

Seven (Scott) Ruthar Fen

They rode the rest of that revolution without incident. They made idle chatter now and then, but spoke not of the "item" Rathcar was carrying, nor Arat's involvement in this journey. Mostly they spoke of what was happening in their lives as of late; which meant that Arat did most of the talking. He spoke of Kristel and Tirem and even Rathcar missed them the way his friend carried on. By the time either of them realized, the sun was nearly gone. It looked as if it was going to be a starlit night. Without warning, Rathcar turned a southerly direction and if Arat's memory was with him, he figured to be somewhere between the Brut Mountains and the Sea. He knew the range lay to their left since they had rode towards it up until now. Always flanking them to the southeast, the Brut range loomed in the distance. Though Arat was nearly certain they were riding towards it, it never seemed to get any closer. Then it appeared directly to the south and when Rathcar turned them in that direction, he spied one or two peaks in the face of the sun's direct light.

Arat shielded his eyes and stared to the west, knowing his home was out there and he couldn't help but wonder if Tirem was looking back towards him.

As the light grew dimmer and more amber in color, Arat noticed that Rathcar seemed to be more wary than usual. He caught him looking sharply around on more than one occasion, acting as though he heard something. Once he nearly called out but Arat saw him stop himself short before sounding a false alarm. Arat trusted his friend's senses without hesitation, they were considerably sharper than his own and had never failed him before. It wasn't until well after sunset before Arat finally spoke up. Urging his mount to catch up the elf's, he leaned over and found himself whispering.

"Should we not find camp for the night soon?"

No reply came at first, in fact Arat's words seemed to startle Rathcar out of a trance. The human saw the elf's body stiffen at the sound of his voice and couldn't help but notice his hand jerk towards his blade.

"Soon." The voice almost seemed to come from someplace other than Rathcar's lips. It fell upon Arat's ears in a flat and lifeless sort of way causing him to suddenly feel a sense of worry. He sat back up in the saddle and found himself casting a slow and watchful eye about him. It was too dark to see much further over the horse's head by now and he felt his fingers wrap around the hilt of his sword before he realized his hand had gone that direction. He suddenly missed Nyrin again.

Well over a span had gone by before either had spoken again and this time it was Rathcar who broke the silence. He had been watching the land around him with earnest, careful to spy anything that moved within the shadows of the growing darkness. The terrain was mostly open here, and for that he was glad. There were no trees anywhere that were large enough to lay ambush in, and with the ground flat and covered in short grass, it would be hard to stay clear of the elf's keen vision. His ears were tuned to the sounds around him so precisely that he was able to block out even the sound of their own horse's footfalls on the soft soil beneath them. All the while his eyes scanned around them and always he seemed to stop, peering long and hard towards some unknown point ahead.

"We must be wary, there may be trouble 'bout."

"Trouble? What sort of trouble are you speaking of?" Arat's tone remained unshaken and his inquire almost casual.

"We have entered into the Nemar homeland and last I heard they were having difficulties with

their neighbors to the south."

"Are you saying they could be at war?"

"Perhaps. It is unlikely we would stumble across any forces this far north. Still, I urge you to remain on guard, there may be scouts about."

Several strides they rode when Arat spied something ahead in the dark.

"What is that?" He whispered as he reigned his horse to a halt. Rathcar followed the direction of Arat's outstretched arm, fearing the worst. Counting in his mind how many scouts the Nemar assign to a party and what the best first course of action would be. He was surprised to find the target of Arat's alarm nothing more than a building. From what he could tell, it was a house, small and simple. Smoke rose from the crude chimney on the roof. Further investigation showed several outlying buildings of various sizes, which led Rathcar to believe they had come upon a local farm.

"I would guess to say it is a farm." The elf answered, bringing his horse to a stop. "From the looks of it, I would also say it is presently holding occupants."

"Then it only seems right that we pay a visit to this farmer and make certain all is well." Rathcar was about to nudge his beast forward when Arat made that remark. He had already prepared to let the matter rest but knew from Arat's tone that he had other plans. "Being so far north, he may wish to remain a neutral observer. Those who 'straddle the fence', so to speak, always seem to have the most to tell from either side."

"In other words, you would rather sleep anywhere but on the ground this night."

Arat shot Rathcar a grin, "There, you see, another good reason to pay the farm a visit."

