

Travelers, by Joy Bushnell (pooka@rochester.rr.com)

Travelers

“You will take charge of the Travelers,” Renzik said; his tone made it a question though he delivered it as a statement.

“Yes.”

I saw the conflict and confusion in Sasha’s eyes though I didn’t understand it.

I glanced at the others pretending interest in the trees and homes as we made our way to the Hysgol. Carwyn was a modest sized holding, but boasted its own Hysgol, run by Sasha. I’d wondered about that when I first arrived, but she was unique among Virlens and apparently Renzik had his own reasons for sponsoring her research facility.

Renzik nodded and turned away abruptly.

“Then why offer the choice to me?” Sasha demanded in frustration. “There was a cry for help and I answered as I am sworn to do. There was nothing different – until I pulled them through and saw what they were. We now have an opportunity to learn about them... why this... ambivalence?”

“You know why.”

“I don’t!”

Neither did I, which made me feel even more uneasy. What little I knew of Renzik didn’t indicate he was the type to play games. Especially when it came to the Travelers who seemed to arrive only to pillage and destroy.

“You choose not to understand,” Renzik said, his eyes mocking now.

I sighed softly, feeling as if I were intruding and yet, this conversation affected me more so than anyone else present on the hovercraft. Renzik could very well permanently close the portal to all Travelers but in so doing, would cripple his holding, limiting the ability of all Virlens, including me.

He was also intent on hunting down all Travelers on his holding and with one exception, I was all for that idea at this point. They came from a primitive savage world and they were coming in greater numbers.

Sasha shrugged. “The facility is for just such an occa--”

Renzik growled in frustration. “The weapons we took from them are like the ones used on me three years ago, of the kind that killed Gael, Brishan and Seamus that day and many more since. Two of the men had armor beneath their coats – they

have come for war!”

“They don’t appear like the other ones from the Mist,” Sasha replied evenly.

I saw her eyes flick to the Travelers and I let my gaze follow. They were sitting quietly, looking curious and somewhat awed. Three males and a female. Other than their unique clothing, they looked like everyone else... other than something about the eyes. They held a furtive, almost feral look.

“I had twenty-four men, of course they did not attack! Do not mistake them for our kind,” Renzik growled.

His words were bitter, his face hard. He had every reason to hate Travelers, even beyond the death of his men. Bolsug’s lands bordered his, and I shuddered at the memory of the death and chaos that now threatened Renzik’s beloved Carwyn. I’d fled for my life, as did many others.

“What of Arwydd? She is a Traveler.”

Arwydd. I’d heard the tale on my first day here. Renzik had accidentally rescued a Traveler years ago and given her the name Arwydd – meaning sign or portent. I wondered if she knew, or why no one had changed it since then.

“For more than a year she was violently insane and then it took nearly two years to even learn our language! Every word a lie or evasion, every action a contradiction, all of it poisoned beyond belief.”

He paused briefly, “Sasha,” he said softly, “They look like us, but are not like us. You are attributing to these creatures a benevolence that will mislead you..”

I sensed his unspoken words, *‘And it will hurt you...’*

I swallowed the sudden lump in my throat, feeling as if I were 10 again. When I had refused to sleep, night after night, terrified I’d find it had all been a dream, a lovely and impossible dream. Now I knew it was real, but felt it was all slipping away due to events beyond my control.

Sasha lowered her head and I watched as his fingers cupped her chin, tilting her head back up.

“Sasha, you are one of the most talented Virlen I know, as well as... the most inquisitive, the most energetic...” Renzik said slowly, “But you must understand that our world is changing and it is changing because of the Travelers.”

I swallowed nervously and quickly looked away, feeling I’d trespassed on their affection for each other.

The ring of steel as the hovercraft came to a stop had me on my feet as I saw one of the guards come to bear on the female Traveler. The tip of his sword pressed

against the hollow of her neck and a tiny drop of blood suddenly welled on the tip of the blade.

I was surprised she didn't seem afraid, or angry, despite staring down 4 feet of steel. Her hazel eyes flicked to me and she seemed about to speak when Sasha stepped forward, breaking the moment.

"Stand down. I believe she is more excited than rebellious," Sasha said softly, keeping her eyes on the Travelers.

I realized that the guards didn't answer to her and winced inwardly, guessing what would come.

