

“Rendezvous Point”

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I finished eating every last bit of my fungus food from the hollowed-out place in the ice where the humans put it, but I was still hungry. As I straightened up, I looked around.

My herdmates were all more or less finishing up their own piles of food. I lashed my tail and sauntered over to the youngest member of the herd. She was small and weak, and I could usually get some extra food from her.

I flared all four of my nostrils and tossed my head to show her my horns as I approached. She flattened her ears and gurgled at me, but she quickly retreated when I curled back my upper lip in preparation for spitting into her eyes. I now had unobstructed access to what was left of her fungus food, and I quickly began eating it.

No sooner had I done so than a human started yelling from outside the ice cave enclosure where they kept us. He opened the door, came inside the enclosure and then immediately closed the door behind him. He wove between the other tauntauns and walked right up to me, angrily yelled again, then grabbed the headstall straps they always left on me and yanked my head back away from the food.

The action surprised me and hurt. I shook my head, but he held on, so I went a different route. I squealed in anger and began to curl my lip back.

The human let go of my headstall, immediately smacked me hard on the nose with his hand, and yelled my name, Buckles, and the word “no”. I jerked back and contemplated turning around and hitting the human with my tail instead, but the human advanced another couple of steps toward me, and I backed up. I had thought the humans would be pleased with my actions; after all, I was proving myself to be a strong member of the herd by getting the extra food. The other tauntauns didn’t protect the younger one. If the younger one didn’t learn to fight and protect what was hers, then she was a weak, inferior member who would not survive long and who could also endanger the herd. So why was this stupid human standing between us and protecting the younger one while she timidly went back to eating her food?

I blew through my nostrils and twitched my tail in warning. The human took another step toward me, and I backed up so he couldn’t hit me again. When the younger tauntaun was finished eating, the human left the enclosure. Good riddance.

I growled low in my throat and began to pace restlessly. My herdmates were agitated on some level as well, and it wasn’t just because of my little interaction with the youngest. Something wasn’t right: we could all smell it from the humans. It didn’t help that recently two of our herdmates had gone missing. One had been taken outside by the humans during the daytime, and the other had been ridden out just before night had fallen that same day. Neither had come back since.

Around that time was when the tension level from the humans began to get very high, higher than normal, and today was the most tense I had ever seen them. I could hear them

running around outside of the enclosure and speaking to each other a lot, sometimes fearfully, sometimes angrily. There were lots of strange noises today, too; another rumble sounded from somewhere, and the ground vibrated almost imperceptibly. I flattened my ears and struck my tail against the enclosure's walls of ice while I did more laps.

A while later, the door to the enclosure opened. A herd of anxious humans came in, and most were carrying saddles and headgear. They began going to all of my herdmates to put the equipment on, and I saw one pair of humans walking toward me. I tossed my head, thrashed my tail and moved away, not at all interested in being ridden then.

The two humans knew all my tricks, though, and soon they had the bit in my mouth and strapped to the headgear already on me. I futilely tried to spit out the cold, hard metal bit. They held onto the reins tightly so I couldn't back away, and they began to put the saddle on me. They were doing this in a hurry: they were definitely afraid of something. That just provoked me even more.

Before long they had the heavy saddle resting on my back, and I immediately kicked at them and danced away before they could tighten it around my stomach. They scolded me like the humans always do at this time. They never learn. Eventually they pulled on the reins and backed me against the wall so I couldn't move, but I still tried to kick at them when they fastened the straps and tightened the buckles. The humans again slapped me and yelled at me, but I continued to squirm and fight back until the saddle's girth was tightened. It pinched my skin and damaged my fur. I squealed to announce my displeasure.

All of my herdmates were saddled now and were being led out of the enclosure to the big cave where the humans' big moving metal boxes lived. One of the humans led me there as well and handed the reins to another human. This human smelled familiar: I think he had ridden me before. He quickly mounted and then nudged me forward with his heels while directing me with the reins out of the humans' large cave and into the open air and bright sunshine. It was just in time because I had been about to kick at one of the small moving metal things that made painful sounds.

