

Familiar

--TW: Horror, Mild gore, Death--

Anam awoke to the sound of breathing. Close and fast. It caused him to bolt upright, the thin blanket that covered him falling to his waist. Sweat beaded on his brow and it had nothing to do with the warmth of his tent.

As soon as he was upright, it stopped, fading away as if stolen by the wind. But he forced his ears to listen. To hear -past- the wind and the creaking of the pines outside.

There.

Taunting giggles and frantic whispers, too fast to hear. The swish of fabric as things moved. But he knew. He -knew- that as soon as he went outside there would be no one there.

He barely made himself decent before he pushed his way out of the tent with eyes wide and searching. Fog surrounded his small tent of furs that lay half buried under leaves and branches he had scavenged. It made the forest around him seem all the more threatening. He could scarcely see a few fulms in front of him and the trees were towering strips of shadow.

"Cian..."

Anam spun with one fist raised but found nothing. It had been just behind his ears. He could've sworn he felt the breath of words against the fur of his ear. The voice returned, whirling around him and disturbing the fog, kicking up leaves but without any physical trace.

"Oh, lost little Saint~" It goaded, taunted. "The light of the Gods is long gone from this place. Why must you persist? Do you wish to find your place as kindling, too?"

He was running before the wind even began to pick up. He had been here before, he knew now, several times but it wasn't until he began to run that memory came back. The hard earth slicing against his bare feet and the sharp bite of the cold as he ran between shadows echoed in his mind's eye and split apart.

Once he had tripped and never risen. Another he had tried to climb one of the trees. Once, he stood and fought. Now? He simply ran.

But Anam knew it would end the same.

First came the heat upon his back and embers dancing through the fog. They bit at his skin and hissed as they found the edges of the trees, dying the fog a sickly orange. It crawled into his lungs and began to slowly squeeze the breath from them, blurred his vision as the fog darkened and mixed with smoke. He tripped as his foot snagged on a protruding root and felt the cold earth bite his palms.

"Oh, Cian~"

The voice drifted closer as flames screeched from the trees. Beyond it, he could hear screams of panic and distress, cries of pain. Those wails mixed with the wind as it whipped around him and tore at his hair and clothes. He hauled himself up off the ground with a yell of defiance and clawed his way back to a full sprint. Taunting laughter nipped his heels.

"You can't run far enough."

The shadows of the trees began to twist and bend, churning into a haunting facsimile of those he knew, their faces distorted by cracks in the bark. The branches stretched out as the wind moaned and cried, snatching at Anam, pleading for mercy. But he could not stop. Would not stop. He ran and ran until his lungs felt like frayed fabric and his eyes begged for moisture. Ran until the sharp edge of a cliff face stopped him in his tracks.

With his arms windmilling for balance, Anam barely stopped himself from going over. Rasping in air, he spun to look back the way he had come, then both up and down the cliff edge. Roaring flames and screaming shadows met him everywhere he looked, the sky a burning wall and Anam felt his knees tremble and give in. He dropped to the ground like a puppet whose strings had been severed, both hands thudding into the ground softly either side as he stared vacantly up at the violent sky; defeated.

As his eyes closed and Anam let his head drop against his chest, he heard that laughter wind its way through convulsing shadows. He heard the steps of many things crunch around him, circling him...

The first spear pierced Anam's chest and drew his own ragged scream to join those around him. He grit his teeth and his fists clenched tight enough to crack his knuckles. Though he tried to breathe through the pain in short gulps, he could feel the bubbling of blood in the back of his throat, felt the tenuous thread of life begin to stretch thin and waver. A heavy blade joined the spear, cleaving down into Anam's shoulder in a crunch of splintering bone and he found he could no longer command his muscles to draw breath. His right arm hung loose and with eyes wide and mouth agape, he forced his neck to hold his head up in one last fitful motion of defiance.

Looming over was a creature born of hardened ash. Its entire body shimmered a dull and merciless silver, untouched by the warmth of the fire it reflected. Empty eye sockets stared back at Anam from a face as still as a mask. Its body was a contorted flower of bark that spiraled outward to lend it the appearance of a torn and shattered wing. Ghostly white hair trickled down from a crown of thorns and, slowly, the creature rose one bark encrusted hand.

Anam watched the wing-like blade raise with a hollowed gaze. The world began to slow as it descended. Memories flitted through his mind's eye like pebbles across a still pond and in that moment, despite it all, he found himself longing for the sweet release that blade would grant. He closed his eyes and smiled as he accepted what was long overdue.

Summoned

"You'll be huntin' th'day, boy. Alone"

"Me? But I've never gone off by myself before."

"Exac'ly. Eventu'lly, you'll be on yer own out in these moun'ains, I'd like tae ken if y'can manage."

"You really think I'm ready, Anam?"

"Sure I do! You'll be back 'ere a'fore noon with a full moun'ain goat. Now, crack on, sun's no waitin'!"

Anam sat by the extinguished campfire fastidiously repairing his Ward's torn jerkin until he was sure that the pair of brown, lopped ears was well and truly down in the mountain crags in search of food. He stared at the curve of the path that the boy had gone down for longer than was necessary with a heaviness in his heart. Anam wouldn't be there when the young man came back.