Renzik signaled the guards to stand down.

"You will tell them they are to answer to me when they are here?" Sasha said, as she indicated to the Travelers that they could disembark.

"No."

Sasha whirled to face Renzik, "Of what use are guards who will not obey me? Keep them then!"

Sasha turned away abruptly but Renzik grabbed her arm, none too gently, and pulled her close.

"My duty is to keep Carwyn safe, and that includes the Hysgol and you for that matter. You will accept my guards or you will release the Travelers to me."

I closed my eyes, unable to bear the tension between the two and yet, I immediately opened them again, barely able to breath.

Sasha stared at Renzik for several long seconds, then she took a deep breath. "Very well."

Renzik released her arm and smiled at her, his gaze drifting over her shoulder at the Travelers who had watched the exchange with great interest. Renzik glared at them and turned abruptly away.

I sighed and remained where I was, blending in with the others, unnoticed.

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Eowis burst through the doors to greet us, jogging somewhat comically as he called out, "Renzik! What news?" He fell into step with Renzik neatly.

"Sasha just brought over four Travelers. Has the missing patrol been found?"

"Four Travelers! How? Why, how?!" Eowis exclaimed, his eyes widening in

surprise.

Renzik stopped short so suddenly that Eowis ran into him. “It doesn’t matter, they’re here!”

Renzik stopped short so suddenly Eowis ran into him. “It doesn’t matter, they’re here!” Renzik snapped impatiently.

Eowis nodded, looking glum as he added, “No word from Drandar yet on the missing patrol.”

“Very well, we’ll meet in the library... gather everyone.” Renzik was halfway down the hall when he called over his shoulder, “What’s the name of our new Virlen?”

I felt myself blush as he referred to me, apparently I was blending in a bit too well.

“Elad,” Eowis replied, “He’s given us lots of information on Bolsug--“

“Yes,” Renzik replied, “Find him and get him to the library.”

I cleared my throat, “I’m here,” I said as I stepped forward.

Renzik nodded at me rather absently and took off towards his rooms. I glanced at Eowis and shrugged. “I guess he’s rather busy at the moment.”

“As are we all, Elad,” Eowis agreed before going off in the other direction.

I entered the library, finding myself a very inconspicuous seat, as others took seats around me, talking softly. I recognized most of the faces, but couldn’t consider any of them allies, friends or family. All I had was my profession, that of a Virlen, one step away from a full fledged Virlen. Maybe.

I watched as Renzik paused at the threshold to the library, his eyes going to a dark haired woman I didn’t know. He looked about to object at her presence when Eowis stepped between the two, raising his hand slightly for Renzik’s attention.

“I’ve just had word that Rillifane and Galil are here to discuss the skirmishes around Frinzydd Falls, the exodus of people from Bolsug’s lands...”

“Of course they are,” Renzik snapped in frustration. “They’re next in line if I fail to contain Bolsug.”

Eowis nodded. “As I guessed. Of course, there is the matter of J’Harest—“

“The Trawsbren?”

I sat up straighter, fingers of dread clenched at me. J’Harest was Renzik’s senior Virlen, charged with the maintenance of the Trawsbren, the source of most of our

power and now, source of our troubles.

“Is fine, however, J’Harest was struck by some kind of backlash. Our best theory is that four coming through at once, in that manner, caused a dangerous anomaly. We do not know if he will fully recover.”

Renzik glanced around, a mocking smile on his face, “Is there anything else I should know about before we continue? Some disaster as yet unmentioned?”

I winced inwardly and shook my head as his eyes flicked over me. I wasn’t exactly a disaster and hoped I wouldn’t have to be.

Renzik’s eyes settled on the dark haired woman again. “Arwydd, I’m surprised to see you here.”

So that was Arwydd! I tried not to stare but couldn’t help myself. She looked perfectly normal, was close to bearing a child. Clearly, not everyone hated Travelers.

“I’ve been working with Eowis, translating,” Arwydd replied with a smile that was at once softly mocking and something of an apology.

I’d heard about the book and papers they’d taken from the Travelers. Would those further endanger my idyll here?

Drandar suddenly strode in, still covered in dust from his ride.

“I’m only here to get more men, the patrol is still missing—“ Drandar glanced at Arwydd in surprise then his gaze slid towards Renzik as he cocked his head to the side, the question plain in his eyes.

