

XVI. The Visitors

By morning the storm had passed, and Foaeru emerged from their shelter to relieve himself and salvage what he could from the remains of the village. There wouldn't be much, he'd seen that clearly the day before. But perhaps they'd missed some of the roots, or the stores he kept in jugs outside the house, or his store of peat bricks. Whatever he found wouldn't be enough to last them long, but it might be of some help.

He had just begun to poke through the ruins when he suddenly stopped. Something wasn't right. He scanned around, searching the blackened heaps of rocks and the cliff that led to the ocean beyond, but nothing seemed amiss. But still, there was *something*...

His hand strayed down to his belt.

The pouch. It was gone.

A spike of panic surged through him, imagining what might happen if one of the girls looked through it and saw some of what he had seen. He turned and ran.

They were still where he had left them. Kreli was propped up beside the cave entrance, watching Jalforn play with her daughter atop the laid-out fleece, and Gilyaln was laying on her belly atop the whorled rock, her hands cupped in front of her...

"Gilyaln!" he shouted.

She looked up, startled.

"What are you doing?"

Her eyes flashed to the object cradled in her hands. "I was just looking," she answered, flushing. "I just wanted to see." She sat up, her look a mix of embarrassment and defiance. "It's not working anyway."

"You don't... Wait, what?"

"You didn't say we couldn't, and I wanted to see. But there's nothing there, just the eye."

He stared at her, not understanding. Every time he'd looked, *every* time... He turned to it, just to be sure...

Blink.

The yellow-white beach, but this time the great head was whole and bedecked with flowers. A man stood before it, wearing nothing but leaf fronds and petals, his hands reaching out in some sort of dance—

He ripped his gaze away, feeling slightly dazed as he turned back toward the girl.

“What is it?” she asked.

But he said nothing as he sank to the rock beside her, stunned.

“Did it work for you?”

He nodded slowly, both relieved and disturbed.

“Am I in trouble?”

“No,” he answered. “I’m sorry. It’s just... some of the things I’ve seen, they scare me. I don’t want you to be scared too.”

She nodded.

“Do you want to help me search?”

“Sure,” she replied brightly, taking his hand as they walked back to the ruins.

With a break for a meager midday meal consisting of the remainder of what they’d brought from Tlongow, he and Gilyaln worked well into the afternoon. By then, he was sure they had scoured every nook and cranny of the wreckage. He was impressed by their haul, a much larger pile than he could have hoped for. The invaders had been vindictive, but not thorough, and much had survived. There was enough sealskin and other material to build a temporary tent large enough for all of them, which he constructed in a nook on the island protected from the wind by a low rise, a place where he had often gone in his youth to find solitude when the community life became too much for him. More blessedly, they had not disturbed the peat store, and soon he had a fire going while he worked on the tent. There was food too, though not much of that. Some of the roots, though singed, had survived enough to be partly edible, and he even found two full jars of barley meal. That would last them a few days, at least, before they had to rely solely on what they could catch or gather. Fish would be best, of course, but he knew his catches were unreliable. Tomorrow, he would send the girls to start gathering seaweed, since it

would need some days to be cleaned and dried before it became palatable. And then he would have to start building a more permanent structure to keep out the encroaching cold. He was starting to believe that they would make it, at least until spring. Or most of them.

Krealinah's condition was worse. He didn't say anything to her about it or mention it to the girls, but it was clear that the poison was spreading. She lay by the fire now, but she still shivered uncontrollably despite the heat that radiated from her, and the red blotches had spread. She slept fitfully and intermittently, but even when awake she was barely there most of the time. They had been able to coax her into drinking some, but she showed no interest in eating. Unless things turned around soon...

But he had no hope that they would. At least he was able to spend these last days with her, at her side, giving her what comfort he could. And when the time came, he would bury her beside her father, in the field marked by low stones on the west side of the island. There at least she would be with family who loved her, and the setting sun could warm the ground where she lay.