Ruthar Fen had been a widower for three moons. Ever since his wife, Lia, was lost to him by the dark fever, his life had been anything but whole. After she had gone, he kept up the farm as usual, tending to the herd and making sure the crops grew healthy. His daily routine faltered none and even though Lia wasn't there at his side to help him, he managed to pick up the slack without much complaint. Since Lia had not bore him any children, he was both alone and left to take care of things single handedly. Sure, he had often said to himself he would hire on some help, paying by offering a roof and hot meals mostly, but that never seemed to happen. It didn't help that he was so far out in the country and away from folks, hard to hire someone that way. And lately, he noticed that even those few passers by that would happen across his way had grown far and few between. It was as if the whole northern territory had up and moved on. He knew it sounded silly enough, but still, not even a wagon in nearly twelve turns. Ruthar wasn't sure which he missed more, his wife, or just some simple company. So when he heard that sound coming from his door that spring night, he had almost forgotten what it meant.

"Perhaps there is no one at home," Arat said with a shrug as Rathcar rapped a third time, this time much louder.

"It seems odd then that they left a lantern burning, do you not think?" The elf was now preparing to make for the window and have a look inside.

"Is somebody there?" Came a voice from inside. It was male and from what they could guess, human.

"Yes." Rathcar called back in reply. He stepped back to the door quickly and added, "We are sorry to bother you, but were hoping you could spare some room for the night."

"We would be willing to pay." Arat added from over Rathcar's shoulder.

"We?" Came the voice from the other side. By the tone, he did not sound alarmed or frightened, more curious if anything.

The two travelers looked at one another rather puzzled. They didn't know if the farmer was

saying something back in some strange language or...

"Oh yes!" Rathcar suddenly exclaimed. "My name is Arne. My friend Byron and I are in need of a place to stay for the night and were rather hoping you could oblige us."

The sound of a latch lifting was followed by the front door swinging wide open. A man who looked to be in his late fortieth epoch met them with open arms. He was shorter than both of the travelers though the years on the farm kept him stout and strong. Wearing a nightshirt and breeches beneath, the farmer stood in his doorway, smiling from ear to ear.

"Please, please, come right in!" He motioned them in with great enthusiasm, almost too much for either of their liking. "How good it is to have visitors! Come, come... inside with you now."

Arat looked at Rathcar in that certain way. By the slight nod the elf offered in return, he knew this man was of no threat to them and so he stepped inside. "Very nice little home you have here," he stated with respect as he cast his eyes about the room. It was a simple area, serving as both dining room and kitchen. A square wooden table filled the center with four chairs placed around, all empty. On one wall was the fireplace and on either side a wooden door that led to somewhere unknown. At the other end of the room sat the stove, sink and cupboard area. Above the wash basin was a small window that was covered by a crude drape. The farmer pulled two chairs out for his guests to sit and then hurried over to the mantle where he took from it a small wooden box.

"Would either of care for some tobacco?" He opened the hinged box and Arat could smell the sweet aroma set free from within. "Oh what a dolt am I!" With a sudden snap of the lid, he quickly pulled it away and shook his free fist at his side. "Of course you'll be wanting something to eat, after all, being on the road and all. Must be hungry, I'd bet for certain. I have little to offer but I'm more than happy to share what's left from supper. Let me see here..." He shuffled over to the counter near the window and banged around on some pots and such. Without turning his head, he continued to cackle like an old woman. "Coffee! Coffee would be nice... or tea. I've some biscuits left and some carrots, but nothing else. Did you walk the way here or have you a wagon outside?"

Arat opened his mouth and was about to point over his shoulder when the farmer cut him short. "Of course you don't have a wagon! What I old dog I must be. I woulda heard the wagon roll up. Horses. I bet you rode in on horses."

This time Rathcar wanted to answer, but again the farmer beat him to it. A basket of some cold biscuits in one hand and a tin plate with a few tiny carrots balanced in the other, he spun around to face his guests. "Ya know, I had a horse once..." He saw the look in the two stranger's eyes and his jaw snapped shut. His eyes went from one to the other, not caring about their looks or even that Rathcar was not human. He looked only into their eyes and saw a bewildered gaze in both of them, not to mention a hint of amusement. "Oh my." He said softly, still staring at them. "Oh my. I have really gone and done it know haven't I. Here I get a little company on such a fine starlit night and I go ranting like an old woman with one foot in a bucket." He moved forward slowly and set his load down at the table between them. Wiping his hands on his nightshirt, he offered a clean hand and announced himself.

"I am Ruthar, Ruthar Fen. I welcome you to my home. Forgive me for my behavior, but it has been long since I had anyone ta home, especially passers by. I hope you don't think me mad."

"Truly the contrary." Rathcar assured the host with an honest smile and obligatory wink. "Your hospitality is most kind and we are grateful to sit at your table." Without even a breath, he set right into getting what information he could from the farmer without his smile ever faltering.

"You say it has been long since you've seen folks traveling out your way?"

"That's right. Why, my field runs right along the road, if ya wanna call it that anymore; mostly growed over now and all. Why, I bet there hasn't been even a cart roll down that road for... for some turns now. Once there was plenty mind you, but all going north and seeming a bit rude if ya ask me. No one had the good decency to even stop and tell me what all the fuss was about."

