

## XVII. The Song

For a moment he considered running, but immediately dismissed the idea. Where would he go? And with Kreli in his arms, there was no way to outpace them, even if there was somewhere he could hide. Instead, he stood still, dejected and defeated. This was how it would end, then. At least he would be with Krealinah. He wouldn't have wanted to die alone.

But the attack did not come. The long-haired man did not even draw his weapon, which stayed hanging from his belt, encased in its leather sheath, and the other did not appear armed at all. Instead, they allowed the girls to run to him, though it took some time to convey their intentions since they spoke nothing but gibberish. Then, after a few more shouted calls to people elsewhere on the island, the younger man dropped onto a convenient rock, casually crossing his legs and watching his captives with undisguised interest. The other paced back and forth, alternately glaring at Foanru and the others with suspicion and glancing behind him toward the shore. Finally, he saw what he had been waiting for and relaxed, his hand straying from his weapon for the first time since he'd appeared.

Soon, three others came into view. One was a tall, striking, woman with deep brown skin the like of which he had only previously seen in his visions, dressed in breeches and a top that revealed more than of her shoulders and chest any decent Hùlor woman would allow. The second was a bald man, as dark as the woman, clad in a flowing robe and with a heavy-looking spiked club hanging at his side. But despite their outlandish appearances, he could not pull his shocked gaze from the third man.

He might have been Foanru's own cousin, they were so similar in appearance despite the strangeness of his garb. He had the same bronzed skin and deep black hair, the same build and height, even some similarities in the nose and chin. And yet it was his eyes that drew Foanru's as he approached, for they were not a brilliant green like Foanru's own but blue, and startlingly so, the right the bright, cheery hue of a cloudless midsummer noon, the left deep and dark, like the sky moments before the last fingers of sunlight fled over the western

horizon. His fellows stopped some yards away, but he continued forward, holding Foanru in a gaze that held no menace or anger, merely curiosity and concern.

Foanru, too stunned for ought else, just stared.

The man spoke quickly, questioning the others in their unfathomable tongue. After a brief exchange, he turned to the cluster of Hùloril standing fearfully before him, and addressed them solemnly.

These words, too, Foanru did not understand, though they differed noticeably from the previous speech. Yet there was something familiar about them, something that tugged on the edges of his mind...

His eyes widened. Yes, it was the same, or nearly so. But he could remember only fragments of what his grandfather had whispered to him late at night when he was falling to sleep, mostly bits of songs and odd phrases.

The speaker looked hopeful for a moment, but his face fell at Foanru's clear lack of comprehension. The woman whispered something, but he shook his head in reply and spoke again.

"We mean you no harm," he said this time. "Please, do not be afraid."

Foanru blinked, taken aback. And then, realizing that they were waiting, replied.

"Who are you?" he asked, his voice cracking with the fear he was so desperately trying to hide. He coughed, trying to cloak his anxiety, and summoned up a voice he hoped would sound more forceful and confident. "What do you want?"

The bronze-skinned man's face lit up. He turned triumphantly to the two beside him and spoke quickly, and they grinned back.

"I am called Korvan," he answered, returning his gaze to the Hùloril before him. "This is Mahila," he indicated the woman, "and Beluonim. There are Derrik and Jeffred." At the second name, the younger man bowed, though Derrik continued watching his charges warily. "And we have come only to see the Eye."

Foanru's eyes strayed briefly to the pouch at his belt before returning to the speaker.

"The Eye...?"

Beluonim whispered something, and Korvan nodded.

“It is a matter of some...”

“Ahh!” He felt Kreli suddenly tense in his arms, bucking with some new pain, and he stumbled, struggling to maintain his hold on her with arms numbed from exertion. But she was slipping...

Suddenly, Mahila was at his side, grasping Krealinah and steadying her. Flashing him a worried look, she gently lifted Kreli from him, holding her tight though she still twitched in agony. In moments, Jeffred and Korvan were there too, cradling her carefully while Korvan bent over her face, resting his hand upon her forehead and muttering to the others in their strange tongue. Foanru stood by, helpless, fear and hope churning within him.

Moments later, Korvan raised his head and turned to him. “She is very sick,” he said softly.

“Yes,” Foanru answered. “Please... Is there anything...?”

“There may be,” he answered gently.

“If you can heal her...”

“I will do what I can,” the man promised, “though it may be that nothing can be done.”

He nodded, feeling a tear come to his eye. He had no skill at healing, he knew that. But if they knew anything...

“And then,” Korvan continued gravely, “we shall speak about the stone that hangs from your belt.”

Foanru stared, stunned.

“Come,” the man said gently. “I promise that you have nothing to fear from us.”

Then he turned and led the others away, Mahila and Jeffred still carrying Krealinah between them.

“What do we do?” Jalforn asked.

“We follow,” he answered. “What else can we do?”

