

Chapter 3

“Alright, that’s enough resting your backside. Come!” Attandallan calls out, and he hoists himself atop his juperse. The loyal thing even made a point of doing its best to crouch for his sake. It lets out an excited chitter and the pair leaps off into the distance, wheeling back around to perch on a marked boulder. I shake my head and get to minding my business.

Keeping a firm grip on Pyeckerh’s reins, I try to pull the large, bulky creature to an old fence post. Damn thing can’t even contemplate giving me an easier time mounting up. I swear there was once a time I had the strength and energy to hoist myself up all by myself and in gear. But, now, I cannot even tell if it’s a dream I’ve had or an actual memory.

Still, I best focus on doing and not thinking about it. Who knows what the slimy bastard is up to, now that he’s got a wounded ego to go with his predatory lending? I certainly do not want to be around to find out. For Pyeckerh’s sake, too...

Overcoming my lack of refined training, I start getting atop my beast. Pyeckerh lets out a snort and a back leg shoots out, breaking the fence post. Halfway up, my backend drops with a smack. I growl at the animal as it shakes its head, our eyes briefly meeting.

“Stupid thing.” I mumble, heaving myself up with strength I really don’t have. My glare breaks, forcing my expression into a mellower one. I adjust my position some more and give Pyeckerh the firm kick he needs to get going. He does nothing.

I kick again- Pyeckerh acknowledges my order by bucking away. My arms lock tight and I cling on for dear life. The ryphurgok rocks back and forth, smashing up the road with taunting laughter in its beak.

“STOP!” I roar furiously as my arms exert enough force to break a man’s neck. Pyeckerh lands on his backlegs and rises higher and higher until he’s standing. The front two punch forward and I mind my grip as we fall. Pushing myself back, I absorb the impact with a whipping head.

Pyeckerh shakes about and trots forwards as the soreness settles in. I give him an extra harsh kick and he picks up the pace, somewhat catching up with Attandallan. The athletic juperse runs about, springing to a halt beside us. I meet the smirk of its rider and sneer at him. He gives a little nod and picks up the pace.

“Come now, let’s go.” the Red-Feather commands, galloping off with the whip of reins.

“Yeah... Fine. Come on, you. Forward!” I order my beast, knocking the back of its head a bit to get the message into its exceptionally thick skull. He gets it without further issue. The bumpiness in my ride disappears, and Pyeckerh settles into his destructive rhythm. I quickly look back at the damaged road and wince at how he’s able to shatter what has his kind in mind already.

Adjusting my seat each hop up, I try to shield my crotch from the bumps. Rider’s cloth or not, they’re not made to handle hide as thick and coarse as this. Tugging the reins, I veer Pyeckerh rightward onto the earth and grass. The softer ground eases my troubles and I quickly manage what I can.

My arse hits the cloth with a poof of air and I feel empty as I do so. This feeling is back. This sense of serenity that I only ever seem to feel when Pyeckerh is hitting his strides. When my instincts are able to take over as a rider.

I lock an arm around Pyeckerh's neck and look back at the city of Unondsbur. My eyes take it in and they shift up to the great mountain it's all built around. A stone giant so much grander than anything else around it. This entire kingdom has mountains for borders and this one in the middle of these open plains is uncontested in its scale. Yet, to the confusion of everyone, no one is able to figure out the unnatural feeling we get seeing it like this.

Our very souls seem to tell us that it should be alive, and I have no idea what to make of it. I suppose I shouldn't worry too much about it, leave it to the nobles and philosopher types. A man like me has no time to contemplate the complexities of our world. Not when he's already dealing with enough perplexing thoughts as is.

Still, the further we ride out. I can never crane my head high enough to see the peak. Even lying down, I can barely catch a glimpse of it. An impossible task that only gets easier when you are further from the goal?

I mind Pyeckerh again as he twists as much as his clumsy form can. And even then, he still manages some grace in his movements. A buried boulder zooms past my vision, not a sign of impact anywhere in the air. Attandallan leaps high, the airtime slowing him down enough to realign with my slow steed.

"Just imagine, Yhrrarda, soon. Soon you'll be enjoying this grandiose sight almost intimately when you swear your oath!" he lets out, his voice full of assuring confidence. I blink and realise he is here.

"D-Dammit!" I let out, flinching as my absent-mindedness ends. My grip slips loose and I flail in the air, slapping right back into position. The man laughs heartily the whole while.

"We might need to look into getting you a proper set of gear!" he comments with inoffensive amusement as his eyes nitpick my troubled riding style further.

"Feel free to offer a name or place that does ryphurgok riding equipment!" I can't help but snap. My nervous grip shifts about and the horrible quality of my paltry gear itches my thoughts.

"Don't you have enough trouble with loans?" he chuckles and I meet his knowing gaze blankly. He waves me off, knowing full well he's crossing a line.

"I do. But, you're going to be a good loaner, aren't you?" I bitterly ask him as an image of my empty factory flashes in my head. The drips of rain and the howl of the cold winds echo in my ears. A shiver goes through me while Pyeckerh is between strides.

My grip on his reins tightens, almost giving me rope burn in the process. Even as a joke or in any other form of good-mannered intention, it makes me furious. There's simply too much humiliation, too many bad thoughts to go with it. All balanced around a centre point that I am riding right now.