Renzik shrugged, his expression inscrutable as he replied, “Apparently she’s been helping Eowis with translations.”

Drandar nodded. “I’m glad you two are finally getting along.” He leaned forward to plant a kiss on Arwydd’s brow before straightening, though his hand remained on her shoulder. He glanced up, “I can tell my news isn’t the only bad news.”

I couldn’t hide my surprise at the obvious connection between Arwydd and Drandar. As far as I knew, Drandar was instrumental in ridding Carwyn of Travelers... and yet?

“Four Travelers, J’Harest ill, Rillifane and Galil here to add to my woes. I think that sums it up,” Renzik said.

“Where are the Travelers now?” Drandar asked.

“With Sasha at the Hysgol.”

“Why?” Drandar asked in surprise.

“Sasha wanted to study them. We hope understanding them will provide some key to ...” He let his words trail off with a shrug, “They don’t seem like the feral ones the Mists usually disgorge.”

I glanced at Renzik, surprised that he would make that admission in light of his losses and the severity of the issues related to Travelers. I did agree with him though. These Travelers did seem different and I was quite eager to meet with them.

Drandar shook his head in confusion and disbelief. “And they are with Sasha... why?”

Renzik glowered at Drandar, “Because they are.”

Drandar ignored Renzik’s ire. “I see. And security?”

“I’ve half a squad there, another half on the way. They follow my orders, not Sasha’s.”

“Good.” The relief on Drandar’s face was obvious.

“I’m glad to know that I can still run my holding to your satisfaction.”

“These are interesting times,” Drandar replied.

Interesting indeed I thought once again, still puzzling over his attachment to a Traveler while every day he was out hunting Travelers. He’d killed several in various skirmishes and had a reputation of a dangerous man.

A servant tapped at the door a moment before Rillifane and Galil were ushered inside.

Renzik, dispensing with courtesies, waved them in.

“We have four specimens for study, I propose we go do that. Right now. It is only a short hoveride and in moments we can assure our selves of what menace we face before making a decision.”

I gasped in surprise, studying his face carefully for any indication this had been his plan beforehand. Was he loath to leave the Travelers in Sasha’s care? Or was this some method to deal with his apparently unwanted visitors? Or did he suspect something else?

My eyes lit on Arwydd, who trailed along reluctantly as everyone else eagerly filed out to the courtyard to board the hovercraft that would take them to the Hysgol. I had to wonder at her reluctance, but Renzik didn’t give me the luxury of contemplation as he continued the discussion from the library.

“Unless anyone has compelling arguments otherwise, I plan to close the Trawsbren. More and more are coming through and I can’t afford any more losses of men, time, and resources. If they manage to break through our defenses, the Trawsbren will be in their hands and I can’t allow that to happen.”

I gasped at his words. One moment he was admitting that the newest Travelers were different, and the next, he wanted to shut down the Trawsbren... rendering his Virlens and others that used that nexus nearly powerless?

“We don’t have the luxury of making rash decisions,” Galil replied quickly, looking shocked at his words.

Yes, I wanted to shout. No rash decisions please!

Rillifane nodded, “I concur,” he said, facing Renzik. “I fully agree with your concern regarding these creatures, and we acknowledge their danger to our way of life – it is however a manageable risk. We do not wish to make an irrevocable choice regarding the Trawsbren. If we can contain these beings to their own world, we should do so.”

Renzik shook his head in frustration. “Don’t you think I would have done so already? Sasha and her team have been working on it for 2 years. We’ve run out of options!”

Rillifane sighed. “I was afraid that might be the case.”

Galil frowned and nodded. “It also does not answer the issue of those who are already here. We are facing a population that has a dangerously functional form of insanity. It may be possible to treat those who are here, though sending them back would be a more desirable option... we need to leave it open until they can be rounded up and sent back.”

I glanced at Arwydd, assuming she would not be included in the round-up, but just where would they draw the line? Could one even be reasonably drawn? Could the four Sasha brought back change Renzik’s mind? Did I even want them to?

It came down to the Trawsbren being the tool of my vocation, the joy of my existence and the gateway through which dangerous Travelers were ruining the world around me. Damn all Travelers! I felt very much like hunting them down and killing them myself and immediately felt shame at the thought.

