

## Bird-people of the Crok Cha

### Chapter 1

An offensive stench rose up from the ground as Drom shoved his pick-axe further into the desiccated soil. The axe stuck in the ground and Drom's arm muscles tensed as he grabbed the handle with his four-fingered hands and pulled vigorously. The ground broke free as the pick released, sending clumps of dirt flying. He sniffed and scrunched his face, his brow furrowing and his beak nostrils expanding at the acrid smell wafting toward him. He must have struck a tendril of flock-rock. It seemed that flock-rock veins were commonly found with a mixture of decaying grasses and dead beetles. Something about the rock seemed to attract the beetles who ate the mineral until they died a slow, smelly death. However, along with the stench came excitement. Finding a flock-rock vein was a welcome discovery! Drom's taskers promised a personal reward for every major flock-rock haul that was discovered in addition to the meager pay that work campers usually received. Unfortunately, only occasionally did the organizers of the work camp fulfill their end of this promise but there was always hope.

Drom stretched his wings and began to focus. Finding a vein of flock-rock meant that there was not going to be an evening break. He dug and dug, ripping roots, and swinging high arcs with the pickaxe. Each swing opened up the earth, revealing the glassy yellowish mineral below. The mineral ran vertically into a mound that was surrounded by small scrub bushes. He furiously dug his talons into the dirt; the bushes blocked the route to determining how large the mineral deposit was. But Drom knew it was big, maybe the biggest find in awhile.

Drom sighed and wiped sweat from his beak and stopped to rest for a moment. He looked out toward the hills across the grasslands and was met with a glare from the distance

reflecting back. Out in the flock-rock fields there was no shade and the sun was unavoidable. As Drom worked the fields he felt that he was shrinking with the skin around his feathers drying up and his wings becoming smaller. Bird-people could handle the heat but they only barely tolerated it when it was dry. They much preferred the humidity of the eastern slopes of their forested Crok Cha homeland. Out in the arid grasslands, searching for flock-rock disagreed with Drom. He hated it but it was necessary. Participation in a mineral work camp provided steady incoming pay which Drom was able to stash away. He hoped the saved coins would pay for his family back home to be released from their servitude.

From behind him, a rock tumbled. Drom turned and found his fellow work-camper, Squall, towering over him. Squall was one of the bigger birds in camp and had a reputation for strong-winging others in the camp. Drom tended to keep to himself and, while he never interacted with Squall, he commonly heard his boisterous squawks across camp when the fermented root-juice ran deep into the night.

“Looks like you found something?” Squall asked, his large eyes peering down his beak at Drom enviously.

Drom moved a couple steps away. He had never found a flock-rock repository before but he knew that the others in the group moved in quickly when word spread. They all would want a cut of the reward. Drom unconsciously spread his wings, his blue feathers widening and denoting his disappointment and anger at Squall’s questioning.

“Drom, relax!”, Squall exclaimed, surveying the scene. “It’s fine. I’m not here for your stash. Although, it does look like the biggest vein we’ve dug this month.”

“Why are you here then?” Drom questioned.

Squall clicked back on his talons and his wings fluttered.

“I’ve got a proposition for you. The rest of the camp has not yet caught wind of this find yet. Perhaps we keep it that way? I will keep this secret for as long as possible and we split the reward for this discovery”.

Drom blinked in disbelief. There wasn’t any reason that Squall would have a claim to this flock-rock. It wasn’t worth it to Drom to even provide a response to such a preposterous deal. Narrowing his eyes, he shook his head. Turning back around his plumage shuddered and he readied his pickaxe for another swing at the vein. Squall reached out and grabbed the pickaxe at the apex of the arc. The axe was pulled easily from Drom’s hand and without the counter-weight of the axe Drom pitched forward falling toward the bottom of the pit he had been digging. His wings fluttered as his beak hit the mound and he crumpled in a disastrous pile of feathers, dirt, and dust.

Squall took his taloned foot and kicked dirt into the shallow pit toward Drom.

“Hey, I offered you a chance for a deal. This is my rock vein now!” Squall squawked. He grabbed Drom by the wing and pulled him out of the pit. Drom turned swiftly and grabbed a clump of feathers from the bully’s neck. Squall jumped backwards and kicked his feet up toward Drom. A large talon dug across his chest and a bright red twinge of blood began seeping from the wound. Drom stepped away, his face going hot from pain and fear.

Apparently, this was no longer his rock vein anymore.

As Drom turned toward camp, the bigger bird pushed him toward camp with a smack across the back. Drom walked away with his wings nervously tucked and his head low.

