

There's a subtle trembling in Mother's hands when she takes the bowl of fresh water he holds up for her.

"Thank you, sweet child," she whispers to him. She leaves a little kiss between the windblown clumps of dark hair on his forehead before turning to the woman who lies beneath a thick blanket on the floor, breathing deeply. It's Ifana—the kind lady who's lived for years with her husband in the cabin next door.

"Come now, I'll help you clean him," Mother whispers as she kneels to soak her apron in the water.

Beside her, Ifana nods—silent tears drawing lines down her flushed face. The newborn infant in her arms lies motionless as they dab away the fluids from his tiny body. A darkened, almost purple body. He doesn't cry, doesn't move. Mother said there's something wrong—something that can happen to children who come too soon. But she hasn't explained. None of the adults have. But they all seem to know something. They speak with hushed voices, bowing their heads and wiping the shimmers from their eyes as they gather around their neighbor and her newborn son. At seven years old, Tolaiyë can't define it. But he can feel the heaviness in the room. He can see it, pressing down on the shoulders of everyone who enters. It seems to hit them like a sudden wave at the door, stealing away any happy thought that might've been carried in on their faces.

Now they help Ifana wrap her baby in a blanket. And the tears begin to cascade anew from her weary eyes. Mother looks down, cupping her hand over her lips the way she always does when something terrible's happened. Something that can't be fixed.

"She's coming! From the woods!" The man's voice shocks everyone from their silence. The father of the baby. He comes running into the room with wild eyes, pointing out through the door he's left wide open behind him. "There's a chance," he tells his wife, voice wavering. He drops down beside her, pulls her close. "There's a chance. We have to let her try."

The visitor from the woods makes no sound at all when she comes. Standing beside the door, young Tolaiyë nearly leaps from his place when he turns to see the slim figure that stands suddenly beside him. A thin creature whose narrow shoulders stand only a little higher off the ground than his own. She stands clothed in a simple tunic—has arms, legs, hands, and feet, as any ordinary human being would have. But she isn't human. She's smaller and covered in dark, short fur. Tolaiyë's every thought is swallowed up in her massive, shining eyes—eyes that gleam with an oddly violet hue—and the broad ears that hang flat against the sides of her head. The visitor matches everything he's heard about the people of the woods. But seeing one of them in person is somehow stranger than he's always imagined. Almost frightening.

Silence falls thickly over the scene. Every gaze in the crowded cabin turns to watch the furred figure that stands in the doorway. Young Tolaiyë holds his breath behind his teeth. But the visitor from the woods pays no mind to the staring faces that surround her. She moves with slow, soundless steps across the room and lowers to her knees beside the weeping mother, placing a slender hand on the newborn child's gray head. Then her wide ears twitch subtly backward, and her eyes turn up to capture Ifana in their bottomless gaze.

"I must hold him," she whispers.

For a moment, Ifana simply stares back. And when she raises her son at last in shaking arms, there's a new glimmer in her face that Tolaiyë can't understand. Like the weary flicker of a lantern in the night. He looks instinctively to Mother—then to the faces of the adults who stand all around, hoping to find the answer. But they're all statues. Speechless, motionless. Watching the visitor with

unblinking eyes. They watch with tight jaws as the newcomer takes the tiny child with one smooth scoop of her arm and lays her hand over his little chest.

What is this creature? Tolaiyë can hardly bear the stillness in the room. It seems to last for an eternity, threatening to swallow the entire cottage and everyone in it.

Until it's broken by a sharp, sudden sound. It's a sound he's heard many times before, in the village. The sound of a newborn baby's piercing cry. The heaviness that drowned the room only moments before is abruptly overthrown—pushed aside by a sudden chorus of gasps and exclamations.

“Healed!”

“Alive!”

“He moves!”

“He cries!”

“Gods be praised; the child lives!”

A once still and silent newborn has begun to wail and stretch out his tiny limbs—and the voices of all those who look on seem to come to life along with him. All marveling, all wondering at the miraculous event before them. Tolaiyë alone watches the broad-eared, fur-clothed stranger at the center of the room. She returns the squirming infant to his parents' quaking arms, giving only a silent nod in answer to their tearful, breathless thanks. And she rises to her feet, turning back to the door that was left open at her entrance. She's nearly over the threshold when she pauses in her place and turns to stare back at Tolaiyë with a violet gaze as profound as the night sky. A wild gaze. Seemingly motionless—like the gaze of some untamable, unknowable creature. Then she turns away, slinking out the door and vanishing into the shadows of the woods. And little Tolaiyë remains frozen, with his heart threatening to burst from his ears.