It felt so good to be out of that enclosure! I picked up my speed, enjoying being able to stretch my legs as I ran along on the soft padding of snow. Most of the time the humans pulled back on my mouth when I did that, but this time the human didn't. He actually encouraged me to go faster, which I was only too happy to do. Around me, I could see my herdmates being ridden in different directions before they disappeared against the backdrop of white snow and ice. I felt uneasy at being isolated from my herd, but at the same time it felt too good to be outside for me to pay much attention to my unease.

The human urged me on, away from the humans' large cave. This human sat and balanced in such a way that it was easier for me to run, and so I did. It hurt when some of the other humans rode me and bounced around on my back. Anxiety rolled off my rider so thickly that I could smell it, and this made me pick up my pace. I gurgled in my throat, not enjoying the fear he was projecting. He was sensing danger. I began listening for threatening sounds and trying to catch warning scents being carried on the cold air.

I gradually began to tire, but the human wanted me to keep going forward quickly. I tried, more out of fear of whatever was bothering him so much than anything else. Finally he pulled me to a stop, and I struggled to catch my breath. I could feel him shifting his weight around on my back.

It wasn't too much longer before I heard it and felt it through the still air: high-pitched

whines accompanied by a small trembling on the ground. It felt like a large herd of tauntaun was running nearby, but there wasn't. And besides, no tauntaun ever made that type of sound. I raised my head and snuffed the air while pricking my ears, straining to hear better. When I finally got a fix on the approximate direction I focused all my attention that way but couldn't see anything. The snow muffled some of the sounds, which made it harder for me.

My rider noticed my actions. He suddenly got much more tense, but he tried to hide it by stroking my fur and speaking my name and other words to me in a gentle voice. I tossed my head in irritation, wanting him to be quiet so I could listen better. He also spoke some other words more loudly. None of those were my name or the word "no", so I ignored them.

After a minute he urged me forward again and directed me toward the low foothills. I wasn't happy to see that we were going generally toward the strange sounds. The human kept pressing me to go faster, but we'd run a long way and I was getting tired. Once or twice he pulled me to a stop, dismounted, and let me rest for a few moments while he listened to the sounds that were getting louder. Then he would talk to his arm. Sometimes his arm spoke back. Then he would climb on my back again, and we'd continue.

Before too much longer he directed me out of the low hills. I could easily feel the trembling through the frozen ground now. The sounds were much louder too, and I didn't want to go toward them, but he kicked me until I obeyed.

We came out of the hills and onto a large flat plain of snow. When we did, I finally got a good look at the cause of the noise and the shaking ground. They looked like wampas walking on all fours, but much, much, *much* bigger.

That terrified me. A spike of panic shot through my rider as well when they appeared before us. That terrified me even more.

I squealed in fear and spun around to run away. The human almost lost his balance, but he grabbed onto me and managed to stay on my back. In that same instant he yanked on the reins to get me to stop and pulled my head to the side to make me circle around and face the Huge, Terrible Super Wampas. I didn't want to. I was scared. I fought him and kept trying to circle and run away, but I couldn't run with him constantly pulling my head to the side and back like that.

I squealed again in protest. These things were going to kill us! Couldn't he see that?! He had to know that—I could feel the pure fear coming from him. Where were my herdmates?!

He spoke my name sharply, yanked back on my mouth, and then released my mouth and kicked me forward when I ended up facing the way he wanted me to face. He also took the end of the reins and snapped them on my hindquarters.

Startled, I jumped forward, away from the piercing sting, and sprinted a few steps before I realized what I was doing. When I did, I snorted and screamed, and then I stopped and twisted around as suddenly as I could.

The human couldn't hold on that time. The weight was suddenly gone from my back, and my rider fell into the snow at my feet with a yell. I took off running as fast as I could, away from the Super Wampas.

It was so much easier to run without having to carry that heavy human. I stayed on the flat ground to get as much distance as possible between them and me.

I ran until I was winded and sucking in frigid air through all four nostrils, and then I ran some more. I had to run. Away from the terrors. Away from the killers. No human would ever be able to make me get close to one of those things.

I saw the large metal birds the humans ride fly quickly through the air from their cave

toward the Super Wampas. They began to spit bright, loud saliva at the Super Wampas. The Super Wampas spit bright, loud saliva back at the metal birds. Some of the birds were blinded and fell to the ground, hitting the snow with a loud noise and black breath.

I could see some humans now near their large cave. They started spitting at the Super Wampas in the same way. The Super Wampas spit back at them.