He woke early the next day, well before the others, disentangling himself quietly from Gilyaln, who had snuggled against him for warmth over the course of the night, and checked on Kreli. She was paler now and her breath shallower, but she still held on to life. A quick hand to her brow told him the fever hadn't passed, but was less intense. He wanted to believe that it was a positive sign, but he was all too aware that the body often stopped fighting when the end was near.

He would stay by her today, do what he could to make her comfortable, give himself to her for the time she had left. What else could he do?

A wave of grief washed over him, threatening to crush him, and he collapsed into helpless sobs. How could this have happened, after he had worked so hard to save her? Why? But the stories of his ancestors about the gods and spirits that shaped the world held no answers, only that fate was both cruel and kind, and that it moved where it would with little regard for those caught in its eddies.

It was several moments before he regained enough control to slip out and tend the fire. As he left, he noticed Jalforn, still laying on her side but watching him. He was grateful for her silence.

“Croak!”

Despite himself, he found that he was grinning. The bird had returned. He hadn't seen it since early yesterday morning. At first, he'd assumed it had gone off in search of food, but when it didn't return by nightfall, he'd been forced to conclude that it had left entirely. His sadness had surprised him. It was a mere beast, after all, but he'd come to value its companionship all the same. And he'd lost so much already.

Kreli smiled weakly as it settled onto the ground, and that gladdened him even more than the bird's sudden reappearance. Though she refused to complain, the constant strain on her face and increased difficulty paying heed to things around her made it clear that she was enduring terrible pain. If the animal could divert her even for a moment, that was a great blessing.

He called out a quick greeting, then resumed his task.

He was helping Kreli bathe. It wasn't easy, since she couldn't stand or even sit upright without support for long, but she'd been unable to control her bladder during the night and had pleaded with him for help. At least the sun was warm and the breeze minimal, and she had the sheepskin to wrap herself in once he finished wetting and drying her. Her clothes, washed and wrung, now lay stretched on the rocks to dry.

He was working on her chest and shoulders now, having completed her legs and lower extremities, noticing with concern the bruises and welts mixed among the red blotches covering her side. Voluoni had beat her again since he'd seen her last. He wondered what for. Not him, he was sure. Had Voluoni learned about that, Kreli would have been unlikely to remain alive. The law allowed a husband to kill a wife caught in adultery without penalty, though of course his own wanderings brought little to legal no consequence.

He swabbed the wet cloth under her arm and around her breast, and she winced as the water dripped onto an ugly, yellowed wound across her ribs. Quickly, he swooped in with the drying cloth, dabbing

away the moisture before moving on, trying to catch it before it dampened the cloth wrapped around her belly, now dark with dried blood. He'd have to tackle that soon, and the prospect worried him, frightened as he was that he might reopen the wound when he removed it—and of what he might see when he revealed what was beneath.

The bird croaked softly, tilting its head as it peered at them.

"I'm taking a bath," Kreli said softly, as if the creature had asked the question. "You know what that is, right? I've seen birds take them too, in puddles sometimes..."

The bird gave a low, cooing noise and shuffled its feathers.

Kreli laughed, then gasped and doubled over, clutching at her side.

"Kreli!" Foanru cried in alarm.

She wheezed painfully, her eyes clamped shut, before she finally found her voice. "Can't laugh..." she muttered, shivering visibly. He threw the sheepskin over her shoulders, and she held it to herself gratefully.

The bird cocked its head, looking at her imploringly.

"It's not your fault," he said to it, feeling instantly silly a moment after for apologizing to the bird. "How is it?" he asked Kreli.

"Just pain," she answered. "Mostly better now..."

He sighed wretchedly.

Suddenly, the bird lifted its head and took off, launching itself into the sky.

"What...?"

"Foanru!"

The cry was distant, barely audible above the rustling of the grass in the wind, but even so, the urgency in Gilyaln's voice was unmistakable.

He turned to Kreli, making sure she was covered by the blanket before helping her onto her back. "Gilyaln's calling..."

Kreli nodded weakly, her eyes fluttering open for a moment before shutting again.

He stood and tore up the rise.

"Foanru!"

There, from the direction of the beach. He followed the voice with his eyes, but didn't see her. "Gilyaln? Over here!"

