

1—Eyes in the Reeds

I heard the roar of the water long before the ripples of the mist-covered river came into view. Milky-white with silt, the raging torrent spilled from the meltwaters of the great wall of ice that flowed down the mountains and cut through our valley. We named it the *Ura Beltza*, and from it came the source of much of our food. Slender silvery graylings and fat trout writhed on the barbed points of our fish spears, while our nets hauled in vast shoals of thrashing salmon.

But today, we women of the Izokina tribe were harvesting willow wands while our little children squatted on their heels amongst the dead rushes and threw pebbles into the raging waters. From the grey sky, one solitary snowflake sailed and landed on my cheek. I pulled my cape closer and lashed it tight around my waist. Soon we would need to return to the warmth of our lodges, but not yet. Before the Season of Awakening returned and the spirits breathed their essences over the land, before the juicy green buds erupted from the long, slender branches, the wands must be collected to repair our fish traps and make new baskets.

Bending my back, I slashed at the green-barked shrubs with my dagger until a sizeable pile of wands lay by my feet. I stretched, sheathed my knife, and scanned the ura's banks, looking for my children.

Balancing her newborn son on a hip was Enara, my eldest daughter, hacking away at the long, pliable wands. Her cheeks were reddened from the cold, and wisps of light brown hair curled out from under the rabbit-fur-lined hood that I had made for her when Baby was but a bump under her tunic.

Across from her worked my childhood friend Izar, perspiring in thick, cold-weather robes. She mopped her forehead with a mittened hand and puffed out a breath that shimmered like ice fog in the cold wintry air. It had not been like this all those years ago, when we were sleek and young and bright-eyed. Back then, we had left our Azeri tribe after the excitement of the Gathering of the Clan and chose as mates the two most handsome men of the Beltza Valley. Eighteen summers had passed since then, and now Izar and I knew the land's hidden treasures as if we had been born to the Izokina band.

"Come," I called out as snowflakes began to float down from dark-bellied clouds. Twisting the long stems of grasses together, I formed a coiled rope and tied my pile of long green wands together. Slowly the women rose, sheathed their knives, and brushed the dirt from their hands. Gathering our bundles, we trudged together through thickets of alder and willow, our two dogs trotting beside us. An otter cried out a warning before slipping back into the fast-flowing water, while unfazed, a grey heron waded along a bend in the ura in search of its prey.

Motioning Enara to my side, I secured Baby safely within the folds of my cape, then lengthened my stride, hoping to get back to the warmth of our hearth and the shelter of our sturdy home before the snowstorm hit with all its fury. Mud squelched through the crevices of my woven reed overshoes, drenching the soft leather foot casings that no longer kept my feet warm. With the wind now howling, I bent over and followed the well-worn path out of the marshy wetland that bordered the ura and led to the sanctuary of our winter village.

So absorbed was I with the storm that I jumped in fright when a flock of starlings rose in a great swirling, shifting cloud of black and brown feathers, their shrill calls filling the air. Baby let out a howl

when his little fur bonnet fell from his head and he began to fuss. Bending to retrieve it, I spotted movement in the reeds and, believing it to be an addition to the pot, I pocketed the hood and slowly reached for my sling.

Holding out my hand to silence the dogs, I crept forward. Ready to unleash my strike, I parted the reeds and recoiled in surprise. A pair of eyes, black as the raven's wing, stared back at me. A dark-faced man smiled, then unleashed a torrent of words that had no meaning.

While Baby bawled in fear, I rose to my full height and thrust out my hand to the women behind me in a silent command—stay back. Izar grabbed Otto and Kimo by the scruffs of their necks and pulled the growling dogs to her side.

The strange man pointed to Baby, then reached into his wrap to pull out a stick of dried meat. Bellowing like an aurochs stuck with a spear, he held out the meat and tried to hand it to Baby.

Terrified, Enara came to my side and took Baby from me while the man continued to babble. Actually, he was not very frightening. Small and wiry he was, and it would have been easy enough for me to throw him face-first into the mud. He pointed to himself, and his lips formed a word that I could barely make out.

