

Slowly, the animals emerged from hiding. The grasses in front of them had been stamped down and torn to shreds by the thrashing of the beast, and they had a clear view of the thing now. Even dead, it sent shivers down their spines. Its shimmering body was covered in deep bite marks, oozing red that ran in rivulets down its side. Then the animals caught sight of the Weezals, most stained several shades of red all over their bodies. One in particular was practically drenched in blood, a maniacal smile on its face like a demented clown. The clown looked over at the animals, adjusted a close-fitting ruddy cap on its head, and approached in a kind of exhausted swagger, exceedingly proud of itself. They were paralyzed with fear as it approached.

“Man!” it said. “That was one...heck...of a Kymid hunt!”

It was Squeack.

The animals were horrified.

“What?” Squeack challenged.

The animals looked at one another, then back at Squeack. Abert stood rigid in horror. Pinky vomited next to him. Gerbil shrugged nonchalantly, trying to act cool, though he was clearly unnerved. Little P stared open-mouthed and wide-eyed with shock, with Shelly perched on top of his head, claws held aloft and snapping in greeting. Squeack took it all as par for the course.

“Where’s Meerie?” he asked.

From somewhere near the beast, a shout was heard.

“Heh! You, there!” From the trampled grasses emerged a blood-stained Weezal wearing a cloak of some kind of animal skin that was no less bloody. He held a hunk of Kymid meat in his paws and stomped angrily toward the animals. He stood next to Squeack, more-or-less ignoring him, and brandished the meat menacingly at the others, who instinctively raised their paws (or wings) in the air. Except for Abert, who was standing ashen-faced, and Pinky, who was loudly retching nearby.

“What do you think you’re doing in our territory? Huh?” shouted the Weezal. “Who are you?” His accent sounded thickly Scottish, though it also had something of a Swedish lilt to it. Gerbil glanced back and forth between Squeack and the newcomer, paws still above his head. He couldn’t help comparing his friend to this new threatening presence waving meat at them. He was taller and wider than Squeack, arms somewhat stubby but muscled, a broad chest, legs slightly longer than those of an Earth weasel. He noticed a touch of beige peeking out from a deluge of scarlet covering his fur. The Weezal, catching sight of Gerbil’s goggling interest, followed his gaze toward Squeack and seemed to notice him for the first time. The creases of his brow knitted together.

“Wait. Who are *you*?”

Squeack turned to him and smiled diffidently. “Oh...yeah, um...I’m—”

“Hold on!” said the Weezal. “Why aren’t you wearing anything?” He surveyed him up and down with equal amounts surprise and disgust. “You’re naked!” Squeack was about to protest that he was, in fact, wearing a cap. “And what’s this?” the Weezal added, wiping a paw across Squeack’s chest, revealing a stripe of light pink underneath the deep red of the rest of his body. “And you’re white to boot!” He shouted. “You’re not from here! Who are you! Where do you come from? Lark? Kiskin? Purdu? Not Mirdua...tell me you don’t come from...”

Squeack’s smile faded as he chuckled awkwardly.

“You do...” the Weezal breathed. “Holy Modoka, you do! You bloody, Mirduan wiseacre! You uppity, shameless, piss-pot mountebank!” He shook his bloody hunk of meat in Squeack’s face. “You naked, insolent—”

“Sana-gulaba/miliba?”

The Weezal turned at the sudden interruption where he spied Fluffy and Flee sitting by the muddy pond, looking up expectantly. He freaked.

“WAA!!” he screamed and hopped back several feet. The hunk of meat dropped from his paw with a wet splotch. What the—?!” Squeack gave the

tails a tentative wave. The Weezal turned to Squeack. “You know them?!” he yelled, both shocked and somehow affronted at the same time.

“Yeah,” said Squeack cautiously. “That’s Fluffy and Flee down there. And over there with his paws in the air, that’s Gerbil. The round one next to him is Little P. The furry gray one standing there,” he gestured to the horror-stricken, petrified squirrel, “is Abert. And that one next to him—”

“HRRRKK!” Pinky retched as a fresh wave of nausea washed over her at the sight of Squeack.

“—is Pinky.” The Weezal stared at Squeack open-mouthed, completely unsure of what to do.

“We’re travelers from...very far away,” Squeack continued, trying to choose his words carefully.

“But who *are* you?” the Weezal shrieked with renewed vigor. “And what are you doing *here*...in our territory?!” The Weezal’s shouting brought the other Weezals away from the dead Kymid. They surrounded Squeack and his friends warily, tightly strung and ready to act in an instant.

“Pisk,” said one of the newcomers, a female. “Who are they?” Pisk, the Weezal who had been shouting at Squeack for the past few minutes, turned an accusing eye on her.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out, you bum-scratching ignoramus!” The newcomer folded her arms and scowled.