Out of the sky, the black bird fluttered down, toes outstretched, to settle onto Korvan’s shoulder.

Foanru sat moodily beside the fire, watching men unload the brightly-colored rowboat they had just pulled ashore. Another was on route back to the white and blue craft that rested placidly upon the water some hundred yards from shore, its central pole now bound in

tied-back cloth, bright lamplights dancing across its surface as goods were prepared for the landing. Already, several tents had been erected on the grassy field overlooking the beach, and among them perhaps thirty people, men and women, bustled about, talking in their strange speech that sounded simultaneously like a baby's gibberish and an odd sort of music. Fires had been lit—using wood for fuel, no less; the waste would have incensed him as an affront to the gods if he hadn't been overwhelmed by the sheer alienness of everything around him—and some of the newcomers had begun cooking upon them in pots and cauldrons of copper and some dark metal he didn't know. The smells wafting out were strange and heady, and yet they made his mouth water just to breathe them in. Gilyaln had been so intrigued by them that she had worked up the courage to approach one and stare in, much to the amusement of the woman tending it. Jalforn had stayed back with him and the baby, though she too stared wistfully at the food, for they had not eaten in some time. Rolianah, however, was sleeping now, unaware of the strangeness of all that was happening around her.

Kreli was not with them. They had brought her into one of the tents as soon as it was erected, and Korvan and Mahila had been inside with her for some time. Now the sun was sinking toward the western ocean, and still they did not emerge. For the first hour or so he had fidgeted constantly as he watched the entrance, too anxious to concentrate on anything else, but eventually weariness set in, and he resigned himself to waiting quietly, though his gaze still shot to the closed tent flap whenever some small movement pulled on his attention.

He was suddenly startled from his musings by the woman tending the pots, her question clearly directed at him. He turned to see her smiling brightly and holding out a steaming cup. He stared blankly for a moment, then nodded mutely, unwilling to offend by refusing. Taking the cup, he grasped it in his chilled fingers, letting the heat percolate through the smooth surface into his hands as the sweet, herbal aroma flowed through his nostrils. Nothing about it seemed familiar, and yet it was strangely pleasant, even inviting. She said something quickly, and mimed drinking from it, and so, glancing at it

nervously, he took a quick sip. And then he closed his eyes as the warmth coursed down his throat and the strange, tingly taste caressed his tongue.

“It’s good, isn’t it?” Gilyaln asked over her own cup. “I like it.”

“Yes,” he answered, taking another sip. “It’s good.”

The girl smiled and sipped again as Jalforn took a cup of her own.

The woman beamed, then returned to the pots hanging over the fire.

“I think they’re nice,” Gilyaln declared.

“I hope so,” he answered, his gaze returning to the tent where Korvan was with Krealinah, atop which the black bird kept careful watch.

In time, the men and women finished their work unloading and setting up tents, and they gathered around the fires to relax and talk. More hot beverages were passed around, the aromas wafting from the pots were becoming almost unbearably mouth-watering, and the sun dipped toward the horizon, painting the sky in brilliant orange, and still the flap on Krel’s tent did not open. He’d even tried checking on her once, only to be shooed away by Mahila, who made her meaning very clear though he could not understand her words.

Back in his place, he didn’t have long to wait before food was handed out. He found himself with a bowl of steaming, thick, reddish stew and a pair of square white biscuits. He eyed them suspiciously as the others, even Gilyaln and Jalforn, dove in, consuming them with gusto. Sighing, he tried a bite of the bread, finding it lighter and richer than any he’d tried before, and sweeter too, from the golden chunks embedded within. Encouraged, he took a spoonful of stew, and was pleasantly surprised there too, for though it was unusually acidic and left an odd tingle in his mouth, still it tasted as good as it smelled, and soon he was diving in like the others, though he still wasn’t brave enough to scoop the stew into his mouth with the bread, despite Jalforn’s insistence that it was even better that way, sticking to the spoon the way he saw some of the others doing.

He hadn’t eaten so well in a long while, and when his bowl was empty the beaming cook plopped in another scoop, so that by the time

he was done he felt like he couldn't fit another bite, nor was he inclined to so much as move from that spot, or do anything but lay out and let the warmth flow into him. He found his eyelids beginning to droop and his head grow heavy...

At first, he didn't even realize the music was playing, it had started so softly and blended in so well with the sound of the waves. After a few moments, though, he recognized it for what it was and sat up to see Beluonim before the fire with a strange object on his lap, a wooden instrument carved into the shape of a beast of some kind, albeit one twisted so that its neck stretched to the sky above the rest of its body, with myriad strings running from the head and neck across to its back and tail. He plucked these with his fingers, playing a melody that danced yearningly through the night air.

And then he began to sing.

