

# Chapter 10: Second Meeting

My first clue about what I'd find at home was mused snow. I'd gotten used to my widened prints and the delicate press of rabbits' paws, but those two types of marks were all I'd seen in the forest.

Until today.

Frowning, I crouched beside this new trail. A crescent carved through the snowdrifts in an uninterrupted path that weaved through the trees as if lost. What on earth could have made it?

I was halfway tempted to follow the strange tracks. I'd killed my rabbit of the day, and Brighde's star had yet to reach its apex. I should use my unexpected free time to further explore the surrounding area or to discover what monsters had been travailing my patch of the woods at night, especially since I'd found neither hide nor hair of them during daylight.

The only proof I had of their existence was the, frankly, terrifying noises they made at night. I couldn't remember how many hours those noises had kept me up when I should have been sleeping.

Honestly, though, I was too tired to care about the strange tracks I'd found. I'd lost track of the weeks since Colavar, and for one day—and single one!—I'd like to relax.

And that was exactly what I meant to do. As I trudged home, I placed bets with myself about how long it would take me to prepare my meal today. For a city girl, skinning and gutting an animal had taken some getting used to, and I still wasn't great at it. Hopefully, I could finish the task early enough that natural lighting could accompany my furious scribblings for the night.

As I shook snow from my tattered clothes, I winced at seeing those scribblings scrawled on my cave's walls. I'd exhausted my supply of paper and ink ages ago, but the relentless pressure in my head hadn't dissipated just because I'd had no way to release it. I'd turned cooled cinders and stone into journal and pen, perfectly aware of how batshit crazy it made me look, but what else was I to do? Let my characters and worlds waste away in my head? Let the pressure of it drive me truly insane?

I'd finished ripping fur off of my meal when I first heard the voice. Alone for as long as I'd been, my heart skipped at the faint noise, but when it failed to repeat, I hunched over my meat again, using a sharpened stone to tear open the rabbit's guts in painfully slow increments.

This method was a vast improvement on my first ill-conceived attempts to roast rabbits whole. The animals' last meals had baked into mine, and... it hadn't been good. I'd been *quite* sick the next day. Eventually, I should make a better tool to eviscerate the hoppy, little bastards, but for now, a poorly crafted, flint blade was what I had.

Besides, if I did somehow screw up meal preparation again, I had a handful of rations left, sitting in my pack at the back of the cave.

“Brennan!”

I paused in digging my stone knife through muscle. Ok. So, what I’d heard before had been real, which meant I’d either enjoyed solitude long enough to go *mad* or someone was looking for me. Who, though? In Brighde, the only people who knew my name had seemed overtly hostile to me the last time I’d seen them, but perhaps that had changed. The voice had sounded familiar.

As I crept to the edge of the cave’s opening, sharpened stone bit into my hand, my thermal coating parting to allow it access. On scanning the forest outside, however, I found no sign of another person, so I slunk into bright daylight, flitting between the cover of the trees, leaving my ears open for-

“Brennan!”

For that. I glided over the snow with my weeks here having taught me the art of moving quietly over it. Soon, someone’s less practiced crunch teased at me, and I followed it. The sound of out-of-breath panting led me toward a protrusion of rock, jutting from the mountain.

“Where is she? I swear. After today, I’m done looking for her. Brennan!”

I knew that voice. Crouching, I scooped snow from a nearby rock, packing it into a ball as I approached the protrusion’s edge, and when I peered over it, a hissing wildcat unfurled in me.

Cropped, orange hair was peeking from under a hood, letting the mane’s color pop against its monochrome surroundings. The one to claim it had exchanged his suit-like outfit for more appropriate outerwear. A fur-lined, black jacket topped puffy pants that boasted a sheen, and black flickers shot across his exposed skin, his thermal coating at work most likely. Something was sitting behind him, but right now, I couldn’t be bothered to find out what it was.

Because the sight of him made me want to scream. As I rose to my feet, snow fell from my form, and I cocked my arm.