Painfully loud noises filled the air as they spit at each other. The Super Wampas continued walking, shaking the ground with each step, toward the humans and their cave. The large metal birds swarmed them.

They could fight all they wanted, but the Super Wampas were bringing death. Regular wampas were fierce enough killers. Nothing would be able to survive against those Super Wampas. The humans and metal birds should run if they wanted to survive.

I did just that. Gasping for breath, I veered into the low hills. It was harder to run there but easier to hide. Hide from the loud sounds. Hide from the killers.

Before long I stumbled to a walk. As much as I wanted to keep running, my body just couldn't do it. I wanted my herdmates for protection from the Super Wampas. I hated being isolated; it was the sure way to be killed by either type of wampa. I tried to keep moving but couldn't, so I burrowed under the snow to hide.

Eventually the loud noises coming from the humans and Super Wampas in the distance began to quiet, and then they ceased altogether. Maybe it was safe now. I kept an uneasy ear open for predators of any size, but I detected nothing nearby. I wanted my herdmates, and I wondered if they were back at the humans' cave.

I cautiously began walking back there. I had my wind back and was ready to flee at the first odd smell or threatening sound my heightened senses detected. I wound around hills, scavenging for fungus and drinking melted snow every so often. Sometimes I used the claws on my hind legs to try to scratch the saddle off of me, but it stayed on. I growled at it, and then rolled on my back to kill it. It still stayed on, and now it had slipped onto my side. In aggravation I started chewing on whatever I could reach on it. I couldn't quite reach it with the tips of my horns.

I grew nervous as I got within sight of the humans' cave. I smelled death everywhere. The snow was stained with blood. The Super Wampas had ravaged the humans, though thankfully the monsters were nowhere in sight. They must have gone back to their own caves with their prey. I saw some large metal boxes near the humans' cave that hadn't been there before, but none were towering high up in the sky like the Super Wampas had been.

I was getting closer to the humans' cave when I smelled something else. Luckily it wasn't threatening: it was just human smell. I wandered that direction. I hadn't found any of my herdmates yet, but maybe this human would take me to them.

The human was lying in the snow with blood all around. I paused and then stepped closer to the Super Wampa's victim. The human wasn't moving much, so I put my head down near him to smell him more closely. He didn't smell familiar. I sensed pain and fear coming from him.

He opened his ice-encrusted eyelids and looked at me, and his breath was barely visible. Then he struggled to move his arm. When he did, he grabbed onto one of the reins dangling half over my head. I immediately shied back, but he had hooked the rein on the inside of his elbow, and I couldn't pull my head away. Finally to ease the tension on the rein and the strain on my neck, I stepped toward him.

With difficulty, the human pulled his other arm out from under him and used it to grab

one of the stirrups on the sideways saddle when it came within his reach. He pulled at it. I hoped it would come off, but it didn't. He pulled at it some more. Nothing happened.

It soon became apparent that this human wouldn't be taking me to my herdmates. He was injured badly and nearly frozen. He also wasn't letting go of me, so I lay down. Anything to stop him from pulling on my head and the saddle.

I didn't expect him to do what he did next. The human used his hold on the stirrup to pull himself through the snow until he was right up against me, then he flailed around a bit and somehow clambered onto my back as I lay there. Startled, I got to my feet, and the human hung on tightly around my neck and clumsily flopped around on my back. He spoke, but he didn't say my name or the word "no".

I didn't like this. What was this human doing, flopping around on my back like this? It was clumsy and awkward and didn't feel right at all to me. I stepped backwards, and he held on. He kept speaking. I didn't know what to do. He wasn't giving me any leg or rein commands. Finally I decided that the human would want to go back to his human cave. Maybe my herdmates were there too. I resumed my walk toward it, though more slowly now.

On the way, the human managed to sit up on my back a little better, and that made it easier for me to walk. I wish he had taken the sideways saddle off of me. He was still holding on tightly around my neck, and he was still afraid. I sensed no wampas nearby.

At last I got us back to the entrance I knew went to the humans' cave. I saw more humans inside, though they smelled a lot different and very unfamiliar. But they were humans.

I didn't expect the fear that bolted through my rider, and I didn't expect the other humans to yell angrily at us. My rider tried to yank my head around in a panic, and then the angry humans began to spit loud, bright saliva at us.

