

## Chapter One

Prince Roxwale walked through the woods, the aroma of old whiskey on his breath radiated off of him. Saying he 'walked' was better served as a euphemism for something closer to what he actually did, like 'hobbled' or 'shambled', for instance.

Whiskey was a peasant's quality taste he only succumbed to when in desperate need and was accepted only through the assertion of his older brother Prince Palon. *"It'll grow hair on your chest!"* his brother had exclaimed at the dingy pub. Why exactly Prince Roxwale needed more hair on his chest to shave off, he wasn't certain.

The whiskey was provided to them free of charge because, of course, it was. Tattered men with beer bellies that stuck out of them like their mother's before birth were ready to offer them whatever they needed. This wasn't out of kindness, as it never was, but as an investment Roxwale never intended to reward.

It was cold outside, with a blanket of snow covering their surroundings, their boots were muddied by the ground beneath the white sheet of terrain. Everything felt quieter in the woods, as though every sound had a little extra oomph and emphasis behind it. Every whisk of wind brought a whistling howl. Roxwale soon began to embrace the pleasant, yet never ending sound of his black boots crackling through the snow; it was a satisfying sound.

"If you don't want to get lost out here, I suggest you move like you don't have a corn-cock buried between your fancy-boy ass!" Roxwale's brother Prince Palon exclaimed, forgetting his buttocks, too, was also quiet fancy.

"It's corncob," Prince Roxwale corrected dryly.

"Not with the way you're walking!" Palon responded back, very fast. Roxwale felt certain Palon anticipated his response before he made it.

Prince Roxwale let out a groan but didn't muster up a further reply to his brother's banter. It would have been a waste of breath at a time when his was in short supply. Even if he'd been reluctant, Roxwale accepted the cheap booze to help him cope with his disdain for the day's activities. Hunting was a job assigned to men of the ape-like persuasion. It was a job assigned to illiterate men who could do nothing except administer brute force. That was not Roxwale, and, as a matter of fact, that was not his brother Palon either.

Roxwale trudged onward, following his older brother's lead through the Demp Forest. While Palon has chosen clothes with the objective of mobility, with boots and clothes meant for the bare minimum of keeping warm, Roxwale had been more generous in his approach, bundling up in snug, thick attire. Unfortunately, this slowed his movement and left him with little readiness to speak of, which helped create a sizable distance between he and his brother.

"Going to find us a buffalo. I have a good feeling about this part of the forest, I can smell it on the leaves," Palon said, and then, for some reason, made a loud sniffing sound to further express the fact. In-retrospect, maybe Palon had been more ape-like than he previously gave him credit for.

Prince Roxwale stopped and looked up for a moment, more as a way of advising his older, more dimwitted brother to do the same, "There are no leaves on the trees, brother."

Palon shrugged off the remark and replied, "You're telling me you can't smell that in the air? We're onto something!"

Roxwale looked around the eyesore of a forest and took a whiff of air. "I suppose I can smell the shit of some species of animal, doubtful it's a buffalo, however," he replied, coming almost eye-to-eye with his much taller brother, helped by the unevenness of the land.

Aside from the smell he did, in-fact, smell, in the stillness that came only in-between Roxwale's gasps of air, he could also hear animals, or, perhaps, the wind rustling the branches of nearby trees.

Palon seemed to have ignored all of his brother's remarks. It didn't bother Roxwale who was, after all, an admitted curmudgeon, as Palon always had a way of keeping that from ruining his fun. That was why they were out in the cold, sheltered only by the bare trees that looked deathly this time of year. They were here because Prince Palon needed the fun.

Royalty in Esko had no reason to hunt. Hunting was for the animal-dummy hybrids their father paid to do so.

"Even if you found a buffalo, what would you use to kill it? Is your plan to hack at it to death with your sword or throw your spear for it to run away with as it laughs at your attempt and homely-looking face?"

"I will improvise," Palon responded, looking around the forest as if he was readying to create a makeshift cannon out of sticks and stones.

"That isn't even considering how you expect for us to bring back any of our kills," Roxwale added, figuring Palon would let it slide they never brought back anything they killed anyways. Food was plentiful in Esko and they were Princes, after all.