He finished his sewing and carefully folded the jerkin atop the fallen stump that served as their bench, the needle atop it almost like it were a gift. As if that quiet gesture might absolve him of the guilt that had already begun to set in. The boy was barely past nineteen winters and tonight he would return to find himself alone. Anam hoped he had taught him enough, or at the very least, instilled in him the importance of seeking out another Warden for help if he needed it. Struggling alone was foolish.

The sigh that escaped his lips was heavy as he rose from the bench and stalked towards the entrance of the small cave that had been serving as their home. They moved somewhere new every moon to ensure they weren't ignoring part of the border they were tasked with watching. Nothing had the air of permanence associated with a home; there were no paintings decorating the cold stone walls, the fire was small and contained to be easily covered, no blankets spread out to lounge on, no more than a single drying rack for meat. Everything could be easily packed up or left behind at the drop of a hat.

Within the thumb-turn of a shadow he had some rations in a small satchel and one waterskin. The majority of the food was left for the boy. His bow was slung over his shoulder and with his spear gripped tightly in one hand, Anam set out in the opposite direction his Ward had gone. He left no note and as he went he covered his tracks to save being looked for. The last thing he needed was a youngster exiling himself accidentally because he tried to follow.

His thoughts turned inward as he moved and left only half his awareness on the sounds around him. Ever since he had been sent out with his Warden so long ago there had been that Pull. He didn't know what else to call it. A sound just out of true hearing, muffled and obscure, its direction uncertain. A deep-seated sense of something important having been forgotten and that if he could just search then somehow, somewhere, he would find an answer. That feeling had carved its way into his soul and grown roots. It strengthened over time until now, after so many seasons, Anam could no longer ignore it.

The high mountain paths slowly descended into a bank of cloud that always encircled the higher peaks in the morning, obscuring the steep valleys below. Expertly using his spear to stop himself slipping and sliding down rocky cracks, the Viera made his way towards that wall of fog and, without stopping to look back upon what had been his home for nigh a century, was swallowed by the mist.

Transient

-TW: Drowning=-

Anam had spent so long enveloped in the cold kiss of fog that he had begun to lose his sense of time. It was still day; there was light enough to see the ground he walked on and there was still colour, but apart from the three fulm bubble he inhabited there was nothing else. Sound was muffled and he had been creeping along now for what seemed like weeks. His ears strained to pick out the slightest hint of danger that the fog hid from sight. It was hard to keep focus, to keep his grip on reality. There had been foggy nights before of course, but nowhere near as dense as this. It was unnatural. If it wasn't for the feel of the rough wood of the spear in his hands and the blisters on his feet, he would have sworn he had entered some form of waking dream.

Slowly, the fog gave way and Anam began to see darker shadows ahead of him. The faint pink scent of water hit his nose and he frowned. He hadn't been walking towards any rivers, had he really gone so far off course because of the fog? The ground beneath him felt flatter than it should and he looked down. The stones created a pattern of many squares all packed close together, decorated by moss in the grooves between. How odd. He had never seen stones shaped in such a way. The Viera paused and knelt down to run a finger along the edge of a groove, finding the familiar nicks and scrapes of a carving tool. These were made and placed thus?

The fog lifted so abruptly that Anam didn't know how to react. He remained frozen in his crouch as his eyes took in the alien sight before him.

The Viera had stumbled into a massive underground cavern. In the distance a crack in the roof shot a beam of light into the gloom, bouncing off the water and illuminating the structures half submerged. The walls shimmered with cold damp, chiming softly in his ears, and the distant

dripping of water echoed out like the aftertaste of a soured berry. It was like a forest of stone only more uniform than Anam had ever seen any trees. Part of the structures looked crumbled away. Gaps ran between what looked to have been bridges.

Somehow everything he could see looked to be made of the same carved, square stones. This place had been *made*. But by who?

Anam's attention was snatched away by something coalesce above the water beside him. It was a figure that looked Vieran only there were no ears. Gaunt and comprised of what looked like layer upon layer of near-translucent rags, it drifted towards Anam without leaving so much as a ripple in its wake. Instinctively he reached out to the spirit, unafraid after numerous encounters with those that dwelled in the Skatay. The thing let out an ear piercing shriek of despair that filled the air with the scent of death and shot towards him like an arrow loosed.

From its branch like limbs protruded blades that sank into Anam's shoulders and pulled him close to the ragged pale cowl that hid the spirit's decaying face. He met the stare of red eyes and felt his blood chill, the pain from the blades numbing as something spread through him. It was not like the other spirits. It's memories bled through him in a rush.

The gaps between the shaped stone filled with light from torches. Laughter bouncing off the walls. A hammer clangs against an anvil and hot metal hisses in water. The soft damp warmth of the sunlight tracing the cave floor. Screeching. Angry metal grinding against metal. The cave wall closes, smothering the light. Laughter fades. The ground rumbles with the warning of a waking beast. Behind shaped stone the rush of death sounds. Screams begin echo. Lights sputter. Small hands grab larger but there is nowhere to go. To run. Water slams cold against screams, dragging them down into muffled cold. In one last vain hope a hand finds the door in the swirling darkness. One feeble knock begs for the sun to come back. The waves catch it as it falls, silent.