I squealed in fear and began to run away. Somehow my rider stayed on. It seemed like my rider spit back at the angry humans, but then I felt a quick flash of heat near my back and my rider yelled in pain. His grip around my neck lessened.

I was running to the nearby hills, away from all the humans. I should have been well out of spitting distance, but then I felt a searing pain on one of my legs. I squealed and stumbled through the snow. Only fear kept me on my feet, though I couldn't run anymore. I slowed and began limping as fast as I could.

I was finally out of sight of the humans' cave and winding through some hills. I had managed to get some distance when the pain in my leg worsened and made me stumble again. When I did, my rider fell off my back into the snow. He lay there, groaning.

I kept trying to walk forward, but my leg hurt. It was bleeding. I stopped and blew heavily through all four nostrils, trying to catch my breath. I was hurt. I was scared. I wanted my herdmates. As if all that wasn't enough, the sun would be going down soon, and I was afraid of being alone against predators when I had to hibernate overnight.

I looked back at my last rider lying in the snow a short distance away. I wanted to run and get far away from all humans forever, but there were no other living creatures in sight, only dead bodies on the flat, snowy plain far back where I'd first found this human.

I had no options. He wasn't a true herdmate, and he was injured and extremely weak and therefore a liability to my own survival, but he would have to do for now. I couldn't be alone. Besides, he didn't have his herd either.

I slowly limped back and lay down next to him, then I made a little nest in the snow to help protect against the cold wind that was picking up. It would have been a better nest if he

hadn't been in the way. The sideways saddle made it uncomfortable, but I curled up while favoring my hurt leg and prepared to hibernate that night like always to survive the cold.

The human watched me with bloodshot eyes. Red blood was flowing from a new wound on his body. He smelled of approaching death now, and I flattened my ears against the sensation. With difficulty he grabbed the stirrup again to pull himself through the snow to me. At first he tried to clamber onto my back again, but humans don't function well in the cold, and he couldn't make his arms and legs work well enough to keep his balance and stay on. After several attempts, all of which ended with him falling back in the snow, he stopped trying. He was making some odd hiccuping noises as he awkwardly pulled himself back beside me.

The human somehow managed to pull something off the back of the saddle, and then he unfolded it and covered himself with the thin square of hide as he moved against me as much as he could. I welcomed the little bit of additional body heat he provided.

I watched the human for a while as the sky darkened and the air grew colder. He kept trying to press closer to me for warmth, and he buried his face in my fur, something no human had ever done. The smell of death was more intense now, as was his fear and pain. He talked. A lot. The words were quiet, but none of them were my name or the word "no". He kept stroking a small area of my fur.

It was the nicest a human had ever been to me.

I closed my eyes and coaxed my body into hibernation for the night.

When the rising temperatures of the next morning pulled me from my hibernation, my human herdmate was dead.

I shook off the snow that had blown over us during the night, then I snuffed at the human, but there was no doubt. I flattened my ears against the smell of death there beside me, and then I disentangled my limbs and tail from the human and stood up. I couldn't understand why humans don't hibernate like tauntauns do to survive the cold.

I shook the snow off more thoroughly before I looked around, raising my partial eyelid to help me see better against the glare of the sun off the snow. My leg still hurt. I still couldn't see any other living thing, and the loneliness was a frightening, almost painful sensation. For the first time I wanted that last human's living presence again. I would have even welcomed the company of that worthless young tauntaun at this point. I inhaled the cold air and let out a loud call, but all that replied was my own voice echoing off the hillsides and the ice. I thrashed my tail uneasily. I couldn't stay alone; I had to find some herdmates to survive. Any herdmates. Strong, weak, anything.

I wished that human had been able to take me to my old herdmates.

In the distance was a mountain ridge I knew. That was where I had lived with my herd before the humans came.

That place was familiar, and it did not smell of death. After one more failed attempt to claw and chew the saddle off, I started limping toward the mountain ridge. Maybe my old herdmates had fled from the Super Wampa death and had gone back there. Maybe there was a new herd there I could join. I had to try, quickly. A herd meant warmth. A herd meant protection. A herd meant life.

And maybe one of them would be able to chew this horrid saddle off of me.

The End

Revision A
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