As he assumed he would, his brother ignored him, readying his spear, clutching the weapon in his enormous hands. He charged some ways ahead of Roxwale. This time, his younger brother didn't even bother attempting to keep up with him. Roxwale's legs were short and the lot of it was more trouble and effort than it was worth. From where he stood at the top of the hill Palon now ran down, Roxwale had a clear vantage point to watch over him.

Roxwale had never been exactly certain whether it was vanity that brought Palon out to the woods or not. That he might be doing it for the respect and admiration of his peers. Roxwale knew that was half the reason he did it. Maybe Palon did it as a fight for his own freedom; to lament his desire to do things that Princes were not meant to do.

Prince Palon went hunting because he wanted to go hunting, Roxwale supposed. It was a break away from the royal clothes, of which, Palon was never much of a fit. Roxwale merely watched on while Palon sneaked around several of the nearby trees, doing his best impression of a tiger lurking in wait of its prey. Although, with Palon's size, it better resembled a bear trying a bad attempt at stealth.

Where the tall grass ended, ahead was a creek with murky water. A small pack of wolves drank. The water must have been icy and cold, never mind odorous and foul, but what mind did a bunch of desperate white wolves give when resources were scarce?

Prince Roxwale had a single thought the second he noticed the wolves, nay, more than a thought, Roxwale made a silent prayer to the Gods above him that Palon would not react how he suspected he would. "*Don't you think about it,*" was the phrase he would have said had he been offered the chance. It was too late, however, as Palon had already begun to brace himself.

Roxwale's brother was not a smart man, equipped in brawn, and perhaps, even, a certain know-how, but not much else. As a matter of fact, Roxwale might even call him downright stupid.

"Charge!" Prince Palon yelled out like the mentally challenged man-child his brother knew him to be.

"Dammit, dammit," Roxwale let out, now running down the hill, withdrawing his sword from out its sheath. If not for his brother's antics, Roxwale's blade and scabbard would have been nothing more than props.

As his exclamation alluded to, Palon charged at the wolves who flinched at his command, but, then, readied themselves, snarling their teeth and preparing for a lunge. He threw his sword at them,

harpooning into the runt of the pack, piercing its neck. It was an effective and certainly fatal attack, but one that left Palon without his spear. The wolf let out a loud yelp and whimpered, crawling only a short distance away, leaving a trail of blood behind it before dropping to its death.

The three remaining wolves circled around Palon until one of them, at last, went on the attack, sicking itself on him and encouraging the others to lunge as well. Palon groaned in agony when a wolf dug its teeth into his forearm. Had Prince Palon dressed dressed for the weather outside as advised, he might have been protected, instead, the wolf's teeth likely chomped through his thin layer of clothing and broke skin.

Palon flung his arm back, sending the wolf flying off before it could fully clamp its jaw down. The wolf wouldn't stay dormant for very long, but, in the meantime, Prince Palon was able to reach for the sword strapped to his waist. The other wolves soon bit down.

One wolf dug its teeth on every bit of what it could fit of Palon's leg into its mouth and the second wolf carried on whether the fallen wolf had left off. Soon, that fallen beast was back on the attack as well.

Two wolves alone may not have been enough to bring down Palon's burly, tower-like build, but, with the third's pounce, his balance was soon brought into question, then, answered to have failed. The awkward landing brought the brunt of his weight down on the wolf once on his arm, making the wolf yelp and struggle to free itself. The other two continued on the attack, biting and further gnawing into his flesh.

At last, Roxwale was able to reach his brother and ready his sword, only to find that his own momentum from running down the hill now sent him tumbling forward. The diversion, or, more accurately, the newer piece of meat, did, at least, help bring one of the wolves off Palon.

The animal lunged itself at Roxwale's face; a terrifying sight. Out of desperation, Roxwale protected his face, using merely his hands as guard, leaving the wolf to bite as his fingers while he cried out in horror.

Slobber dribbled out of the wolf's mouth in large globs of spit and blood let out from the freshly made teeth marks in Roxwale's hands. The pain was immense and insufferable, but the fear he found from having to restrain the wolf, was far worse than that.

The wolf inched closer and closer, barking with a maniacal hunger that made it ravenous and ferocious. The long strands of spit that shot out the wolf's mouth was an indelicacy far from Roxwale's mind; the only thought he had was in-regards to his pending death.