The girl suddenly came into view, charging around a stray boulder as she raced toward him, moving as swiftly as if the wind itself were chasing her.

"What is it?" he asked, starting toward her.

"There's a boat! A boat!"

"Where?"

Jalforn had just appeared, clutching the baby tightly against her chest, looking terrified.

Gilyaln nearly stumbled to a stop. "That way," she answered, pointing south. "It's coming fast!"

Due to the topography, he could see little of the ocean from his vantage, only the distant water against the horizon. There could have been a whole fleet out there and he would not have seen it.

"What kind? Like ours, or..."

"Like theirs, the bad men," she answered. "What do we do?"

He felt his blood turn to ice. He would never have expected them to return, not with the destruction they'd left in their wake the first time, but he really knew next to nothing about them, only what he'd seen in the stone and the aftermath of their attacks. What reason could they have?

It didn't matter. They had to disappear, fast.

"Okay, here's what you're going to do. Take Rolianah, and go into the cave. Go straight in, stay low, and hide. I'll come soon with Kreli. But if you hear anything or anyone that's not me, you go in deep, to that room I showed you, okay? They won't be able to see you back there. You'll be safe until I come."

"What if they come before...?"

"We'll be okay. Go!"

"Come on, Gilly," Jalforn whispered.

Gilyaln regarded him for a second, then raced off after her sister.

He rushed back to Kreli, who had drawn the blanket tight around her so that only her feet and head were exposed. He skidded down to her side.

"Kreli?"

“Mmm?”

“They’re back. They’ve come back, the invaders. We have to get out of here before they find us.”

He saw her clench up. “Girls...?”

“I sent them to the cave to hide. I have to get you there too. If they can’t find us...”

“Fire...”

He stared at her blankly, then at the glowing peat amidst the circle of stones, not far away. What of the fire? Did she think that, somehow, he’d be able to fend them off...?

And then it struck him. They’d come here, and they’d see the fire, and the pail and tent too. And they’d know. And there was nothing he could do to prevent it, not if he wanted to hide before the invaders came. Sure, he could put out the flames, douse them with the remaining bathwater, but what then? Still-hot peat would be just as big a giveaway as the fire itself. And it would take an hour to disassemble the tent and everything around it, time he didn’t have. He muttered a curse against fate under his breath and hoped the invaders would assume they’d taken to the sea when they couldn’t find them.

“We leave it,” he decided. “Here’ let’s wrap you up.” As best he could, fumbling with the cloth in his haste, he pulled the sheepskin around her, making sure it was tucked in tight enough that it wouldn’t slip off while he carried her. Then he grasped her beneath her legs and back and hoisted her from the ground. She hissed sharply when her side brushed against his chest. Mentally berating himself for his clumsiness, he grasped her tight, climbed up the ridge, and began toward the cave.

But when he topped the next rise, the spine of the island from which one could see clearly in all directions, he stopped, suddenly still as stone.

There it was, the boat. A sleek wooden craft like the ones the invaders had come in, though wider and deeper, painted in white and blue with a sharp. The cloth set up top seemed to be triangular, though men were folding it down so he couldn’t be sure. They had stopped some yards out from the shore, but he could see a smaller boat on the beach, though not its occupants.

He stared at it for a moment, its horrible realness taking all breath from his lungs, but finally Kreli's shift against his chest brought him back to his senses. Hurrying now, hoping they hadn't sighted him atop his perch, he raced down to where the rough island terrain once again offered cover. He could see it now, the low hill upon which the rock lay...

A man's cry stopped him again. He spun wildly, searching for the source of the sound...

It was as if his whole world shattered in an instant. A man stepped onto the flat stone, shouting something incomprehensible. Everything about him proclaimed his alien-ness, from the loose, shoulder-length gray hair and shaven face gray with stubble to the glinting metal rings of his shirt and long blue cloth over his shoulders. Behind him came another, a youthful man in bright clothes of red and blue, leading Jalforn before him, his hand on her shoulder as she clutched the babe in her arms. Gilyaln followed close behind, looking scared and defiant.