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In this part of the world, in the eastern continent of Ucoris Tol, flock-rock was a commodity with several uses. The bird-people originally discovered it in the lands west of the Crok Cha. They used it in cooking but at some point some of the human-folk discovered that it could be used as a component in weapons making. Through an alchemic process that Drom didn't quite understand, flock-rock can be modified to give it explosive properties. This allowed an archer or a catapult to send a payload toward their enemy resulting in a wide concussive blast of the target. The discovery of this advantage of flock-rock changed the way that wars were waged and several fledgling fiefdoms were able to expand their lands and some became proper countries. Through this flock-rock became valuable and allowed the more prosperous countries to maintain their strongholds within Ucoris Tol.

Although the bird-people were the first to discover the flock-rock they did not benefit from the eventual economic advantage. Many of Drom's kind found work in the rock fields as means for steady income but this work took them away from their homes and families and subjugated them to near slave-like conditions. The work camps were usually managed by humans from Gruebar or Usparland and even as far west as Holvarn. However, everyone knew all the money went to Silana, the capital city of Everdawn. Drom had never been to Everdawn (in fact he had only ever dipped a toe across the border into Gruebar) but he had heard fascinating stories told around the hearthstone by his old relatives.

The stories are told of Everdawn being one of the most beautiful areas of the continent. Everdawn had the advantage of being a large peninsula surrounded by water on nearly all sides with a mountainous region capping the north part of the country with its border to Crok Cha. Though Everdawn had a reputation of high culture, art, and beauty it seemed that either by economic or military conquest that Everdawn was slowly colonizing the world. Bird-people generally avoided humans from Everdawn as they had a reputation

of a bigoted attitude toward non-human races. Everdawners thought of the birds as savages and less worthy than human-kind. Life in the workcamps proved this as the conditions within the workcamp did not seem to value a bird-person's life very much -- the danger and strife was acceptable.

Most humans looked down on the bird-people quite literally. The bird-people were a couple heads shorter than most humans even when standing upright. The bird-people tended to have a small hunch that allows their thick neck to extend slightly forward and focuses their eyes downward. Presumably this posture evolved from smaller birds that flew as the forward lean allowed for better hunting during flight. However, bird-people do not fly. They do have large wings that stretch from neck to knee but the wings are largely considered vestigial. The wings offer some ability to slow a descent after a jump from a small height however traditional flight is beyond their abilities.

Drom had also heard that the northern mountainous city of Bron Crok within Everdawn was originally a Crok Cha territory and that hundreds of years ago the Crok Cha were violently forced out of the territory toward the forested hills surrounding Rang Dok where the bird capital is now located. It seemed that there was a deep ongoing rift between Crok Cha and Everdawn that manifested itself in an imbalance of power and wealth between the two nations. However, for several years there has been a tenuous peace between the two nations. This peace has allowed trade to continue but has also forced many Crok Cha to look for work and opportunity far from home.

None of that history mattered at this point to Drom though. Back at his camp, he shuffled between anger and despair as placed his pickaxe and work clothes back at the quartermaster's table. Squall's action put Drom in a poor position because not only did Drom lose a big payout he also came back with nothing for the day.

During the evening's reporting, Glen Bligstef, the surly Gruebarian camp boss, called out the names. As each name was called, a weary bird-person hobbled on thin legs up to a long table placed on a small stage. After confirming their name, they would grab into their leather shoulder bag and pull out chunks of flock-rock. Each piece was then individually placed on a rusty scale and the stocky man would peer at the measurement and make a note in the logbook and grunt with acceptance if the result was satisfactory. Then the worker would turn their bag inside-out to prove they weren't stealing any additional mineral. If all was acceptable the camp boss would dole out the day's pay to the worker.

Drom glanced over at Squall. Squall was amongst a small group of young bird-persons and they were very interested in the outcome of the day's work as their wings twitched excitedly as Drom animatedly recounted a story of his find for the day.

He's telling them lies, Drom muttered to himself. "*A beak should spread songs but not stories,*" he recalled one of his grandmother's many idioms she often impressed upon Drom in their native language.

"Squall!" yelled Bligstef. "Come up to the count."

Squall broke from his cohort and as he did, Drom could see that Squall's bag was full with the seams stretch and barely holding the old leather together. Drom's eyes widened as he also saw that Squall was carrying an additional box full of mineral. This was going to be the biggest payout the camp had seen in nearly six months. This could have been enough to buy nearly three months of freedom for one of Drom's family member.