"Fuss?" Arat shot in, hoping to break the farmer's latest verbal spasm.

"Sure..." Ruthar said with a nod and a tone that made it sound as if it were obvious. He slid a chair out and was sitting down before he went on. "Why it don't take no book learner to know there must be trouble in the south. "

"Then you know of the struggles with the southern border?" Rathcar's brow cocked at this and he felt he was getting somewhere now. He casually nibbled at one of the biscuits, dry and bland as it was, not wanting to hurt the man's feelings.

"With Lim'rosh? Sure. Been trouble with them land baron, money whores for some good many harvests now. Thinkin' they can just buy anything and move right in. Why I guess I can't blame folks for moving up wind further."

"Mister Fen, I believe it's a little more than just..."

Arat suddenly cleared his throat quite loudly and dropped a hand hard on the table. "Ya know, I think I could really go for some of that fine tobacco about now. This biscuit has just hit the spot so and there's nothing like a good smoke after a fine meal." Looking to be certain his friend was watching, he shook his head with such subtlety, that only Rathcar would have noticed. The elf offered a nod in reply and continued no further on his present course of questions.

So the three of them sat at the table, enjoying a fine pipe or two, a great improvement over the food. They managed to steer Ruthar in the right direction each time he strayed and by the end of the night they had learned a great deal. The farmer poured out all he knew or thought he knew and through it, the two were able to draw their own conclusions. In the end, they knew that Nemar and Lim'rosh were most certainly on the brink of war, and that something bad was stirring in the heart of Nemar. Rathcar had already felt a glimmer of evil when they turned south and knew then that something was amiss. Now that he knew all roads north were completely abandoned and that trading had even stopped with the dwarves in the Brut, he sensed the worst. Arat noticed the change in his face as the night wore on and when Ruthar finally went off to bed, telling them they were free to sleep in the loft overhead, he questioned his friend.

"There is something more in all of this than this farmer is saying." They were coming back in the barn where they had tended to their horses. Rathcar stopped in the shadows of the half moon and spoke in nearly a whisper.

"What he says is the truth, or what he perceives it to be."

"And what is your perception of this truth?"

Rathcar sensed that tone in his friend that said he did not want to be toyed with. "Only that he knows the end of many things but not their actions that preceded them."

"And those being..."

Rathcar sighed. "First of all Lim'rosh is not a country of wealthy... 'money whores and land barons,' as our friend so eloquently put it. Quite the opposite actually. You see, my friend, Lim'rosh is not the name of the territory that borders Nemar, it is the name of the one who controls it."

"Lim'rosh." Arat repeated. "For some odd reason that name feels as though it should be known to me."

"So it should, my friend, for *Lim* means Ogre in our tongue."

By the time morning arrived, Arat had learned more of their little adventure than he really cared to know. He now knew that the skirmish between these two territories was actually this Lim'rosh's attempts to completely wipe out Nemar and seize control of every last thing within her borders. His army was growing stronger with each passing and though the Brut still lay between Nemar and the south, Rathcar felt something evil already on this side, something that could be a problem for them. And being told of the sorts that make up this army, Arat did not doubt this dark feeling. It seemed that whatever this "item" was that Rathcar possessed, it would be felt by this evil just as he senses it. They would have to get out of Nemar quickly and immediately, for though Arat still knew not what this "item" was, Rathcar was not holding back that it needed to be at its final destination without delay. They obliged Ruthar's offer for breakfast, and though it was no better than his biscuits, the coffee was welcome. They spoke not one word of their plans and made small talk to keep their host busy.

Once they had rode off the farmer's land, they made their way in a down westerly direction. Their plan was to stay on Nemar's border as best they could and make for the Cuwi River before turning south. The Cuwi would take them south and west until it hit the Great Sea. They would get off before then and head south to the Third Kingdom. If all went according to plan. For the next four revolutions, the two rode in a steady southwesterly trail. Each night they camped in the open, with no fire and little talking. Rathcar did not want to catch the attention of any far-reaching war parties, especially orcs. So they ate cold jerky and whatever else they saw fit to eat uncooked, and each night they took turns keeping a watch. Dawns light came to them each morning, falling on the backs of their necks as they saddled their mounts and headed out for another day's ride. Neither seemed to sleep very soundly since crossing into Nemar but did not complain. Moving onwards meant moving closer to the Cuwi, and putting this place behind. One afternoon, as they passed a portion of *elan* between them, they heard a sound like thunder. Both reigned their steeds to a halt in unison and even the horse's ears stretched front wards. Looking towards the sky, Arat found only one or two large whites overhead, no rain in sight for days. Rathcar scanned the land around them, his keen sight able to reach nearly a full league on a clear day. From the look on his face, Arat could tell the elf saw nothing but open fields of grasses, weeds and sparse trees. The two looked at one another with a shrug, and simply urged their horses back into the slow gate. Mere moments passed when the sound came again, this time almost seeming to echo across the skies. This time Rathcar immediately threw his head over his left shoulder and stared south. Arat followed suit and just when he was about to ask what they were looking for, he saw a faint cloud of black smoke sail into the southern sky. "What was that?" he exclaimed in such a start that his mount whirled about. Arat swung his head around him in order to keep his gaze fixed, all the while turning his horse full about and calming him.