Anam gasped as sensation came back. His body felt as if it were stuck between two rocks and tied down. Moving was an immense struggle. He found himself breathing quick and sharp, the feeling of being unable to find air and only water still keenly present. His hands found solid ground, grasped into the earth, and he used it to anchor himself. He felt sick. Freezing. Even with the sun warming his ears.

The sun...

Panic slowed and Anam focused on what was around him. On the bland rocks of the Skatay and the patchwork foliage and stunted, rough-looking trees. He was in a valley with tall cliffs rising up either side and the midday sun beaming down between them onto his back as he lay flat against the ground. The sweet sound of birds filtered through and slowly Anam's fingers uncurled their fearful grip in the dirt.

On trembling arms he pushed himself back up and looked for his spear. It was only about a pace beside him, as if he had simply tripped. Only he didn't remember doing such a thing. He reached over and curled unsteady fingers around the soothing familiarity of the wooden haft. The Viera pushed himself up on legs that didn't quite want to work just yet. He still felt the cold chill of dark water.

In the path ahead a rock clacked its way down the stone wall to the ground. Anam jumped and rose his spear. The crag lizard looked as terrified as he was.

With an apologetic exhale Anam leant heavily against his spear and stared. His mind desperately wanted to process what he had seen while at the same time acknowledging absolutely no part of it. He distracted it for now with the blessed warmth of the returned sun.

Foster

Anam looked down at the head of mouse brown hair hovering awkwardly between himself and Njsta. He remembered the woman from his childhood and she hadn't much changed; large and inquisitive green eyes framed by curved face paintings in a dull orange, stumpy dirty blonde ears and short cropped hair of the same shade against not-quite-caramel skin. That made the snivelling individual being pushed towards him her son.

"Please? I remember you when you were a boy, Cian- kind and compassionate- I trust you with Kosve." She half pleaded, her smile wavering. "He is not so skilled with a bow, but he is a good cook! And he learns very quickly."

Anam's gaze drifted down towards that trembling head of hair and the overly fuzzy ears that drooped either side of it. He didn't answer Njsta just yet and instead reached out a hand to grasp Kosve by his small chin and pulled the child's face upward to look at him directly. Green eyes immediately closed.

Anam sighed. Audibly.

"I cannae, Njsta."

"Why!?" She blurted, her grip on her son's shoulders tightening.

Though his gaze was on her, Anam watched the boy in his periphery. Those fuzzy ears began to creep hopefully upwards.

"Am no takin' a boy jist tae die! Lookit 'im-" Anam swept a hand over the scrawny figure between them, "- a strong breeze'd knock him ower! And whit's he plan on 'untin' wi' his eyes borin' holes in th'flare? His aen feet!?"

Kosve's shoulders rose up and those fuzzy ears began to straighten at those words. The fur on the tips bristled.

"I'm *not* giving him to Sainn! The last boy that went with him I heard was left for dead. I know it is custom to test them, but Sainn is a bastard!" Njsta snapped. "Kosve will not die, he can handle himself, I have made sure of it."

"Really? An' how'd ye'd manage that?"

Anam put his weight on one foot and crossed his arms over his leather jerkin with a soft creak. By now a small amount of Viera had gathered to watch. Some of them tried to look as if they were busy with other tasks but their hands moved too slow and their ears were trying too hard not to twist over.

Anam rose a brow, waiting.

"The same way we taught you! With spear and bow, and how to clean and to sew, or have you been gone so long as to forget who really teaches you men how to survive?"

Njsta's words cut across the space and left silence in their wake. By the slight widening of her eyes, Anam suspected she hadn't meant to snap so, but it had been said now and her provoking expression told him she would not back down.

"I have not forgotten." Anam kept his voice low, tempered and even. "All've us know we would nae've lasted a day'd it no been fir our mithers, but... look. That's no a boy! He's as useful as a babe by th' look've 'im an th'moment I took my eyes aff 'im he'd be runnin' back tae y-"

"Shuddup."

Anam's jaw clipped shut and he had to try hard to keep the smile from creeping in. Slowly he took his gaze from Njsta to the boy before him. To the croaky- and slightly squeaky- voice that addressed him.

"Both yous. Shuddup." Kosve gave a hearty sniff and pushed his mother's arms from his shoulders, purposefully moving to make a triangle of their bodies. "I'm small, yeah, but I'm not deaf! I'm old enough! I am going and you are taking me!!"

Those scrawny little arms shook from determined anger and the grip of tiny balled fists. Kosve stared up unflinchingly at Anam now and his eyes held the same challenging flame his mother's had moments before. Only the boy had lit that fire deliberately.

The silence stretched out and eventually even the sound of tools stopped as those closest stopped to watch in earnest. Anam kept his gaze level with the boy just long enough to test that flame, to see if it would snuff out if pushed. It held. Even if Kosve did give an anxious swallow or two. Anam sighed.

"...Grab yer things."

Kosve's eyes flew so wide, Anam almost didn't catch the laugh that threatened to escape. He nodded to the boy with an expectant quirk of an eyebrow and Kosve, now stunned and bewildered, looked up to his mother. Njsta was equally as surprised but recovered much faster.

"Yes- Go! Grab your things, Kosve! Quickly!"