Bligstef's eyes widened too. He saw what Squall was carrying and he quickly yelled over to another camp boss to bring a bigger set of scales for the larger chunks. Squall's beak stretched upwards and outwards in what can only be described as a human-like smile as he set the flock-rock on the table. Bligstef's hand shook as he carefully weighed each chunk. After weighing them he separated certain chunks into various bags of different sizes. Each

bag represented a buyer and Drom could see faded heraldic emblems representing a particular country or fiefdom. He recognized the ones for Gruebar and Holvarn but the biggest sack that was being filled was a stamped circle with the top-half yellow and the bottom-half blue. This symbol represented the western-rising sun at dawn coming up over the ocean; a striking view that was able to be seen from nearly all parts of coastal Everdawn.

Setting the bags aside, the Gruebar boss called his guards over and silently conferred between them. One of the guards hurried into a large tent and brought out a traveler's case with a large padlock on it. He hefted it on the table and Gruebar peered over the box and looked toward the locking mechanism. Reaching into the folds of his tunic, Gruebar pulled out a large key with several indentations. Inserting the key into the lock and turning it forced a spring to pop with a clicking sound and the top of the case rose up to display the treasure inside.

Amongst those who could see the gold coinage, wings shuffled and bird-songs let out. Each bird-person looked excitedly at the treasure and some started moving forward for a better look.

"Quiet!" yelled Bligstef, casting a stern look over the crowd. "Nobody get any ideas!" Pressing his hand slightly on the top of the case, Bligstef turned to Squall and called out the payout for the day.

"Five hundred gold pieces designated for Squall Vindabursk. Additionally, a reward of and half a boar and three Holvarnian bottles of cherry wine. Respect to Squall for today's hard work." The crowd shouted out in excitement and the large bird's wings expanded in uncontrolled glee as he quickly swept up the pay.

Drom's heart shuddered upon hearing the announcement. This was much more a reward than he imagined. Drom's thoughts went immediately to his family. He envisioned his sister, Linna, toiling away over a soup cauldron in the hot cellar beneath her ruler's

home. He saw his brother, Gust, in the cold northern city of Transk attached to a cart with little clothing to stay warm. He thought of his mother...

Without even realizing it, Drom was making his way through the feathery crowd. Pushing birds left and right, he reached the table quickly and gave the scales a shove. The guards quickly grabbed the treasure case and ducked back into the tent while Bligstef pushed his chair away and stood up. Bligstef raised a finger and pointed but before the boss could say anything Drom had already put his hands around Squall's neck. Eight fingers wrapped around Squall's thin neck as the larger bird tried to fight back against the chokehold. Drom's eyes narrowed and he squeezed harder when just within his view he saw a large baton being swung toward his head.

Drom fell in a crumple, slowly losing consciousness. As the guards dragged him away, he could already hear the celebrations beginning and the sound of a cherry wine bottle being popped.

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Drom's feathers grew clumpy and wet from sweat as he stabbed the shovel into the crusty dirt. It had been four days since the counting incident and Drom had found himself again at the bottom of a pit that he had dug. Bligstef had direct Drom to build the pit as a punishment. With Bligstef's guidelines for the proximity from camp and the cylindrical shape Drom figured out quickly that the pit was not going to be for flock-rock mining. It was the new camp sewage pit.

Work-camps run by Gruebarian bosses were well-known for their sanitation techniques. The camp's were built with one central latrine. This latrine was built on top of a mound and sewage trickled down onto a wooden ramp which funneled water into a long



iron half pipe. The half pipe then terminated at the latrine pit. Occasionally a work-camper would pour a bucket of water onto the ramp and the contents would flow into the latrine. Eventually a latrine pit would fill up and someone was unlucky enough to need to build the next one.

Drom was the unlucky one this time. He realized that he was also going to be the one to reset the angle of the pipe to point it at the new latrine. More work than digging the pipe itself will be hefting it onto the rollers and pushing it to the new location.

Drom's slithery tongue was parched for water. He hefted himself up the tattered rope ladder and slung himself above the edge of the pit. He rested for a moment before pushing himself up. Wandering over to the water bucket he grabbed a ladleful of water and brought it to his beak and drank heavily as an excess of water poured down onto his chest feathers.

As the droplets evaporated Drom scanned the landscape. The hills in the distance seemed as parched as Drom had been a moment before. Twin shadows cast themselves in the lee of each hillside – a shadow each for the two suns glaring down on the rocky landscape. A strong breeze worked its way through the pinch of the hills and cascaded through the latrine fields lifting up an acrid smell which caused Drom to grimace.

A small dark object caught Drom's attention. He was afraid it was a musgar but at this distance he could only perceive a fuzzy outline. Musgars were scrawny creatures that scavenged the desert subsiding on spiders and the occasional hare. They weren't especially strong but they were agile and had a large jaw with four fangs that provided a nasty infectious bite. Drom subconsciously leaned a bit closer to his latrine shovel, readying himself to put a edge of steel onto a musgar's head.