"I would guess as to say it is smoke." Rathcar replied as he and his own mount stood still as stone. Arat couldn't be sure, but he could have sworn that both elf and horse were staring at the same point in the sky. Rathcar slowly raised an arm and with one long, slender finger, he pointed towards the south, and the tail of smoke. "The finger of the Brut Mountains lay there and on the other side, Lim'rosh. I fear the push into Nemar has begun and that means only one thing." Rathcar heeled his horse sharply and the two sprang ahead at a brisk gallop.

"That they have gone to war?" Arat shouted as he spun his own horse around and raced after.

"That we are in danger." Came the elf without looking over his shoulder.

"Danger, how?"

It wasn't until the end of the rev, after seeing the smoke when Arat asked that question. They had traveled on through the night and well into next morn and not once did either utter a sound. Mostly Arat found himself continuously reminiscing in his head of all the times he had felt this same way in his youth. Several times he wanted to break out in a tale for Rathcar, but each time he cut himself short when he saw the serious mask chiseled in his companion's face. He knew that his friend was tense and worried about something and that he too should be as well. But he figured he was beyond that. After being through some of the situations he found himself in those younger days, nothing seemed to worry him. He guessed it was probably something Rathcar would credit to "growing wise" when your grow older, and now he was wondering why the elf wasn't following his own words. Arat was looking at Rathcar's saddlebags when he suddenly felt his head turn and look towards the south.

When they finally made camp that following evening, Arat had nearly demanded it. Not for him, but the horses. He was finding all this "adventure" stimulating by now and his energy level seemed to be growing stronger by the league. But his common sense told him that if they did not rest these horses now, they maybe on foot ere they reach the river. Rathcar agreed without argument and had stopped his horse right there and dismounted. After tending to the grooming and watering of the mounts, Arat had knelt beside his friend and asked that question while Rathcar was foraging through one of his packs.

The elf was silent for a moment after, his head hung low. Arat heard him sigh and then some strange words that he mumbling under his breath. Without warning, a small light burst before them. It was as round as a melon and as big to match. It cast forth a soft, white light that cast a nice brightness across the ground at their feet. Using a stick he picked up off the ground, Rathcar began to draw in the dirt.

"This is the section of the Bruts that lies between the borders. This is the splitting of the Cuwi where we seek. This is where we are about now."

It did not take Arat long to discover the root of his friend's mood. Looking at the lines Rathcar had drawn, they were farther south then he guessed and the border was not too far. The point at the river where he had drawn would take them even further south. And if these troops of Lim'rosh were as Rathcar said, they would pour in and drive straight north. He didn't know if he quite understood the severity of the odds, but he figured there would be a skirmish in the end.

"So how many revs 'til we reach the Cuwi?" Arat questioned. "It does not look to be too far if your markings are any telling."

"It will be nearly five turns of Arth," Rathcar replied as he took his hand and erased all signs of his drawing. "But there may already be trouble there."

"How do you mean?"

"The Sweger River flows south of here. Being fed by the sea, as the Cuwi, it pushes upward until it pours into Hora Lake. Now, this lake lies deep in the southern realm and while branching off to the east and feeding other kingdoms, there is a waterway called the Strait that leads north where it eventually meets up with, the Cuwi."

"So what you are saying is we are faced with three possible scenarios to greet us. One, the army on land is sweeping through and is heading in this direction, only to descend upon us. Two, a force is coming up river and will descend upon us. Or three, they are both there now and awaiting our arrival."

"You forgot four." Responded the elf without taking any of his friend's words very close to his ear. "We could be there before any of them and be gone before anyone is the wiser."

"When are you going to tell me what we are carrying?"

"Come, let us rest a short bit." He rose to his feet; at the same moment the ball of light vanished. For a moment Arat was completely blind, but when his eyes did finally adjust, Rathcar had thrown a blanket over himself and laid his head on his saddle pad. Arat stared at him while a long breath blew forth from his nose.

"Nothing shakes you does it?"

"Aye." Came Rathcar's muffled voice. "I guess that is why we have been friends for so long."