The fear then subsided and turned to shock when the wolf's disinterest must of waned and had left him, also discovering the ability of flight. Either that, or it was because Palon's large boot drove itself so hard into the wolf's rib-cage that it was sent hurling off into the air. Beneath the sound of the wolf's yell, Roxwale could have sworn he also heard the wolf's chest folding inward, but how did such a harshness sound?

Prince Roxwale climbed to his feet. His body was drenched with sweat and even as his fingers clasped the clods of ice in his hands, they still throbbed and felt red-hot. Both the wolves that once chewed on his brother were now dead, snow stained with blood was visible around them. The final wolf tried to crawl away to safety, but it was not long before Palon brought his sword over its back and struck it dead as well.

Roxwale breathed heavily, his heart was beating a mile a minute, and like it might implode at any minute. He looked down at the blood that poured from the bite marks on his hands; tears of skin hung off his fingers in flaps. He sighed. For the next few days, everything he did with his hands would hurt.

Prince Palon turned back around to him, holding his sword and a satisfied expression on his face; they made eye contact. Prince Roxwale outstretched his arms as his bloody fingers painted the snow,

“Why!?”

“Come on, brother! You can’t deny this will make a wonderfully good story to tell,” Prince Palon answered honestly, unable to hide how proud and exuberant he felt.

Although Palon appeared to be making the comment in jest, Roxwale knew better than that. He could already very well see Palon in a pub some place, chatting it up about this very scene with a large glass of ale cupped in his hands.

“You know what also makes an especially amusing yarn? Telling everyone my brother died! Oh, how’d he die, did he die from the wolves? Oh, no, he fought off the wolves all well and good, but, afterwards, I smashed his head in with a fucking rock!” Roxwale yelled out, like his brother, he was unable to contain his emotion. His was anger, however, not excitement.

“That’d make you next in line to be King,” Prince Palon countered, helpful to a fault. “Another good story to tell, but in a very different way.”

“Something like that feels too played out though, doesn’t it?” Prince Roxwale said at last, forcing himself to slow his breathing and calm down.

Prince Palon let out a playful laugh in-response, for which, Roxwale dryly reciprocated. His brother might have been stupider than Stupid’s stupid uncle Stupid but nobody forced Roxwale to go out and hunt with Palon. He did it because his brother was proud and would never accept having Knights of Esko accompanying him, but still needed to be accompanied. It was one of Palon’s traits that allured civilians to him, be it nobleman or peasants. The nobleman saw a strong, powerful leader whose ambition outmatched his fathers, whereas the peasants looked at him and saw one of their own. They were fools to the bitter end, it seemed. Prince Roxwale could understand the benefit to having such a reputation but could never force himself to befriend commoners as though they were equals.

The throbbing in Roxwale’s hand was now starting to die away and leave him. In-retrospect, his short, scrawny presence likely wasn’t the biggest asset to Prince Palon in the Demp Forest. Maybe he needed the time away from the castle as well. Or maybe, deep down, he enjoyed being able to spend time with his brother; the same way an ant yearns for the inner sanctum of an anteater’s stomach.

“Has your need for adventure been satiated?” Prince Roxwale asked, rummaging through the sack he had strapped over his shoulders. Soon, he found what he was looking, bringing out a roll of cloth so he could tend to his hand. “Are you alright?” Roxwale asked, wondering if he should bring out another roll of bandages for his brother’s sake.

“I will live,” Palon remarked, which Roxwale had expected, knowing his brother’s stubborn pride. “And just about.”

## 2

The heat from the fire was a warm welcome on Prince Roxwale’s weary bones, fatigued from a day of exertion he wasn’t accustomed to. As much as he would have preferred it, he didn’t even bother trying to convince Prince Palon to seek refuge at an inn some place. It was a real shame, because no doubt they would have been able to find a nice one at no charge and been treated like the royalty they so rightfully were. Palon didn’t seem to mind the inconvenience, as a matter of fact, he welcomed it, the idea of being one with nature.

The cold air and bad conditions added legitimacy to a lie he was so determined to convince himself of. All that mattered was whatever played best to the imaginary life he pretended he had on these hunting expeditions.