“Ellair!” I shouted.

He snapped his head toward me, giving his lime green eyes a split second to widen before my snowball exploded in his face. Sputtering, he wiped clinging ice crystals from his skin, but by the time he was done, I’d already started toward home, done with him.

When I heard crunching behind me, I scooped more snow off of the ground, packing it as I turned. Facing Ellair, I let it fly, and when the ball burst on his shoulder, he rocked in place.

“Go away, asshole,” I said. “I don’t want you here.”

When I strode away from Ellair, I hoped he'd get the hint, but again, snow crunched behind me, and again, I bent to create more ammunition.

"Please, don't do that!" Ellair shrilly said. "I don't know what you're doing, but I don't like it!"

Frowning, I stacked a missile in the crook of my elbow. A planet of snow and ice and they hadn't figured out how to have a snowball fight? The hell was wrong with them?

Ellair didn't need to worry, though. What I was holding wasn't for him. Yet.

He continued following me, the stubborn bastard, and when we reached my cave, I whirled on him with a snowball raised.

"If you *insist* on plaguing me with your presence, you can do it outside," I hissed. "I'm not having you drive me from another place of safety."

Lifting his hands, Ellair retreated to the tree line before folding into the snow. I kept one eye ever on him while stacking ammunition outside the cave before darting to retrieve today's meal. He hadn't moved when I returned, so I sunk to the ground too. I watched him for a while, but he just examined me with his head tilted and hands folded. Soon enough, I started gutting the rabbit again.

"Will you say it?" I asked.

"Say what?"

Clicking my tongue, I pulled intestines from meat.

"You summoned the people who cast me out of your city," I said before waiting.

Waiting.

"Don't you think you should say something about that?" I continued.

"I requested *gairm* of the Conclave," Ellair said. "It's our way of proposing policy adjustment, although it rarely works. Nothing changes in Colavar."

"Riveting," I said. "And?"

"And I made the request because the citadel's stagnation will kill us, whether now or a century in the future, and no one will open their eyes to it," Ellair said. "I hoped that showing them you, a *coigreach* acting in a civilized manner, might show the Conclave that change can be good. I failed to account for how stuck in their ways they are. As usual."

After several heartbeats, I set the gutted carcass in the snow, letting red seep into white. Standing, I hovered over my snowballs with my gaze boring into Ellair, and as usual, he avoided meeting my eyes.

"And?" I hissed.

"I don't understand," he said. "Do you... expect something from me?"

"No shit, dumbass," I growled around the fist in my throat. "Do you have any idea what my life's been like since getting banished from your 'paradise'? Do you know how many times I've almost died? Do you-?"

"STOP!"

The scream cracked through the mountains' stillness, freezing me in turn. Moaning, Ellair rocked in place with a hand to his mouth.

"Too much, too much," he raggedly gasped around it. "No, no, no!"

Rolling my eyes, I stalked into the cave to ready my firepit. If I was right, Ellair would be at that for a while, and until he calmed down, I had things to do.

When he eventually fell silent, flames were licking at a precariously arranged stack of dried wood. Grease was sizzling on burning logs when he eventually spoke again.

"I made you a gift."

Pursing my lips, I stopped turning my spitted rabbit over the flames. Outside, Ellair was standing beneath his tree with something strange resting beside him. A white sphere was balanced on the snow, rising to Ellair's knees. Pulsing, blue rings circled it, and as I watched, a panel on it popped open, dusting glitter into the air.

"What," I breathed, "is *that*?"

Leaning to the side, Ellair brushed glitter off of the sphere.

"This is a construct that I made, hoping that it could help you," he said. "His name's Ailig, although I suppose you could choose a different one if you want."

He nudged the sphere.

"Go on," he said. "That's her, the one I was telling you about."

The flash of blue in its rings quickened for a moment, and while two, opposing slices of its surface stayed stationary on the ground, the middle portion rolled its bulk toward me. When it reached me, it bumped into my leg before stopping, wildly pulsing.