She flapped her hands at him as if it would will the boy to move faster. He was already stumbling over his own feet as he raced through the village he was going so fast. As soon as he was out of sight, Njsta rounded on Anam with a wry grin and an outstretched palm.

"Ten, as was agreed," When Anam opened his mouth to object, she produced one silencing finger. "Ah! He cracked before we could use the goats."

Anam groaned but diligently reached to a small pouch that hung from his belt at his left hip. He untied it and passed it to the woman. It clacked as it landed in her palm and she spilled some of the contents out for inspection. It contained many polished and carved stones; Anam's own handiwork. They were used to commune with spirits by the women but could only be made in places the men could reach.

"I still 'hink he'd've come willingly if ye told 'im 'e was ready. All this testin' 'is mettle seems unnecessary, Neest."

"Aww, sad that you lost, Cían? I know my boy. He is strong but only when he is given... motivation. A lot like you, once upon a time. Now you are just a pushover, eh?"

Anam's eyes narrowed but he could not retaliate. Kosve came trotting back towards them with an expression a tangle of anxiety and excitement. Anam couldn't say another word or Njsta's plan would be exposed. The devious woman had already forced her eyes to mist as she turned back to the boy. She stole him into a hug with one hand upon the back of his head, pushed him back so that she could commit his form to memory and then turned him towards Anam. The very picture of a proud mother sending her son off. Anam wished he had never let her rope him into this ridiculous plan. Her son should have just waited until the next group of men came through instead of scrambling to go with him.

"Come along, boy."

Turning on his heel Anam began the long trek back out to his camp. The sound of smaller feet struggling to keep up slowed him down slightly.

"My name's Kosve!"

"Not anymore it's no. Tomorrow ye'll wake up someone new."

From behind the pair, Njsta's theatrical farewell sang it's way over, crying out for her son's safety and for the spirits to aid the pair.

Anam drew a deep breath and made his own, silent prayer; to never again be drawn in by a game of chance.

Aberrant

--TW: Death--

"Cían!? Where're you going?!"

Kosve- for after two summers he still had yet to choose his new name- hissed from the edge of the cave mouth as he squinted into the darkness. He had learned quickly that his new guardian was easily distracted by things 'mysterious' and, as Cían himself described them, 'invitational'. The slim crack in the rock face that had been revealed after recent storms fit both categories and so there was no hesitation in exploring what had long since remained hidden.

Kosve bounced anxiously from foot to foot and glanced around as if his need for someone else might make them simply materialise from the air. No one came and instead the young man found himself staring at the crack in the wall again, ears twisted forward. He could hear the dull scrapes of Cían making his way through. The soft curses of scraped shins and palms or a bumped head brought Kosve small comfort.

For once why couldn't Cían have kept to the paths they were meant to patrol? They had one job and yet his Oh So Wise mentor was intent each day to everything but that one job. They had climbed to the tops of 'odd' looking pine trees, spent terrifying hours trying to scale a rock face to investigate an 'enchanted carving' half way up that turned out to simply be an old lightning strike. Not to mention his personal favourite; almost being mauled by bears because the 'trapdoor' Cían had found was simply a crack in the ceiling of their den.

It was exhausting!

Sometimes Kosve wondered how Cían had managed to survive on his own for so long. Divine intervention? Or did the gods keep him alive for their own amusement?

"Y'comin', lad!?"

The excitement in Cían's tone made Kosve sigh hard enough he wilted slightly on the spot. But he nodded. Thankfully he was smarter. He grabbed one of the small, carved rocks that Cían made from his belt pouch and clutched it tightly. Leading with that hand, he followed the other Viera in.

As the strip of light from the crack began to fade behind him Kosve brought that little rock to his mouth and breathed upon it gently while casting his mind to thoughts of the sun. It worked. The

spirits had answered his request and the little trinket in his hand became a dull star in the dark. Just enough to see by if you squinted slightly.

"..Wha' in th- Hurry up, boy! Ye've gottae see this!"

Kosve did not in fact hurry. He was determined to make it to Cían with as little damage to his person as possible. By the time he wiggled free of the cramped space and found the ash-furred Viera, Cían was practically vibrating with excitement. And Kosve could see why.

The serpentine crack in the wall had led the pair into the remains of a subterranean chamber. The ceiling was low but shaped most peculiarly, a perfect curve the likes of which Kosve had never seen. And there were faces peering out of the stone! He took a step back instinctively and reached for the spear, feeling his heart sink as his grasping hand found nothing. The spears would not fit in the tunnel and Cían had decided to leave them. Another reason Kosve was so anxious. While Cían had a decent grasp of basic magic, he did not.

"What d'ye suppose this place was? Wonder wha' kinda folk lived 'ere. Y'think it was th'Diggers?" Cían asked more to the air than to Kosve, staring at the stone beings with eyes like a new fawn. "Migh' be deep enough for 'em, don't see any shiny stone though... Maybe some've 'em didnae live fer diggin' like w'thought? They 'ad tae 'ave other hobbies..."

"I don't think it's wise to question the spirits, or speak for them, Cían. That's the job of the Anui." Kosve kept his voice low. The little pebble light made those stone faces appear unnerving real. "Can we go?"

"Go!? W'jst stumbled onnae somethin' amazin' an you wannae leave!? Where's yer sense've *adventure*?"