“Look,” said Squeack. “We’ve traveled a very long way and found ourselves here by accident. My name is Squeack. I’m from...from Mirdua.” He paused to assess the reactions of the other Weezals. Like Pisk, they didn’t seem pleased by this news. “I’ve been away from home for the past five years. I met these friends of mine during my travels,” he added, gesturing to them. “One of our friends was taken by the Guins...” That got a reaction from the crowd as they stole furtive glances from one another. “...and we’ve come to rescue him. But we need help to do it. So, we’re trying to get to Mirdua to seek their help.”

“Hah!” Pisk laughed. “Mirdua? What help do you think they’ll give you, huh? Who, there, is going to assist you in your foolhardy endeavors?”

“I’m sure the Elders would—”

“The Elders?!” Pisk shouted, throwing his paws in the air. “Hah! Let me tell you something about the Elders, you scrawny white miscreant!”

Sqeack was beginning to marvel at Pisk’s creative insults.

“For the past twenty years, we’ve been seeking their help for threats against *us*. Threats, we have strong suspicions, that are caused by the Guins. Every single one of our requests has been ignored! Every! One! We have tried every means of communication, even travelling three weeks to their city to make our case in person. They turned us away! They! Turned! Us! Away! Then they threatened to arrest us if we ever came again! That, you ruddy fool, is who the Elders are! They’re traitors to their own kind! They’ve got their heads buried so deep in the sand they’d give the bloody Oriligs a run for their money!”

“Oriligs?” Gerbil whispered to Sqeack.

“They’re like ostriches,” Sqeack explained.

“You’d be better off leaving your friend to the Guins to fend for himself,” said Pisk. “You’ll get no help from Mirdua, I can tell you that!”

Sqeack digested the news disconsolately. In truth, he knew little about the Elders of Mirdua, the four most powerful Weezals of the country of Weezalia, despite the fact that he had grown up in their presence for sixteen years. He always assumed they were wise and helpful, like his grandfather. Looking around at the faces of the Steppeland Weezals, though, he knew that Pisk was not merely stating his own opinion on the matter. They all agreed with him. They had all experienced the Elders’ ill will in some way or other. Sqeack despaired at the prospect of receiving any help at all from his home city, but he had to try. After all, there were others in Mirdua besides the Elders.

He looked over at Gerbil, whose paws were still up in the air, and noticed a shiver running through him. The chill air was closing in, and even Squeack could feel it seeping into his bones. Pinky looked wretched as Abert gradually emerged from his stupor, looking around nonplussed by the crowd of strange, blood-stained Weezals glaring at Squeack.

Squeack sighed heavily. Things were not going as he had hoped, and he realized sullenly that he hadn't given much thought to what they would do if they *did* manage to make it through the portal. Did he expect they would end up in the middle of Mirdua with the Elders fawning all over them, giving them whatever they needed to rescue Penguin? Did he think he would lay siege to the Guins with an army of Weezals at his back, returning paw-in-wing with Penguin to cheers and celebrations throughout the country?

Squeack was naïve.

He was a fool!

Even if he did manage to get help from the Elders, they would have to get to Mirdua first. And with winter approaching, as it seemed to be, that prospect was a tall order indeed. They had no clothes (as Pisk so plainly pointed out) and very little food. And they were exhausted.

He looked around at his friends again.

Where *was* Meerie?

He must be nearby, perhaps hiding in the grass, waiting to see what Squeack would do. And what *would* he do? He realized he had only one option, and he wasn't sure it would work. He turned his eyes to Pisk.

"Maybe you're right," he said at last. "Maybe the Elders won't help us after all. But not all Mirduans are like them," he insisted. "My father, Perk, is a good Weezal. He must still have some influence..." His voice trailed off for a moment as he stood pensively. "If my grandfather, Skeep, were still alive—"

"Skeep?" said Pisk, craning his head forward toward Squeack.

“Yes,” said Squeack, a little unnerved. The crowd exchanged glances and whispered his grandfather’s name, as if it were some magic word.

“You’re Skeep’s grandson?” Pisk pressed, receiving a nod from Squeack. Pisk tugged at his bloody chin with his even bloodier paw and narrowed his eyes in thought. Squeack thought he saw an opening and decided to risk playing his next card.

“Look,” he said. “We need to try to get to Mirdua in any case, but we can’t do that without some help. With winter coming, we won’t make it. You know this. Could we please, perhaps, stay with you for a bit?” That earned a wary eye from Pisk, but Squeack pushed on. “We need clothes... obviously...food, a place to stay. We could help you—”

“Oh, reallyyyy?” mocked Pisk. “And how, pray, do you intend to help us, you and your ragtag bunch of puking fluffwads?” At that moment, Squeack was very glad that Greg was still switched off. Pinky, for her part, sick as she was, took offense at Pisk’s insult, though it was rather on-the-nose. Gerbil, his arms shaking from holding them in the air for so long, was no less chagrined at being called a ‘fluffwad.’ Little P was still staring at Squeack in awe, and Abert stood patiently gawking. There was a sense, though, that the animals were waiting for Squeack to regain their honor in some small measure. So, he took the plunge.