"Fascinating," I said, crouching in front of it. "How smart is it? Has to be at least a pretty high-level AI, right?"

Another panel almost smacked my nose as a claw extended from the sphere toward me. After I'd blankly stared at it for a moment, it bobbed up and down, and I hesitantly took it to shake.

"What does AI mean?" Ellair asked.

"Artificial intelligence," I said.

I couldn't wait to rip into this thing. Maybe Ellair would share parts of its construction with me so I wouldn't have to break it. Either way, I wanted to see inside.

"Like a machine mind?" Ellair asked. "Ailig comes as close to Innealdeam's level as I could safely get."

His words stole my gaze from the marvel in front of me.

"And what's an Innealdeam?" I said.

Ellair's face crinkled while the corners of his lips turned down.

"Brighde's demon," he said. "The machine mind that's come closest to resembling a human and whose fight with Sgaradh shattered Sleib."

He pointed at the broken moon, looming above, and I sighed.

Yes, Ellair had pushed me out of safety, but he'd also come to find me with a gift in tow, all to make sure I was ok. I got the feeling he'd never apologize. Ailig was his way of saying he was sorry.

And that was fine. As long as he brought me mysteries to ponder, taking my mind off of my problems, I could forgive him for what he'd done. For instance, I couldn't wait to learn how a machine destroyed a moon. Maybe he'd share the story with me.

Standing, I waved to him.

"Come on in."

Ellair grinned, but before he could start toward me, a net flew from out of nowhere, pinioning him to the tree at his back. Stunned, I watched him struggle for a moment before ducking behind cover while Ailig followed like a baby duckling would its mother.

"No, no, *NO!*" Ellair roared. "TOO MUCH!"

Laughter answered his distress. Two figures ambled in front of my cave's entrance with their long hair hanging in dreadlocks and draping, ragged clothing covering them. They looked like raiders from a typical post-apocalyptic film, and with my mouth drying, I plastered myself against stone.

"Cad atá againn anseo?" one asked.

The other one shoved him.

“Éirigh as! Ba cheart dúinn do thairiscint a dhaingniú sula dtagann cabhair,” she snapped.

Why wasn't my translation charm working? It was supposed to make nonsense like what they were speaking understandable, right? So, why had I returned to fear that was only heightened by unintelligible words?

In the net, Ellair went limp, hanging in its rope.

“Brúid,” he hissed.

“Oh, ho! Tá a fhios aige dúinn!” the man says, chortling. “Is dócha gur as Colavar é, ar dheis?”

“Neamhghnách, más amhlaidh,” the woman says. “A ligean ar dul, Nuadha.”

She withdrew a pole from across her back, and as she approached him, panic turned Ellair's lime green eyes vivid.

“Bren-!” he cried.

The woman touched him with the pole's end, making a stuttering click rise alongside his scream. Diving for Ailig, I hugged the construct to keep it from racing to help, like my heart was roaring to do, but how could I help Ellair as one unarmed woman against... *them*?

Eventually, the noise stopped, and the two strangers jabbered at each other as they bound Ellair, hand and foot. The man threw the boy's unconscious form over his shoulder, and they strode over the snow with their laughter harsh on my ears.

Once it had faded, I released Ailig, and it rolled away from me, revving its midsection before careening into my shins.

“Ow!” I said, cursing. “I'm not abandoning him, stupid machine! What do you think I am? A monster?”

As Ailig's pulsing oscillated between fast paced and slow, I narrowed my eyes. That was strange. Why was it reacting to our situation and me like this? A typical artificial intelligence wouldn't be able to do that, or at least, one from home couldn't.

“We'll follow those strangers. Track them until rescuing Ellair won't get me killed,” I said. “Is that ok with you, big hunk of metal?”

Blue flashed from front to back across Ailig, and my narrowed eyes became slits. How advanced of an AI had Ellair put in this thing?

It didn't matter right now. Retrieving my pack, I slung it over one shoulder and rushed to rescue my... friend?

Yeah. Friend.

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