The man's voice was deep and resonant, filling the air with his melody, a haunting tune unlike any the Hùloril made which set on end the hair on the back of Foanru's neck. He let the sound flow into him and closed his eyes, borne along by the notes. And as he listened, images began to form in his head, scattered at first, but forming patterns and then scenes...

Great white waves crashed against the shore, a place unlike any he'd seen even in the stone's visions, a long beach below rugged, red cliffs, topped by leaf-capped plants stretching into the sky. And the music bore him up the cliff and beyond the shore, to a land where men had carved holdings hemmed out of the greenery, where great beasts with wide horns grazed placidly and men toiled in fields wielding tools of wood and metal. Amidst the fields was a river, long and broad, far wider than any that trickled through the Denkyali, so wide that to cross it one needed a boat, or the bridges of stone and wood that intersected it from time to time. The river flowed round a village built in its midst and reached by a series of bridges, a village of great size like none Foanru had ever seen. Walls of stone surrounded it, topped with slender towers that loomed over the river, and within houses clustered together like mussels clinging to the rocks, vying for every last space, while people flowed in and out in a never-ending parade, on foot or with animals and carts laden with goods. And in the center stood a

great tower of blue tile, capped by a dome that shone yellow in the sunlight.

But the song did not stay in the village. It brought him up the river, past the fields and smaller villages, toward vast stretches of land choked with vegetation, where no man lived and only the beasts roamed, lithe creatures with spines on their heads, stalking, spotted beasts that hunted them, and birds and small animals in varieties that boggled the mind. From there the music soared, rising through the forest toward high hills, where the plants became dark and twisted before failing altogether, giving way to stone and snow and clouds. And there he saw the sun, rising close and bright amidst the snow, and the sight of it filled him with wonder, for he had never seen it so bright, or so close.

And through it all was the searcher, the man who strode across these lands seeking a thing elusive, yet at the same time the most precious thing in the world, more precious than any made by human hands or dug forth from the earth. Long had he been questing for it, through village and farm, through forest and hill, over sea and in lands unknown, and though he came ever closer, still it remained just beyond his grasp. Now though, as he reached the end of his life, he felt he could finally see it, like a distant light on the horizon...

The music ceased, one last note that seemed to linger in the night air long after Beluonim had ceased to breathe it out. And yet it felt as if the song was not yet over, and perhaps would never be. Feeling oddly disoriented, as if he had been recently staring into the stone, Foaeru opened his eyes to see only the red glow of the fire amidst the dark of the night and the quiet forms of the other listeners, stirring now that the music was ended.

“What did you see?”

He turned, startled. Korvan sat only a yard away, legs stretched before him. He had been so lost in the music that he hadn’t even heard the man’s approach.

“Pardon?”

“When you were listening to the music, what images came to your mind?”

“Why?”

“I’m curious. I can’t imagine you’ve heard anything like Beluonim’s song before.”

“No,” he agreed, then shrugged. “A saw places. And a man, searching for something.”

Korvan lifted an eyebrow. “What kind of places? Islands, like this one?”

“Well, no...”

“Like anywhere you’ve ever been, or seen?” His look intensified ever so slightly with the last word.

“No...”

“And were fragments, pieces of ideas? Or did they seem real, as if they were someplace that could be traveled to.”

“Real,” he answered slowly, only now beginning to grasp how strange the whole experience had been.

“And the man, what was he searching for?”

“I don’t know. But he couldn’t find it.” Fohanru frowned. “I’m not sure he ever expected to.”

Korvan nodded. “Good. And you are correct. The song is of the Great Search, of that for which all who think deeply seek. Some will uncover part of the answer, but none truly find it, and even those who do find some often don’t realize what they have stumbled across, or doubt that what they have unearthed is the real thing.”

“What is it? And if you cannot find it, why look?”

“Truth,” Korvan answered. “Meaning. God, even. And you look because it is not the finding that is the purpose, but the seeking itself, the striving. For even to grasp a small piece of it is worth more than all the wealth in the world.” He smiled. “You don’t agree.”

Fohanru shrugged. “If Truth doesn’t help you feed yourself and those you love, or put clothes on their backs or drive away the winter cold, of what use is it? And as for the gods, what have they to do with Truth?”

“Well asked, and fair questions all,” Korvan conceded, “and a discussion perhaps for another time. Though regardless of your take on the subject matter, you must admit it’s a beautiful song.”

“Yes,” Fohanru agreed, “but strange.”

“A great many things in this world are. But tell me, of the places you saw, was there a city, a walled town upon a river with a great blue tower?”

Foanru stared at him in shock.

“How do I know? Because what you saw was Homanjaio, the Jewel of the South. It is where Beluonim was born.”

“But how...?”

“There are many things upon which we must speak,” Korvan replied. “But first, I must take you to Krealinah, as I promised I would. She is waiting, and I have delayed you overlong with my questioning already.”