I've brought myself so low to achieve the dreams my ancestors put into this animal...

My eyelids force themselves together, scrunching up my face, "What a mess."

"Yhrrarda, I know it's hard for you. I will do what I can until you start earning your keep. When you make your oath, I'm sure I can find many who will be happy to rally funds to your name. You'll ride with your brothers and in the King's name!" he affirms and I can't help but show an embarrassed smile. Yeah, yeah, maybe one day.

Delusion or not, I should do my best to stick to the warmth it can bring. Attandallan is the only one looking out for me right now. He is a treasure that lives and breathes and I owe enough to him already. Yet, I still hope for more. The pointless hope that he's said enough good words about me to warp a positive perception in the examiners.

My expression turns towards Pyeckerh and my grip tightens again, though softer compared to before. Moments like these ground me. Someone is looking out for me. While it might be out there to consider, perhaps the gods are looking out for me in a way I cannot figure. Though, I will never tell Attandallan anything like this to his face, not yet, anyway.

"So I take it that it'll be all the usual stuff?" I dread to ask, years of failures racing around my head. When we get there, the Fortress of the Sworn Brotherhood of the Red-Feathers. It will all begin again.

"The familiar trappings, yes." he answers, heading off to a distant, rare rise in the plains. He stops and I panic even with this time to stop. Forcing myself on the neck of my beast, I try to get him to get out of the motions and stop. Charge and charge, it's all he can damn well do!

Keeping my eyes tightly shut, almost knitting them together, I pray and pray...

"I'm sure he would've plowed through it effortlessly!" Attandallan laughs with a light heart as mine threatens to burst out of my chest. Opening my eyes, I sit up straight and shake at the sight of an unbroken rise. I felt all that force and I am scared to look at the mess behind me. My head flinches back ahead, my muscles daring it to take a peek that I do not want to see.

"It's not him going through it that worries me..." I let out, my skin going pale with a grim memory of being thrown off into the air. Pyeckerh struggles to understand when to stop. His mind is not like a loyal juperse, so obedient and quick on its feet. All the force in a charging ryphurgok cannot pass away without destruction. When... When I get that riding gear, I'm paying a premium for little hooks to keep me on Pyeckerh's back!

"You need to trust him more." Attandallan insists and I can't help but see a lack of understanding in his head. If this beast has hid the rise, I would've gone flying. Pyeckerh would have kept on going, and going. I *would* be red paste under his trunk-like legs!

"I'll trust... I'll trust him more. When he does more than smash what he can or peck it!" I almost shout, the tension setting into my muscles and elsewhere. Pulling myself away, I caress my right arm, nurturing it with a soft hand. I do what I can, but, with what Pyeckerh is, I can't stop the aches and cramps that come with riding him. I can merely tolerate it all.

"Well, hold on for a little while longer. We're not far from a good inn by the looks of it." Attandallan tells me, his eyes looking over my frail body.

"We have three days to reach the fortress and you want to rest now?" I question, glancing up at the Orbital-Halo's place in the sky. It's not that far from its peak, barely on the way down, even.

"You've had enough battle with animals today. And I doubt you've had a proper warm meal in a long time now," he says, the swelling from the thugs becoming almost all-consuming in my skin. Punches and grabs and hard floors, though. It all means nothing to the abrasion I get from handling this beast.

"You're in for it if you are lying..." I almost swear through grit teeth as I roll some of the ache out of my shoulder joints. Attandallan nudges his head and he rides off. Leaning ahead, I pat Pyeckerh's neck and get him going once again. But, I refuse to encourage him to speed up. No matter how fun Attandallan and his juperse make it out to be.

I withhold the words on my tongue and take some leisure in watching the pair. Envious as I might be while doing so. At some point, maybe I'll buy a juperse and ride that instead. Until then, though, I can only watch and study. Then, with a lot of prayer and patience, I might be able to apply it to my handling of Pyeckerh.

"Alright, slow him down... Now." I mutter under my breath, watching the man like I have done so many times before. None of the troubles that I have with Pyeckerh. That juperse handles so smoothly that it's practically a godsend pleasure in and of itself. Family legacy or not, I want a juperse as my mount. Not a ryphurgok, not a poorly bred farm animal...

Clumsy on the turn and unrelenting on the dangerous charge. Thick-legged with no sense of dexterity or agility. Leaping? Forget that, all a ryphurgok can do is stomp, stomp, stomp!

Pyeckerh is no rider's beast. He is no animal of war. What were my ancestors thinking? How does this question keep eluding me to this day? I want to say 'whatever' and leave it at that. But, I can't. I cannot.

My brow settles and I direct my gaze away from my animal as the road crunches under foot again. A thoughtful noise escapes me as I note how poorly kept the road is. Year by year I travel roads like these to the fortress and they keep getting worse. While Pyeckerh is most certainly responsible for a fair few potholes, he's not the only user of the roads.

I look up and away, following the trailing mess of poor maintenance all the way to its end. The Great Kingdom Gate. The landmark that separates the kingdom from the outside world. A lone fortification with nothing else behind it.

"Guess we'll be seeing it one way or the other, won't we?" I ask Pyeckerh, knowing full well that failure to become a Red-Feather means either fleeing the kingdom or dying inside of it.