

'The Fairies are here.'

Dawn had turned an hour since, and the sun was well over the horizon. It was cold in the valley, but bright. Everything about the place felt as alive as could be. The water babbled across the stones and a single bird, long-legged and skittish, pierced the air with its gentle but insistent piping. Vel was imitating it as he took the winding path down to the beach.

Renia stood at the top of the path, staring into the cove. The stream looked as if it was feeding into a sea of molten gold. Kerin came up behind her, pack in hand, and took in the same view.

'Isn't it lovely?' she asked him.

'Very lovely,' he agreed. 'You are still sure you want to go with us, Renia?'

She looked over her shoulder at him: there was nothing to be read in his expression.

'Don't ask me that. Otherwise I might ask you the same thing.'

This provoked a wry smile from him.

'You know I am going.' He looked down the path, and saw that Vel was already far along it. 'Come on.'

He started off, but realized she was not following him. When he turned back, Renia seemed to have grown tense, turned pale. She blinked at him slowly, swayed a little.

'Renia?' She was looking in his direction, but seemed unable to focus on him.

'The fairies are here,' she said, which made no sense at all, and started to sit down but instead pitched forward with a little cry and fell on to the grass. Kerin ran back and found her shaking all over, twisted up in muscle spasm with her eyes wide and staring. Her breathing came in little strangled gasps.

'Vel!' he bellowed, panicked by the look of her.
'Velohim!'

Vel scrambled back up the path, but stopped and took his time when he saw what was happening.

‘It’s all right,’ he assured Kerin as he joined him. ‘It’s only one of her falling fits.’

‘She looks to be in pain,’ Kerin observed anxiously.

‘No, she’s told us she doesn’t feel a thing, and it doesn’t seem to do her any harm. Stay clear, though. Sometimes she jerks about, and if she catches you a blow you’ll surely know it. Melor has read old books about it. He says something is happening in her brain that makes the messages it sends go awry – hence all the twitching and seeing things that aren’t there. She’ll be right as rain when she wakes up; we just have to make sure she doesn’t hurt herself on anything.’ Vel moved a stone Renia’s leg was in danger of catching then sat down nearby. Kerin sat too, watching her in awful fascination.

‘So this is when she has her visions?’ he asked.

‘It doesn’t happen in every fit, but they do seem to make her more, I don’t know – receptive. Sometimes she sees stuff without all this thrashing about, and you can talk to her then. We call them waking fits. They’re harder to spot; unless she says something out of place or we notice her looking a bit daydreamy, it’s hard to tell. Melor’s books say that with either kind of fit, people often grow out of them. I was hoping she already had. It’d been months since she had one... at least until these last few weeks. At least they’re getting shorter now than when she was young. The first one I saw, I thought she was dying; she was in it so long. Yes, look, her breathing’s going back to normal. This is a short one. She’ll wake up in a minute.’

Sure enough, the shaking was stopping and Renia’s eyes closed. The tension slowly worked out of her, clawed hands relaxing into their normal shape. She looked now as though she really had gone to sleep. Vel moved across to brush the hair out of her face and spoke softly to her, letting her know someone was there. After a minute she gave a long heavy sigh, opened her eyes again, and started to get up. Both men moved to help her; she wanted to stand, but Vel made her sit on a grassy knoll in case she was dizzy. She let herself be seated, rubbing her arm and dusting the dirt from her face.

‘How are you?’

‘Fine,’ she reassured him. ‘I just caught my elbow when I fell.’ She turned at once towards Kerin, a smile of pure radiance on her face.

‘Kerin – it’s all right. Jastur’s alive!’

‘What?’ the two men chorused.

‘Yes! It’s true...’ Her voice faltered as she looked hard at Kerin, and he could not guess what she was reading in his face. With an effort he mastered his shock, knelt down by her and held her by both shoulders, not daring to believe this. For a terrible thought had darkened his mind: that this was a lie, told to relieve his misery.

‘Renia, are you sure?’ Her look was steady, defiant even. She had seen what he was thinking. ‘Positive.’ He hated to continue this, but...

‘Then you can describe him to me?’

‘Dark hair, fair-skinned with a stern face, and bearded. Above the beard there’s a little scar, just here.’ She indicated on her own cheek, below and to one side of her right eye. ‘I think it reminds him of you,’ she added hesitantly.

Kerin’s hands dropped from her shoulders and he stood up. ‘That’s Jastur,’ he confirmed. ‘I put that cut there myself in sword practice, the day before we left Federin.’ He felt dazed; whether from shock or relief, he was not sure.

‘Ren, do you know where he is?’ Vel put in. She frowned in thought.

‘Somewhere deep? It’s really dark in there, dark and cramped. He doesn’t want to be there. Maybe a ship’s cabin?’

