked too, but his eyes saw only blackness. After three breaths or so, Rathcar turned back to the human and continued, "Gladness fills my heart that you can see past my half-breed appearance."

Arat took a deep breath of cool night air. He was suddenly aware of the forest's intricate multitude of scents. Beyond the smoke of the campfire and pipe, the human identified many forms of life by his sense of smell alone. This had happened on one other occasion of smoking *ghutn*, nevertheless the impact of such an astounding revelation shocked the man's being. Rathcar noticed the reaction, and he studied the middle-aged man closely. Pupils' dilated, back straight, nose slightly pointed up with nostrils flaring. The elf quietly drew upon his pipe and exhaled. Golden eyes watched the human react to the smoking exhale. Arat turned suddenly to the elf. Human lips tried to form words, but couldn't decide where to start. The man's eyes sparkled with keen awareness.

"The power of the senses can be very unnerving," Rathcar said smoothly. "Be one with your surroundings and become apart of what your eyes, nose, ears, fingers and tongue are experiencing. It is nothing that you have not known before... Do you not remember the time we spent in Timberwood after slaying *Garginoan*, the were-dragon of Sand Keep? Both Tars and yourself were given the experience we call *ihlmi*... I believe Tars called it *kbuni*. Friend, you had too many words."

"That is not fair and you know it, elf." Arat stated defiantly. "There is not a way to concisely describe *ihlmi*. My god, it was like touring Arth by being everything that lives!"

"Not everything," Rathcar quickly pointed out. "There are many creatures and places that are not involved with *ihlmi*. Blackness is not interwoven with the fibers of existence. Rather, blackness is cast upon its prey."

"I understand," Arat replied. "Allow me to state it as this: *ihlmi* made me a part of all good and natural life, creature, and plant. I was able to feel as my panther feels. I was the leaf of grass that was trodden upon, the raindrop as it fell from the sky, the moss clinging to the side of a tree.

I could go on and on. Quite honestly Rathcar, *ihlmi* changed the way I look at life."

"As it was meant to." The elf puffed his pipe thoughtfully.

"I know, I know. You saw something in me that you felt you had to improve upon."

"We all can and need to improve. That is part of our purpose."

"Do not tell me that which I already know. That is truly a talent the elves have perfected... stating the obvious."

"But the student of life shall always look beyond appearances."

"Is that what you call yourself now, a 'student of life?'"

"Can you provide a better title for the ancient children?"

"Conceded, elf, bloody conceded. There is no better title."

The two sat silently for a while smoking their pipes. Arat then reached forth and stirred the fire, adding a log. As he sat back, he hoisted the wineskin. When he was through, he handed the skin to Rathcar, who accepted it with a nod. The elf was drinking as Arat spoke.

"It is good to be traveling with you again, Rathcar. But I miss not having Nyrin at my side."

"There was no way of bringing the beast. It is not written into this tale. You and I alone will forge the coming days. Together we will ride quietly and fight savagely. Fore we must complete the delivery at all costs. There is no other way." Rathcar handed the wineskin back to the man and turned to the fire.

Arat looked long at the elf. Rathcar was lost in the flames and embers of the fire. All too often in their travels together, the elf would do this very thing. He would get drawn into some type of heavy meditation, eventually emerging with knowledge of the future and bigger and better spells. Rathcar had long ago explained that for an elf to do so in front of other beings is a significant sign of trust. Arat thought that it was an excuse to stop talking. So the man tapped out his pipe, took a last sip of wine, and lay down. The last sight the man had before sleep was of his half-breed friend sitting hypnotically in front of the fire.