As the figure moved forward it moved in a strange elliptical pattern. Coming into focus, a human was stumbling back and forth across the terrain. Each minor undulation

pushed the tall person in a different direction. Drom could see that the figure, which looked to be a woman, had dark long hair that had become greasy and dusty, clumped and matted. Her clothes, made of a blue and yellow leather-and-wool style common in Everdawn, were holey and tattered with some loose strips forming around the arm cuffs. However, what took Drom's breath was her gaunt face with high cheekbones forming a shelf where her eyes were sinking backward into the depths of her skull. She obviously had not been thriving while in the desert and barely even surviving. The woman stumbled and fell to the ground. She grabbed her staff and tried to hoist herself up but was only successful in getting to one knee before collapsing again. She did not attempt to rise any further.

A raspy scream reached Drom's ears. It was barely loud enough to hear but it provided enough signal to snap him out of his confusion. Drom ran forward to provide assistance but immediately stopped for a moment. Leaving camp boundary was considered a criminal act, generally punished by either lashings or removal from work. Drom shuddered at being punished again by Bligstef and while being sent home warranted a pause in his decision, Drom's kindness weighed more for him as he set off to help.

The bird-person quickly moved over the landscape. He was fatigued from the latrine work but as long two-toed feet bounded over boulders and across the rocky sagefields he found a rhythm in his pace. Soon he was upon the woman and as he neared her he flared his wings to provide a shade over her face and torso, shielding them from the hot suns. He looked for any acute injuries, finding only a small gash on her arm where it seemed a sword was swung haphazardly barely finding its target. Her face was covered with a layer of reddish-yellow dust; a mixture of desert and salt caking to her face. The only part not covered with this dust was her lips which were desiccated, cracked, and bloody.

Drom grabbed her hand and called out to the woman. "Hey! Can you hear me?"

The woman slowly opened an eye and suddenly tried to pull away.

“Hey, sorry. It’s ok! Ok. I’m here to help,” Drom said. “Who are you? What do they call you?”

“Jolden,” creaked the woman. “I’m called Jolden Rhauil.” She lifted up to try to touch Drom with her hands, seemingly trying to prove that she was not conjuring a vision in her own mind. When her hands touched feathers she pushed deeper and felt Drom’s chest and his thumping heart. Convinced that she was in actual reality she relaxed and opened her other eye.

“Water?” Jolden inquired.

Drom reached down to his pouches and grabbed the water skin. In his urgency he didn’t refill from the bucket but perhaps it was enough. He uncapped the bladder and pushed it to the woman’s lips. She drank but had difficulty swallowing and trickles of water came out of the corners of her mouth. Drom could see a rejuvenation happening while she drank. With each sputter a bit of color came back to her face. The bladder was soon empty.

“Sorry, that’s all I have,” Drom said while peering into the tube for any extra drops. “I’ll get you more from my camp.”

“Wait. It’s fine. Please stay for a moment,” Jolden said with a surprising firmness. “I’ve been in the desert for a month, first battling a sickness and then afterward surviving the heat and thirst as I was wandering. I haven’t seen anyone for so long.”

Drom put his leathery hand on her forehead at the mention of sickness. She didn’t feel hot - at least not like a fever. He wondered if he should keep a distance.

“No, it’s not like that. At least not anymore. Do you see that gash on my arm?”

Drom nodded at the slight wound.

“I had a run-in with swordsmen from the Blue Helios Guard. They ambushed me as I traveled on a mountain path. I was able to fight them and set off on a run down the

mountain but not before one of them swung a sword into my arm. Do you know what these swordsmen do to their swords before they go into battle?”

Drom hadn't even heard of the Blue Helios Guard, much less what they do with their swords. He shook his head for the answer .

“They rub their swords in bloody entrails and piles of animal dung before they march. Then if the infected sword comes in contact with an opponent and they're not slain the Guard can be assured that the opponent gets sick and dies soon after. Cowardly practice if you ask me. This sickness removed my appetite for days and forced convulsions through my body. But I'm here now. I'm here now...”

Jolden trailed off, her conversation taking too much energy she did not have to give.

Drom looked down at her. How was he going to help her? She could not be brought back to camp - there was no money to be made from her. Drom wondered what to do.

He decided he would make a makeshift gurney from spare wood pieces near the latrine pits. He reached down and put Jolden's arm over her face to protect her from the suns and stood up.

Drom turned around to start his rescue plan. He swiveled and stopped just short of a spear tip scraping his beak. At the other end of the spear was a camp guard staring greedily at Drom.

“Drom. To the camp brig with you.” Bligstef swung a cudgel at Drom's head. Drom collapsed, his eyes closing in pain once again.

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End Chapter 1