‘Or a prison cell.’ Kerin was coming out of his daze. He could think of many places that qualified as dark, cramped and unpleasant. But at least he was alive!

‘If we eat quickly, we can go straight back. We must start out tomorrow now, knowing this.’ He began to unpack their meal there on the sward, giving the job far more attention than it needed, using the distraction to calm himself.

‘I’ll eat in a moment,’ he heard Renia say. ‘I’m dirty, I must wash, and I want to check on Bluey.’ She must have

flicked her eyes towards the horses or something; Kerin didn't see what exactly but, whatever hint she gave him, her brother took it.

'Show me what you're checking for. I'll see if I can help.'

Vel followed her over to where she was making a show of fixing Bluey's bridle. 'What is it?' he asked. She tilted her chin towards Kerin.

'How did he react? Did I scare him too?'

Vel shrugged. 'Same as usual.' Her face fell; he tried to make light of things. 'He was mostly bothered because he thought you were in pain.'

Renia smiled slightly at his attempts to make her feel better. 'It must look that way.' She used the back of her hand to feel her face. 'At least I didn't drool in front of him.' But Vel's expression had turned apologetic.

'Sorry. I did clean you up a bit while you were waking.'

Renia sighed. 'Go and have your meal, I'm not hungry. I'll take Bluey along the cliffs. I want to see if he does what I tell him or if he's just been copying the other horses. Tell Kerin I'll be ten minutes, no more.' She stooped to drink from the stream and wash her face before walking Bluey up the slope.

Kerin handed Vel a mug of milk as he sat down. Breaking up the sweetloaf, he handed Vel a piece and took a wedge for himself but did not eat it, turning it around in his hand. Vel gestured at it.

'Something wrong?'

Kerin looked down at the bread, realized what he had been doing.

'No, no. I was only thinking.' He broke off a small piece and put it in his mouth, chewed and swallowed.

'Vel, is your sister seeing the future? She talked as though it was happening in the present.'

'I'd say this is the present.'

'I thought she had visions of the future?'

Vel smiled. 'She just has visions. It's no good asking either of us how it works; we simply don't know. Last time

something was coming, and she knew that. This time she spoke in terms of here and now. The here and now ones make a bit more sense to her; she's spoken of feeling drawn out of herself, of looking in on things somewhere else, even of communicating with people there. The future ones are vaguer, she says, sort of out of reach; that's how she can tell the difference between them. Hell, ask her about it. All a mere mortal like I can do is give you second-hand information.'

Vel blanched as he realized what he had said, looking warily at Kerin.

'I didn't mean that the way it sounded. And, for Heaven's sake, don't tell Ren! It's the kind of thing that really upsets her. She's just an ordinary girl. Sometimes she can do this extraordinary thing, that's all.'

Kerin nodded. 'Mark you, she says extraordinary things too. Before she passed out, she said, "The fairies are here." I did not realize she believed in spirits.'

'She doesn't, though she did believe in fairies as a child. What she said was her way of telling you a falling fit was coming. She gets these lights, like sparks at the edge of her vision; when she was little she thought they were fairies flying up to her. She's got into the habit of using the phrase, though I wish she wouldn't. The trouble is, by the time she sees the lights she's most of the way into a fit and really is away with the fairies. Aagh – don't tell her I said that either!'

On the way back Renia and Vel spoke together now and then while Kerin trailed a little way behind. It had given his shaken nerves a degree of relief when Vel had made those slips, though he doubted he could follow the advice to take Renia for an 'ordinary girl', even though on the face of things that was what she was. Renia had that sort of anonymous ordinariness that was so rare, it ought to stand out more. Not beautiful, not homely either, but somewhere in between; he could not even recall what colour those sad eyes of hers were, despite having known her for weeks. Known her? He had known nothing till an hour ago. He had assumed much, taken

more for granted, even after what he had been told about her first vision. Witnessing one for himself was very different. He could not describe the emotion he felt now; it seemed to fall somewhere between fear and excitement, and he was unable to say which it was closer to.

Up ahead, he heard Renia say, 'Go on, then,' to her brother, as Vel urged his mount into a gallop. She held Bluey back, under control, maintaining a trot; she learnt fast.

Kerin steeled himself and rode up to join her. He got ready to smile if need be, to answer any awkward question that was posed. Her face wore a serious expression when she turned it to him. Hazel eyes, he noticed, mind fixing on anything rather than what he'd recently seen...

'Do you think I need more practice at a gallop?' Renia asked with a frown.

'It couldn't hurt. You held Bluey back well there. Make sure you can get him started on your own.'

'If I can, would you race me? The head start should make it fair.'

So he raced her. He let her win; she knew and scolded him for it. Little had changed between them after all.

The story continues...

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