“Well...” began Squeack, looking around at his friends in their various ridiculous poses. “...we could help with your preparations for winter.”

“Already done!” said Pisk. “What? You think we’re a bunch of lazy, mindless idiots?! Next!”

“We could help you gut the Kymid,” Squeack offered. Pinky looked suddenly nauseous again and doubled over as a fresh wave of vomiting poured forth. “Or not...” he conceded. Pisk just smiled. Squeack was sure Pisk was enjoying this far too much, and he was getting tired of it. He thought for a few precious seconds while the crowd milled about impatiently. Finally, he had it.

“Ha!” he announced, holding a finger in the air. “You said yourself you’ve been dealing with threats here, right? What if we were to handle these threats for you?”

“YOU!?” Pisk laughed. “Hah! Now *that* is awfully rich!” He looked around at the crowd with arms wide, trying to draw them into his little sideshow. No one moved. He continued undeterred, hoping they would all come around eventually. “You think that some scrawny Mirduan Seer’s grandson and his mutant cronies are going to *handle*...” Here he added air quotes. “...the threats against us? Hah! Do you even know what they are?! These threats of ours!?”

Squeack obviously had no idea what the threats were, but he remained silent, and he set his jaw defiantly. He refused to be drawn into Pisk’s public shaming, and he was pleased to see that he seemed to be earning a bit of respect from the crowd. Pisk noticed it, too.

“Naw!” said Pisk dismissively. “You’d all turn tail and run to save your skins! And even if you didn’t, you’d surely perish in your attempt to, as you say, *handle* our threats.” Again with the air quotes. “And even if you could, by the grace of Modoka, somehow *handle* these threats, do you expect us to give you anything you want in return!?”

“Now wait,” Squeack began, “that’s not what I—”

“You expect us to give you the clothes off our backs just to keep you warm and cozy at night. I suppose you want us to steal food out of our own children’s mouths, so you won’t go the tiniest bit hungry...”

“Now hold on a—” Squeack’s protest was interrupted by a reassuring paw on his shoulder. He turned to see one of the Weezals in the crowd, the one who had spoken to Pisk earlier, leaning toward his ear.

“Just wait for it,” she whispered. He wondered what she meant as he turned back to Pisk, who had renewed his taunting with gusto.

“I suppose you want us to give you a nice, comfy ride on our Lapins back to our camp, while the rest of us trudge through the freezing mud.

Oh, la-di-da! Look at me! I'm riding on a Lapin!" Pisk had resorted to some rather absurd theatrics as he stomped around, trying in vain to work up the crowd. They all continued to watch passively, as if just waiting for it to end.

"You think we're just brimming with food and furs to spare for every half-wit fool who ends up in the steppes? Huh? You think we've got plenty of space in our tiny yurts to accommodate your foul bodies, including that porcine, slack-jawed, feathery orb of yours?" Pisk added, pointing to Little P. "We work...and we slave...every single day of our lives, our very souls bled dry by the endeavor to just stay alive and provide nothing but the dimmest of futures for our little ones, who pine for the day when they don't have to live hand-to-mouth, praying for just a little nourishment so they don't succumb to plague. And what do you do? 'Oh, give us clothes! Give us food! Give us a warm place to snuggle down at night and listen to bedtime stories!' Hah! And all because you think you can *handle* the threats from the Guinish hordes, despite the fact that you have no idea how deadly they are, how long they've tormented us and kept us in fear, even as we beg for mercy from the great power of Modoka, who lends us naught but a deaf ear!"

The taunting diatribe went on for what seemed like another five minutes, in which time Squeack thought that their chances of receiving any help from Pisk were nothing but a false hope. Until...

"You know what? Fine! Come with us! Eat our food! Sleep in our beds! Wear our clothes! Do what you want! GAAAAA!!" Pisk threw his bloody paws in the air and stormed off back to the dead body of the Kymid, its shimmering skin still alive with birds desperately flapping their wings, trying to get their beaks out. After considerable effort, a few managed to get free.

"What...what just happened?" said Squeack in a daze.



“He does this all the time,” the girl Weezal explained, staring in Pisk’s direction. “He’s been our tribal chief for almost three decades, you see, and he likes to look tough once in a while, just to keep up appearances. It does get rather tiresome, though.” She turned to Squeack. “I’m Veska,” she said, extending her paw. Squeack took it in his own. It was firm but soft. He felt a sudden flush in his cheeks.

“Hi,” he said, still a bit dazed. Veska smiled.

“Come,” she said. “Let’s get you and your friends some clothes to wear. Before that, though, would you mind helping us gut the Kymid?”