Kosve scowled at the older male. Cían' back was already turned and he was wandering quite calmly- though thankfully with enough caution to be silent- down the strange tunnel. After a moment of hesitation Kosve followed him, trying very hard not to look at the stone faces as he passed by. The light made it seem like they were turning. Stone didn't turn. It couldn't turn. Would-

"Oof! Cían what are y-?"

The older male clasped a hand over his charge's mouth, stifling further words. His eyes were fixed forward and his usually lopped ears had risen to focus his hearing. Cían had heard something. The hand not holding Kosve silently quirked itself into the beginning of the gesture Cían used for his casts. Always the same, quick and efficient motion; swirl of the index and middle fingers, open palm upward, push the heel forward.

Kosve bit his tongue hard as the Warden's hand left his mouth. He wanted to ask what was heard. What might have been seen. Then he heard it. A dull rumble like a distant flour stone being spun. Such a strange sound for a place such as this.

Then came a second, much closer and louder sound. A jarring sound like the growl of a monster with a throat made of spear blades. It hurt Kosve's ears and made him gasp. Then a mighty slam that he felt vibrate through his very bones and rattle his skull.

The silence that came after was like that of the first snows of winter. Still enough to hear a bird's breath.

A clattering beside him made Kosve look down to see the light pebble skitter towards the foot of a stone face. They *had* turned. He tried to gasp but found that he couldn't and when his eyes met Cían', he realised he felt cold. Like those winter snows.

"Cían..?"

"Don't- Don't move I can figure this out, I can-"

"Cían, am I dreaming? I feel foggy..."

"Don't ye dare close yer eyes, boy- Kosve! Lookit me!"

"Shhh, you're too loud... I'm just gonna... take a nap..."

He had backed away from Kosve until his back hit hard stone. From there he slid down, unfeeling, until the ground caught him. The stone faces had moved as one, towards the last source of sound, he supposed. In the dim light neither Viera had seen the huge lances held in the shadows of each alcove. A weapon for every face. He had no idea what had activated them but in one smooth and loud motion five of those spears had torn clean through Kosve, sticking him in place like a fish. It had happened so fast the boy never even realised and Cían had no time to react.

The pool of red that had been slowly seeping across the ground swallowed the little light that had rolled from Kosve's hand as his grip failed. The stone faces illuminated briefly in a soft pink before darkness claimed the tunnel again.

But Cían could still see every spear. See that peaceful smile.

He sat on the stone floor until he felt numb enough to move. He fumbled his way back to the crack in the wall, staggered into the sunlight, and screamed.

Scale

"You really don' see it, Mammy?"

"No, son. Now hold still, I needae check your head."

Eilidh turned her son's head from side to side to peer at it from every angle. His lop ears were normal enough, if a little dirty as were the ears of all small boys, and there were no bumps to the gray of his temple she could see. His dark blue eyes were as clear as rain water.

"Hrmn... You're sure y'didn't hit your head, Cían?"

"Yes, Mammy. It's awways been this way, jist thought everyone saw'd it..."

"Seen."

Eilidh corrected automatically as she released her son and took a step back to examine him as a unit. He seemed perfectly fine and healthy despite his claims at seeing flashes. Flashes of colour, to be precise, whenever there was sound. When Cían had started giggling when they were scaling the fish she had asked why. He had never liked this activity before.

He explained that whenever the bone knife slid along the scales there was a ripple of green and pink from the scales as they softly plinked against the blade. Little shimmers in the air. When she saw no aether, Eilidh had inquired further and immediately assumed the worst. Her son must be hallucinating from fever. But there wasn't a lick of heat to his skin and no pallor. She folded her arms and knelt down to his level.

"Always been this way? How'd ye mean, son?"

"Noises awways hae colour. Your voice's orange, like th'leaves when they's turnin'. Anui's voice's pale- kinna like th'sky in spring but withou' th'blue." Cían nodded with a very serious and thoughtful frown. "Arrows make pink sparks an' spears're red. Most birds're yellow... y'really da see 'em?"

"No, son... I think y'might be jist a bit... special."

It didn't seem to have done him any harm so far, this ability to... see sound? So, Eilidh simply gave the boy a reassuring ruffle to his hair and stood back up. She picked up the knife she had been using and turned it over in her hand as if it might hold an answer to this mystery. She shook her head and picked her fish back up.

"Come, th'fish're no gonnae finish scalin' themselves, now. Crack on."

She smiled at Cían as he diligently hopped back up to return to his task. Within a few moments he was giggling at the fish again and making elegant swishes with the bone knife as if casting spells. Eilidh wondered if the colours he saw moved like smoke. Perhaps this strange trick could be used to aid his hunting, especially if different animals held different colours. Her hand paused in it's scaling motion as a world of possibilities began to creep into her mind.

Later that night, while Cían slept, she would visit the Anui and ask of their wisdom. Perhaps it was a gift from the spirits, perhaps a strange sickness. Whichever it was, Eilidh would find out all she could to make sure it remained a boon to her son.

Baleful

It had shone so brightly in the bog muck that Cían had been drawn over instantly. At first he tested it with a stick to make sure it was definitely dead before daring to come close enough to hover over it.

The tiny frog was a bright sky blue with flecks of red and green down each side like the banks of a river. Its eyes were painted with that tell tale glaze of an empty vessel, staring up at the Vieran boy unseeing.