"Jokubas," he squealed, tapping his chest. My eyes opened wide, for the stranger sounded like a wounded boar floundering in a pit-trap. Placing his hand over his heart, he thumped his chest and repeated, "Jokubas."

Snow fell now in great swirling sheets, shrouding the trees and shrubs and covering the path back to our village. Ready to push the little man aside and trek homeward, I checked myself as another like him crawled from the reeds. Even shorter than this Jokubas, a dusting of snow coated the man's springy black hair as he barred our path.

I sucked in my breath and fingered the round stone nestled within the folds of my cape. Ler, my seven-year-old son, appeared by my side. His blue eyes were round with curiosity, and he pointed at the first man, then blurted out with a perfect accent, "Jokubas!"

Taking no notice of the howling wind, the stranger leapt up and down, smiling wildly as if Ler had suddenly pulled the sun spirit from the sky.

"*Ta'ip!* Jokubas! Jokubas!"

With his lips, the man who was Jokubas pointed to his stocky friend whose glance travelled up and down Enara's tunic. Narrowing my eyes, I fingered the smooth round stone in my hand, but before I could act Jokubas thumped his friend so hard he lost his balance and fell into the reeds. Laughing, Jokubas pointed at him.

"Pemu," he grinned, and holding out his hand, he helped the stocky one to his feet while Enara shrank behind me.

Six women faced the two men who cackled like hens between themselves and simpered at us like foolish puppies. We stood planted to the ground while the snow swirled around us, and the two strangers shifted their feet. Ler shrugged his thin shoulders and turned to me.

"Ama, can we bring them home?" he asked, as if the two strangers were fox kits for him to nurse. Innocent little boy that he was, he saw no danger in their arrival, whereas I wondered if more of their people waited in ambush. It was not unheard of for hunters to stalk two-legged prey, and over the years, many tribes had enriched their numbers in such a way.

I looked them over, taking in every detail. Never had I seen man, woman, or child with hair that coiled like the tendrils of green vines in the spring. They did not seem like fully-grown adults, for the men were short—barely as tall as Izar and me. Their garb was unique, and unlike our soft, thick hides that were cunningly crafted into tunics, capes and leggings, their clothing was made of a strange substance that came from no animal I had ever seen. How thin the material was, and of strange colours that were normally seen on the dried meadow grasses! I wanted to reach out to feel it under my fingers, but it did not take that for me to realize how thin their garments were, nor did I fail to see the two men rubbing their hands together and shaking in the cold.

Turning to Izar, I pursed my lips and sighed. “What harm can these two do? Why, their arms are as thin as Ler’s and their legs are like the reeds that line the banks of the Ura Beltza.”

“You mean to bring them back with us?” she asked, her hazel eyes wide and her lips drawn back. Izar turned to look over her shoulder and shook her head. “Te’a, I hope you know what you’re doing.”

Truly I did not, but I saw how helpless they were and knew that leaving them amongst the willows would lead to their deaths.

“Perhaps they are on a spirit quest,” I responded, though even I did not quite believe this, for the two seemed dim-witted. I bit my lip while trying to decide what to do when suddenly I realized that they were without weapons. I blew out my breath, and taking a step forward, I gripped Jokubas by the shoulder.

“Come with us,” I said, speaking slowly and loudly.

His brows knit together, and he tilted his head, then spouted a string of strange sounds like the barking of dogs. With his long fingers, he pointed to where the sun spirit wakes in the morning. I saw his lips were turning purple, and Pēm̄uo was shivering in his strange thin wrappings.

“Come with us,” I repeated, pointing to where our village sat on a broad flat plain under the protection of a craggy cliff.

The two conversed for a brief period, with wild gestures and stamping of feet, until Ler planted himself between them. He motioned to the path, then using his fingers, he imitated walking. With his hands, he drew the outline of a shelter in the air and pretended to make a fire. I stifled a laugh at my intelligent little boy, trying to make these two dull men understand. But that he did, and taking Jokubas by the hand, Ler led him and Pēm̄uo to where our cozy lodges sat snug and warm in the freshly fallen snow.