Starting the fire proved not to be a very difficult task. They had plenty of alcohol to spark the flame and stashed pine sticks in their bags for the occasion. The real hardship was finding dry enough wood and finding an isolated location to setup camp. After some searching around, they found the best place they could have expected. It was some ways off the trail, but not too far into the woods, some place where they were unlikely to be found by anyone.

Nobody knew exactly when or where these hunting expeditions happened, not exactly, and very few had reason to enter the woods in the first place. Regardless, despite Prince Palon's silent prayers for the contrary, they were Princes and that came with a bounty on their heads in the neighboring kingdoms.

"Sometimes I wish I could stay out here," Prince Palon said, bringing the neck of the bottle to his lips and downing a small amount.

"In Demp Forest?" Prince Roxwale laughed at the absurdity, unable to keep a straight face, "That's far from the most ambitious of goals. Does your dream also include a pot to piss and shit or is the Demp Forest also that pot?"

Palon smirked at the comment and shook his head. "It doesn't have to be Demp Forest. Just somewhere that is away from Esko, away from the men that snarl when my back is turned and grovel at my feet when it is not. I would love not having to deal with all of this."

"The last week or so, you have drank all night and slept all day. You have your choice of the women and you won't even be asked to pay for them. I don't reckon your busy schedule is as strenuous as you like to believe it is," Roxwale countered, bring his own alcohol to his lips. The taste was rough and unpleasant, but at least the cold air kept it cool.

"They call us royalty, but royalty does seem to come with a very short leash. I am not a fool," Prince Palon remarked, nodding his head in affirmation to his brother he was, in-fact, not a fool. Prince Roxwale held his skepticism. "I know I have it luckier than so many others. I am a rich boy complaining about rich boy problems when poorer folk with realer problems to contend with like starvation and cocksuckers like us bossing them around because happenstance deemed us superior."

"Not happenstance, Palon, our bloodlines, our fathers who slayed beasts and conquered cities, the Gods smiled down on us and that's what decided us superior," Prince Roxwale snapped back.

"The Gods decided our fathers would slay beasts and conquer cities, they didn't say anything about us, brother."

"You might as well grow used to your bloodlines, after all, father's not getting any younger, and you're the first in line to be King."

"King," Prince Palon scoffed, shaking his head in disgust of the idea. "King is a title we give to angry, controlling men that have stuck their banner in the ground and want everything brought into their fishbowl for them. If you want the title of King, I would say you are more than welcome to claim it."

Prince Roxwale did want to be King, more than anything, in-fact. It was something he thought about every night before bed, but that he had accepted as an impossibility. He yearned to be respected by everyone in Esko, to have that responsibility, to have that power.

"We will see," Prince Roxwale responded, taking another drink from his bottle of whiskey. "You say that now, but every village, whether it be Esko or somewhere else, every place needs someone to take command and create structure to it. Sheep are just sheep, they need herders to guide them. They need a leader to make a decision when the time comes. Whether to go to war, or whether to fallback. They need an economy that allows distribution of goods in-exchange for doing ones' share. It has to exist, and someone has to do it. Something else is, every village, whether it be Esko, or somewhere else, everyone wants to be King."

“Tell me, brother, exactly how much of those goods did you and I have distributed to us and how much of it was us doing our share? War is a King sending men to death for conflicts he usually started.”

Roxwale leaned against his backpack, stretching out his limbs in from the fire that raged on. His older brother was a dreamer. He was like a child in that respect. He believed everybody could have everything, that everybody would put in the same level of work to attain it. They can't, and they wouldn't. The hard truth that reality reflected back at you was simple – someone had to be forsaken and might as well not have been them.

“I want what's best for you, brother, and you know what is best for you is in Esko. You will find nothing else outside of it, nothing except for trees and dirt, and people that are not your own.”

Prince Palon stayed quiet for a moment, the look on his face seemed disillusioned and drained, but Roxwale knew it was for his own good. He stared away from Roxwale and over at the blazing flames in front of them.

“Well then,” Prince Palon mumbled beneath his breath, then, looked up again and offered an exaggerated grin, raising a glass before Roxwale, “To dirt!”