"Cían! G'wa fae th'mire! Ye'll get swallied ye daft boy!"

He stood instinctively to flash a gap-toothed grin over his shoulder towards his mother. Bare feet made shlorping and shlapping sounds as he splashed his way back through the low rivulets to Eilidh's side.

"Ma, lookit!"

With the greatest of pride did the little boy hold aloft his prize of Dead Frog, its still moist skin glistening in the afternoon sun. But his mother's reaction wasn't what he had hoped. She slapped his hand and snatched him up so quickly he didn't even have the time to cry about it.

"You eejit! Y'bloody dimwit- did I no raise you smart!? Touchin' poison frogs- if ye'd given that t'someone else we'd have a catastrophe!" She was leaping across the bog in practiced loping strides, Cían's arms flying out behind them both like scarves in a gale as he bounced over her shoulder. Eilidh's voice rose as they ran until the last word rang out across the village with a punch. Ahead of them a bent old Viera shuffled out of a tent with eyes wide and sharp. "If y'go dyin' on me so help you I'll kill y'myself you absolute fucken shoelace! ANUI!"

Soul

It had been six moons now since Anam had welcomed his newest Ward into his care. A bright young man named Seoras whose image was every bit the opposite of Anam's own; dark skin instead of ashen, vibrant auburn hair instead of gray and deep hazel eyes that made Anam think of an excited cat. Seoras was lanky, his movements showing a care that few youngsters grasped this early on. He'd managed to sneak up on Anam several times and that was impressive in itself.

But lately the young man hadn't been quite himself.

Where there had been excitement in learning the skills and ways of being a Warder was now replaced with hesitation. The constant questions to learn the why of the things outside the

village had gone silent. Even the young man's usually smiling eyes had gone flat and often downcast.

He was not himself.

"Here, kid." Anam spoke up as they prepared the stone border for their campfire. He was careful to keep his tone of voice calm. "Y'daein' aricht? Ye've no quite been yersel' this last wee while. Some'hin' botherin' ye?"

Those hands hovered over the rock that had just been placed and it took Seoras quite some time before he actually spoke. When he did it was hesitant and- if Anam was hearing correctly- fearful?

"Do you ever... Hmn." Seoras paused, starting again. "When you lookit your hands, do they ever... feel... not yours?"

Now it was Anam's turn to pause, placing down the rock he held but keeping his hand on it. His brow drew down into a soft frown.

"Naw, can't say I've ever experienced tha' one. Y'feelin' okay?"

"Yes... and also no? It's like... lately I don't feel like me? I-I know that I'm me- that I'm here and alive- but my... me? It feels wrong somehow. That probably doesn't make sense..."

Seoras was right. To Anam it wasn't really making much sense. How could someone not feel like themselves? Sure, there were days when inner sadness could overwhelm and make someone feel like they weren't real, but his intuition told him that wasn't quite what Seoras meant.

"Ye mean like yer possessed or some'hin'? Or y'feel like yer in a walkin' dream?"

The young man shook his head as Anam prodded, sitting back on his heels and forgetting about the rocks for now. His body had relaxed and the note of fear was almost completely gone. Once the words began they didn't seem to stop. Whatever Seoras needed to figure out, it had clearly been haunting him for some time now.

"No quite? It's... It's like when ye dream of being someone else, yeah? One of those long dreams that when ye wake up it takes a bit to shake the feelin' of being that other person. Only... that feelin' hasn't gone away. It's got stronger. So this," Seoras brought his hands up to tap gingerly against his chest, "feels... wrong."

Finally, Anam's brain managed to piece together what that possibly could mean. His eyes looked over his Ward in a new light and he, too, sat back and ignored the firepit for the moment.

"I think I understand... Lemme ask ye some'hin' then, kid; d'ye miss th'village? Is this life no fer you?" When Seoras went to object, Anam rose a hand. "Aye, I ken, boys cannae stay there, but entertain th'thought. If ye coul' go back, live that life wi' th'women, woul' ye wannae?"

Seoras fell silent. The frown that he had placed on the half built firepit was so intense it might have bored through the rock if he kept on for long enough. Eventually, he nodded, and Anam gently asked his next question.

“An’ when ye think’ve that scenario in yer heid, how dae y’dress...?”

Seoras turned to simply stare at him. Those hazel eyes were wide enough to swallow Anam whole. Though his mouth worked, no sound came out. And none were necessary. That expression told Anam everything he needed to know.

He remembered once, when he was still very young, of a Warden returning with their Ward. The youngster had been crying, but the adults had been smiling and when Anam had asked his mother about it later she had simply said, “They understand who they are now.”

He hadn’t understood back then. It wasn’t until many summers later when he met that same Ward, transformed, as she handed Kosve over to him that those words finally made sense. That what was inside sometimes didn’t match the outside. That sometimes Wards would come back before a full summer and the next day the women would have another pair of hands join theirs. Or one of the older Warden’s would appear outwith the gathering time and leave with a Ward no one had seen before but was too old to have gone unnoticed.

And there was no shame in that.

“Dae me a favour, wee yin,” Anam spoke quickly, the tone of his voice back to normal conversation in order to jolt Seoras back out of their mind. “I’ll finish up th’firepit, you awa an’ find us some decent wid fir a fire, aye? As much as y’can fit in those arms.”

