

HERDER

Taeiche pulled a stick from his belt, attached to it was a long piece of string which, when whirled around his head emanated a low, moaning sound that was immediately responded to by one of the giant herbivores in his care. Taeiche kicked his mount, a memchuni, forward. He steered the beast into a large pool of water and pulled his legs up to squat on its back as he did. As it reached the far shore the cool water lapped over the beast's back wetting Taeiche's bare, black furred feet. He looked back over his shoulder and was satisfied to see his charges following.

The memchuni climbed out of the pool. It moved with its wide, flat head almost brushing the ground in symmetry with its long tail. Between head and tail its back arched high off the ground and Taeiche sat at the apex over its powerful hind limbs. Its forelimbs were much smaller and ended in rudimentary hands used more for catching fish and tearing vegetation from trees than for propulsion. Stood on the ground, Taeiche was a head shorter than his memchuni's arched back and sat upon it he was still a head shorter than the members of the herd now crossing the pool. These great quadrupeds, neyomeks, had tree like legs that supported their barrel bodies. Two sets of large horns protruded from either side of the head and their thick, horned tails made them tough prey for any predator. Taeiche affably slapped the side of the first beast as it passed by, water streaming off its flanks, and received a toss of the head in reply.

Taeiche acknowledged each of the neyomeks in turn as they passed him. He was rewarded with a nod or a shake of the head. The thick smell of their bodies and sweat was comforting. He was where he belonged and was happy as a result.

The heavens opened and only moments after the first, large drops of rain struck it quickly became a downpour. Taeiche didn't care. He squatted on the memchuni's back with his cloak pulled over his shoulders, his wide brimmed hat channelling the rain away. He surveyed his herd as the drumming on his hat drowned out all sound, content to just sit where he was and wait until the rains had ceased.

The giant, maned head emerged from the trees with its long tusks curving downwards from its jaw. A second set, just behind the first, angled slightly to the sides. Taeiche froze. Adrenaline fuelled his body and his heart thudded in his chest as he stared deep into the dark, powerful eyes that focused directly on him. For a moment Taeiche wondered at the legend that had suddenly appeared before him. The great carnivore, three-quarters the size of the neyomeks, was the forest goddess' own hunter: Wyeneth's laeoché. No-one for generations had seen one and the species was believed to be extinct, yet here it was: rippling muscle, forearm length claws, tusks, mane and all.

The laeoche stepped from out of the tree line and amazingly Taeiche's herd didn't stir. They had frozen like painted statues, probably from sheer terror. Taeiche's bewilderment vanished as the reality of his predicament hit hard. The worst thing to do would be to run, that would only delay the inevitable and probably buy just a few short moments anyway, so he stayed where he was. He had no intention of making it easy for the laeoche though, he'd go down fighting. Taeiche slid a shaking hand under his cloak and grasped the head of his axe.

The laeoche took a step closer. Its eyes never left Taeiche as it approached and Taeiche himself would not break eye contact; that would show weakness and was a blatant invitation to attack. Slowly, Taeiche drew the axe out of the loop on his belt and altered his grip to the shaft. His timing would have to be perfect. When the laeoche made its attack he planned to leap backwards from his memchuni and whip the axe underhand into the laeoche's eye. With some luck the laeoche would strike his memchuni and give him a few precious seconds.

Every nerve was on alert and a strange clarity came over Taeiche. If death was coming for him then so be it, he was not afraid of dying and it certainly seemed inevitable. However, if he was killed out here in the wild his soul wouldn't receive the necessary rites and passage to a new life and he could end up in the ranks of the walking dead to exist an eternity enslaved by the evil one, Luaghet. It was every herder's nightmare and if anything gave him pause that was it, it scared him more than anything but endowed him with nerve enough to attempt overcoming the massive predator now stood in front of him.

Then, a curious thing happened, the laeoche lay down and cocked its huge head to one side. Taeiche was taken aback and even more so because he could see curiosity in the creature's eyes.

"Are you going to fight me, Taeiche?" it asked. The low voice was a reverberating growl so deep and penetrating Taeiche could feel it in his bones.

Taeiche was stunned into silence. The laeoche chuckled: although surprisingly jovial it rumbled like a charging herd.

"We can fight if you want to, but I would rather not kill you," the laeoche said.

Taeiche opened his mouth but just couldn't find his voice.

"But it's your choice. Do you want to fight?"

The laeoche waited and eventually Taeiche recovered enough of his wits to respond. "If we don't have to fight then I'd rather not." He still kept a

firm grip on his axe and was prepared to throw it should the laeoche show any sign of aggression.

"Good. Wyeneth would be very disappointed if I brought you to her dead!" the laeoche said as it slowly got up and turned around. Taeiche didn't move. The laeoche paused and called back over its massive shoulder. "Well, are you coming?"