Prince Roxwale smiled politely and nodded, fearing the message might have went unheeded by his brother. He clanked his body against Palon's, “To dirt.”

They would have to return to their lives in Esko once morning arrived, and even if Prince Palon may have been in no hurry to do so, Prince Roxwale couldn't wait.

### 3

The night began with tossing and turning, with Prince Roxwale unable to sleep in the confines of the crudely made tent. His brother insisted on a makeshift creation comprised of branches and materials strictly found in the forest.

It made for a long night.

Every time he thought he might have drifted off, he awoke only to be met with the blackness of the night once again.

His left leg began to hurt over time, progressing to a slight ache to a throbbing sensation. It was a feeling he initially chalked off to the discomfort of the lackluster bedding, but the pain never subsided.

Drenched in sweat, Roxwale sat up, breathing heavily, a dark-blue tint veiled itself over everything, and, in the dead of the night, he could see because of it. What was happening to him?

He could see the tree branches and the bushes outside; nausea was beginning to set in as well.

“Fucking dammit,” Prince Roxwale yelled out next, but he could not say for certain if it was aloud or in his head. He couldn't even distinguish if his eyes were open or if he was imagining the surroundings of the forest. Everything felt so far away and distant from him.

His body convulsed and shook. His eyes clamped shut tightly as the pain crept up his body and soon started to surge through him. It was overbearing; he squirmed the best he could, trying to adjust in a way that would make it relent, but to no avail.

It was insufferable, in smaller flickers now, he fought to shut his eyes and force sleep, but it was a fool's errand. Every time his eyes were pried open, he saw the bright silhouette of a horned figure. Was it a figure from outside the tent?

The pain in his leg made it difficult to focus on anything else. Soon, he found himself unable to return to a seated position, rocking back and fourth, squirming like a worm. His leg, his leg, his leg, ... it throbbed and throbbed, but he could not find it in him to bend his body to look at his injured limb. It felt much larger and much heavier than it should have been.

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After what felt like an eternity wedged into small moments, Prince Roxwale opened his eyes once again in the darkness, and, for a moment, he did not know at all what looked back at him. As his eyes started to focus, he noticed they still carried the blueish hue, and what he saw again was, in-fact, the horned figure from earlier. The woman had pale skin and a face without blemish, but it might have been his own damaged eyes that made her appear to immaculate to him.

“You must follow, you must come,” the voice whispered; a faint, distant echo that felt so faraway and small. The voice was too distant to make any sense out of, too muffled to perceive as a demand or as a request, and high pitched. However, for a reason Roxwale could not explain, he felt drawn to it, wanting to hear more of where he must go to.

He let out a guttural yell as the pain once again surged through him, disrupting the short-lived peace of mind. He blinked his eyes as the bright flashes began to nearly blind him, but, then, at last, as the light stopped, he saw his older brother Palon look back at him with worry on his face.

Roxwale didn't try to speak words and knew he would fail if he tried to. He watched his brother Palon who now clearly had his attention on Roxwale's left leg, no doubt having seen him favor it and cry out in agony.

His brother applied pressure, which only made Roxwale yell out even louder.

At this rate, it would only be a matter of time until he lost consciousness, and what a welcome event that would be. Prince Roxwale blinked again, seeing the horned creature stare back at him. It spread its lips and showed its teeth, they were razor-sharp and formed a sinister smile, one that suggested malice, but, behind it, the bluish tint provided an angelic aura as well. The longer he admired the aura, the better he felt, but its presence was short lived.

Roxwale blinked again, and, as he did, his hollering increased with it, “Fuck, no, no, no, no,” he cried out as he watched his older brother brandish a hunting knife and begin carving into his skin.

The very second the blade broke through his skin, Roxwale felt an immediate relief to his throbbing despair, but what was happening to him? He could not hear very much beneath his own screaming, and yet, he felt confident he could hear the grinding of the blade against his bone. It could not have possibly been loud enough to distinguish though, could it? The pain itself felt distant, as if the leg was already no longer a part of him. It was a thought that he hadn't it in him to even think about, all he focused on was the knife going back in fourth on bone.

His face felt soaked with his own sweat and tears, his own slobber and snob. It was an awful presentation of royalty, but he didn't give two shits about royalty right now.