Seoras fumbled a moment as the world around them came back into proper focus. Wobbling to their feet they strapped on their quiver, picked up their bow and slung it over a shoulder. There was a brief hesitation, as if Seoras had another question, but it went unanswered as the youth scampered off to complete his task.

The moment his Ward was out of sight, Anam abandoned the firepit and moved to the bundle of fabric that served as his fèilaedh-mòr and began to spread it out across the hard ground. There was enough fabric to wrap around his body and then cover his upper half in a cloak-like manner. Easy enough to half it. He’d just have to make do with cold shoulders in the rain for a while.

Anam grabbed his hunting knife and sliced the fabric roughly in two with a good deal of effort. Now came the hard part.

Seoras returned after the shadows had moved a full hand over, laden down with wood of various sizes and shapes in a pile so large they could barely see over it. When it was dropped beside the firepit with a clatter, they frowned. It was still not finished. In fact, it was exactly the same as it had been when Anam requested firewood.

“Uh... What have ye been doing?”

It hadn't meant to sound accusatory but Seoras would be lying if they weren't a little irked at having done so much work when Anam had sat here doing nothing. Looking over, they found Anam lounging against a nearby fallen log he had dragged over to function as seating.

"Close yer eyes."

"Excuse me...?"

"Ye heard me; close yer eyes."

Seoras did as instructed, albeit with a confused grumble. Their frown deepened as the sounds of Anam scraping about and flapping some sort of fabric made them want to peek. His footsteps came closer until Seoras was certain that Anam was within arms reach.

"Righ'. I've no done awny'hin' like this a'fore but it's th'best I could dae. Y'can open yer eyes noo."

Once more Seoras did as was requested and found both hands flying up to catch a gasp that all but jumped out. Using half of his fèilaedh, Anam had managed to fashion a very simple dress. It had no sleeves and the stitching was very rough, but at that moment, as pieces of the puzzle slid into place, Seoras didn't care.

The youngster darted forward and slammed into Anam's chest. They weren't tall enough to hug him properly so instead they settled for squeezing the life from his waist. Tears they hadn't known were hiding burst forth in relief of acknowledgment. Of realization. Anam brought a hand up, placing it gently atop that head of bright auburn hair while the dress stayed pinned between the pair of them.

He held onto his young charge until that river exhausted itself and a pair of bleary eyes looked up at him, tentatively fingering the dress. The laughter that bubbled up was one of joy. A piercing beam of sunlight finally breaking through a clouded sky.

Tomorrow their journey began anew.

And in two suns time, a new pair of hands would join the women in their work.

Daoine Síth

Eilidh's hushed tones of worry had faded into soft snores at her sick son's side. The fever brought on by the toxin had broken through the night and he was finally sleeping soundly after the Anui spent two solid days making sure to keep him alive.

Cían's groggy eyes opened to the dull interior of the seer's tent. Everywhere he looked there was some form of dried herb bundle or carved talisman or strange tools and bowls. The blanket was scratchy and carved with the magic symbols Anui said the spirits liked. He wanted to learn one day so he could write them letters.

"..Halò."

Cían twisted the best he could on the fur pile to stare down at the bottom of his bed. There sat a peculiar looking man with long brown ears and wild orange hair. Cían had never seen him before but if he was in the Anui's tent then he must belong here. No other males were allowed near the village until Choosing day. So his mother had said.

"Who's you?"

"Me? A friend. Call me..." One dirty hand wrapped in bandages came up to tap at the man's chin. "Call me Abara. Nice t'meet you, Cían."

"Y'know my name?"

"But of course! Your mother's been telling me all about you. How you like to go adventuring, finding treasures, telling stories~ Wonderful stuff, wonderful."

Cían couldn't keep the small smile from sliding into place. His mum really told this man all those things? Maybe she wasn't mad at him after all. He tried to push himself up to see the man better but found his arms and body felt like they had a mill stone on top of them.

"Now, now. Don't go moving about just yet, you've been through the wringer, child. Poisonous frogs are dastardly things. Lucky your mother is fast." Abara nodded. "Might as be she has the wind's blessing."

"Mammy's th' best runner 'ere! Is only two- no three- wha can beat 'er." Cían beamed proudly.

"My how impressive!" Abara grinned, leaning forward slightly and lowering his voice. "What about you, Cían? What sort of blessing do *you* have?"

"Me? Dunno. Don't think've got one."

"Oh, now that is a pity... Hm. What if you could pick? I could grant you one right now."

"Because yer th'Anui's helper?! Y'can do that!?"

"Sure~."

Cían frowned thoughtfully up at the ceiling as his mind spun. What sort of gift should he choose? To be the greatest hunter ever? No, too boring. To fly like a bird! ...No, he wouldn't be able to see anyone above the trees. Just like he wouldn't if he could be a fish. Several minutes passed with Abara watching him in curious silence.

"I got one!" Cían declared, clapping his hands together weakly. "I wanna b'safe from all th'traps tha' comes wi' treasure huntin'!"

Abara rose a brow and leaned back again, a wide smirk curving into place. Nodding he rolled up the sleeves of his raggedy shirt and held both hands out, palms upwards, towards Cían.