* * *

“That baby was ill, wasn't he?” he asks Mother as she helps him spread a freshly washed blanket over his bed that evening. It puffs the faint scent of summer wind into the room as she tosses out the corners and shakes out the wrinkles.

“He was dying, child. None of us expected that poor little soul would live to this hour,” she tells him. She glances at him over her shoulder, showing him a gentle smile. “But our friend Lídei saved him today. Now I suspect he'll live a long life. Our little village hasn't seen anything so marvelous since the morning the moons aligned five years ago.”

Outside, the last beams of daylight fight to peer through the trees. Glancing out between the half-open shutters, Tolaiyë can spot Father's tall silhouette in the garden—sauntering, bending down here and there as he gathers the rakes and little shovels left lying between the rows. Preparing for the coming rain.

“Mother, where do the people of the woods go when it rains?” The sight of the violet-eyed visitor sticks like a stain in his mind. Those wide, bottomless eyes . . .

“I'm sure they have shelters of their own.”

“Where do they come from?” He slumps to his knees near the foot of the bed, resting his chin on the edge as he lets a thoughtful frown fall over his face.

Mother crosses the room to close and latch the shutters. “They've dwelt in these lands for many generations,” she says. “The clans of the voránjevin were here long before our people came down from the old kingdom.”

“From Sketza.”

“Yes—from the lands of Sketza, far away to the north.”

The old kingdom. Tales of the far north have been told in the village for as long as Tolaiyë can remember. The land tucked away into the northern horizon, where the earth is bold and stony. A

land where the ancient trees rise to towering, marvelous heights overhead, fingering the sky. A place Mother and Father chose to leave behind. They came with many others, journeying from the north with young dreams carried fondly in their pockets and the gleam of the southern skies framed crisply in their eyes. Father says they came searching for things they couldn't find in Sketza—that many of their kinsmen came in search of new lives, away from the troubles of the old kingdom. He always puts the same stern expression on his face when he speaks of those days, shaking his head and letting out his breath in one long sigh. As if the story's far too long to ever be told in one sitting. He's never explained much more, and Tolaiyë's never asked. Father's family was among the first to settle in these lands, just north of Emér, the inland sea. In those days, Father was just a boy. And the people of the woods were the only neighbors he knew. Now Sketzan families can be found in a handful of settlements scattered throughout the forests and hills of North Emér.

Kneeling on the earthen floor, Tolaiyë's knees begin to tingle with numbness. He shuffles his weight. "Have we taken this land from them, the people of the woods—the voranjev . . . ?" He struggles to remember the word.

Halfway across the room, Mother's kneeling to poke a fresh log that lies heavily in the fireplace, and the light of the flames casts a warm red-orange glow across her face. "No, my son. They never remain in one place for too long," she says to the flames. "Their people can be found nearly anywhere. Our friend Lídei and her clan often roam the woods near our home. But there are times when we don't see them for many months." She rises now, a basket of sun-dried wrap tunics and loose trousers under one arm. "Come now, we're nearly finished. There's likely to be a few more that need mending," she tells him, bringing the laundry to the edge of his little bed.

Tolaiyë shuffles reluctantly to his feet and snatches a stiff pair of trousers from the basket. Father's working clothes—still chilled from the evening wind they were just pulled from. Despite being well worn, they have yet to earn any tears.

"The voránjevin people know far more of these lands than we do," Mother explains as she folds a shawl with several quick flicks of her wrists, looking it carefully over. "They've spent many years exploring all around the inland sea and beyond."

"Beyond?"

"Yes, child—the western shores, the barren south, and far away to the east, where the forests end and the hills turn to golden, blowing sands. There they found Rand to Molsó, which we call the Sand Sea."

"A sea of sand? Can we go to see it?" Tolaiyë's fingers grip suddenly tighter around the half-folded trousers in his hands.

Mother laughs. "Maybe someday. It'd be an adventure told of for generations if we did," she says—and there's a familiar melody in her voice. A soft thrill to the edges of her words. She smiles up at him again. This time, vibrantly. "There's a song about it, the Sand Sea," she whispers.

All the people of North Emér have their songs. But no one seems to sing so often or so whimsically as Mother.

She snatches another tunic from the basket, letting the notes slip calmly from her lips.

*I've looked to the east
Beyond treetops
Where the plains melt like morning light
Beyond hill and horizon
Can you reach it—
The endless sea of golden sands?
A place of dreams
Where only Thought can walk?*