"Excellent choice! Now, place your hands on mine and let's make some magic."

Cían had to wiggle his way down the bed a little in order to reach the man's hands. When he plopped his small gray ones on top he felt an odd tingly sensation along his fingers and up his arms. It made him feel warm, like the feeling of slipping into blankets on a cold winter night. Abara's thumb curved over the back of his hands to keep them there and the strange man closed his eyes. Cían felt compelled to do the same and instead focused on that warmth creeping its way up to his elbows.

"From this moment forward, I do so declare this boy untouchable by any known or unknown trap. May every dart miss his head, every boulder stop before squishing him and every collapsing floor wait until he has passed~"

Abara's voice came in a slow rhythm. Almost a pulse. Cían had heard that type of flowing speak before when Anui needed the help of the spirits.

"May he tread fearlessly where others dare not in search of fortune and secrets both. Unto he I do bequeath this blessing... and this curse."

A sudden sharp pain in his hands made Cían open his eyes in startlement. He had snatched his hands back the moment he had felt something break his skin and glared daggers up towards Abara. Only the strange man wasn't there. It was only the darkened wall of the tent and an array of mixing bowls stack precariously.

Cían frowned and rubbed his hands together. He looked quickly around the room but, sure enough, only his mother was here. Still fast asleep and propped up against the tent pole. He was about to dismiss it all as a weird dream when his eyes caught a glint on the back of his hands.

Dead center, almost exactly where the V made by the bones of middle finger and ring finger met, was a puncture the size of a small claw. Cían snatched his hands in with a gasp.

"We'll be keeping a close eye on you," Came Abara's voice from the foot of the bed. "'S e ur beatha, anam air chall."

Avatar

Vivid dreams oft make for the best bursts of creativity regardless of their content and Anam had been beset by intensely vivid dreams ever since leaving that cave. He had begun to fear

sleeping at night for he knew that as soon as sleep claimed him, he would face Kosve once more. He was locked in a relentless and unwinnable war with his mind and memories.

The idea of an offering came after a particularly jarring dream. Anam awoke more shaken than usual and in a bid to distract himself had begun to needlessly sort through what little belongings he had with him. As he had moved his pack a carved piece of wood, no longer than his palm, had toppled out. Strange symbols swirled around the body of it, joined together with vines whose grooves now held several years of pack lint and dirt.

A gift from the Anui before he had left with his Warden all those years ago. A blessing of protection and good fortune.

Anam had set out without breakfast as soon as he had placed the carving back into his pack. He set out at a slow pace, his gaze on the ground at his feet rather than the thick pine trees that crept up the steep mountain slopes. The Viera picked up several fallen pieces of wood but each was discarded in turn. Not the right shape. Wrong colour. That one didn't resonate. He was beginning to lose hope when finally his eyes found the rounded top of a fallen branch.

Worn smooth by rain and wind on the top third while the rest remained rough, safe in its blanket of soil, the piece Anam had found held an almost abstract shape of a body. Exposure had worn the top part down significantly, making it smaller than the body. The polished head of a tiny wooden being. With a quick thank you to the land spirits, the Viera turned and headed back to his camp.

Food was forgotten for hours as Anam was drawn in with a singular focus. Though there could only be an approximation due to its rounded size, he did his best to laboriously craft an effigy of Kosve into the wood. The outline of ears and eyes, deeper scrapes to give the hands more prominence. For hours he whittled away until, finally, with a shaky hand he placed the small avatar down.

Now came the difficult part. To coax a spirit to accept the offering and carry it to the other side as a gift.

Anam closed his eyes, bringing the carving up to hold against his chest so that it could feel the beating rhythm below. He reached out to what lay around him. He felt the soft caress of the wind against his skin and let it carry his mind around the trees to brush against the leaves. From that touch his mind spread in a myriad web, following branches to trunk to root and earth. Deep underground he heard the tiny blue taps of the feet of hundreds of insects and, further still, the soothing calm of water. It was that spirit that held him fast, that reacted to his silent call.

It came as little surprise to Anam and indeed it brought a relieved smile to his lips. Water was often regarded by his clan as the bulwark between living and dead. A frigid barrier to keep separate those worlds. As he felt the energy below him begin to seep its way upward, he extended his arms and held the carving out before him.

Overhead the sky responded with a dull rumble in purple across his vision and after a few moments, Anam felt the first drops of rain splash against his outstretched arms. As if those drops had knocked loose a dam, he crumpled forward, bowing his head over the carving that sat cradled in his hands.

Tears mixed with the rain as it began to pour down around him, assaulting his vision with a constant shimmering veil of deep green. From his heart came an apology without words, spilling down his cheeks and neck until his eyes burned and his arms trembled with the weight of holding up the small carving.

Finally, he let it go, placing it gently atop the earth before him in a small ring of stones he had made. There it would stay, to be held in the earth and cleansed by the rain. To hold Kosve's spirit until peace was found. Then both would return to the earth to rest.

Pronunciation List:

For those tricky words.

Cían	- “Kee-an”
Njsta	- “Neestah”
Sainn	- “Shan/Shاون”
Kosve	- “Kohs-vay”
Eilidh	- “Ay-lee”
Daoine Síth	- “Doo-een Shee”