Rillifane continued, “These creatures are feral and do not accept reality. In fact, will defend their self-generated delusions to the death. We’ve learned that they decimate entire populations who do not accept their delusions.”

Galil nodded in agreement. “They also appear to have the power of projecting their delusions onto others though the exact mechanism is not clear. If they’ve been clever enough to devise some method of mind tampering or control... they would

be incredibly dangerous... at least until we determine what that mechanism might be.”

I groaned inwardly, wondering where Galil had gotten that information! I knew she had to be mistaken but as I had no proof otherwise, could not object.

Eowis pursed his lips thoughtfully before saying, “If they were all hopeless, they would have annihilated themselves long ago. As they clearly have not, we must consider there are those Travelers who are peace loving and productive?”

The sudden, drawn out silence was punctuated by the hovercraft coming to a stop at the Hysgol. It was an impressive site, luminescent now in the darkness, looking like a glowing gem cradled by the black void.

Sasha stepped out, “Welcome. I assume you want to take a look at the Travelers?” Her eyes flicked to Renzik, flashing him a mocking before she smiled as Rillifane and Galil stepped forward.

“Greetings Sasha, and yes, we are here to see them if we may.”

“I can hardly deny such an august company deciding the fate of four individuals, can I? “ she said as we followed her inside the research facility. “Surely asylum is an option also to be considered,” she said as she directed us to take seats in the lounge.

Renzik groaned in frustration and Galil shook her head. Rillifane spoke, pausing to make sure he had everyone’s attention.

“I have sincere doubts on such a course of action. I don’t believe we should close the Trawsbren, but neither do I want to offer them asylum. They will embroil us in their conflicts – have already embroiled us with Bolsug who might very well be a Traveler.”

I didn’t think Bolsug was a Traveler, but I was almost certain his steward was.

“On the whole, our records and observations indicate they are little more than slaves – slaves to their own ignorance, their delusions, their lust for power and control over one another. The dearest ambition of a slave is not liberty, but to have a slave of his own. That is their current stage of development, and likely their last.” Rillifane said.

I wanted to agree with Rillifane if only because he advocated leaving the portal open. I didn’t agree with his assessment of Travelers. Closing the Trawsbren had to be a last resort as it would significantly impact the economy and ease of life until such a time a new nexus could be created – though would they be then opening the door to another world, perhaps even worse than the one that plagued us now? Creating a new Trawsbren was a matter for many Virlens and would likely take several years. It was a steep price to pay, but then, so were the constant skirmishes and deaths, not to mention the loss of Bolsug’s holding to chaos and

destruction of the Travelers.

I saw Arwydd step forward, looking somewhat distressed.

“I want to share with you what I’ve been unable to share until now. Among my people, language is... fluid and not as precise as it is here,” she explained with a slight smile.

“I do not want this place to become the place I left. I could not have formed the words and ideas to wish for a place such as this. People here speak freely, unafraid. You are confident in a way I cannot describe. Life here is...” she paused in frustration. “You don’t have words for it... on my world, we were taught that we can’t know, that we shouldn’t presume to want to know, we hid in our illusions, justified, rationalized... we pretended and because we thought we couldn’t know anything about our world, we accepted anything.”

Her emotions were so strong that I felt them as physical vibrations and it made my uneasy as I’d never sensed anything like that before from anyone. I shifted slightly, forcing my mind back to the problem of the Travelers and keeping the Trawsbren open.

Arwydd took a deep breath before continuing. “On our world, we make the misrepresentation of truth a high art, a cultural standard in most places. It was incomprehensible to me... but the rest of the world apparently understood.”

Arwydd pressed her hands to abdomen in a protective gesture, her eyes pleading.

I closed my eyes, unable to concentrate as the growing contradiction within me seemed to take on a life of its own. I took a deep breath, quickly drawing familiar shapes in my mind, the shapes I’d learned as a young apprentice, the very building blocks of the universe. The exercise calmed me, forced my mind to focus. Arwydd was still speaking though I wasn’t sure if I’d missed anything.

“You don’t know the joy I feel knowing my child will not suffer as I did. My child will be spared the physical and emotional mutilation, spared being imprisoned in a creche most of his life, little more than property of those who seize power and dispense with us as if we were their personal property. Please, don’t let them come here... they will corrupt you with their way of being that is insidiously evil... though does not appear so.”

Sasha frowned, her expression both stern and curious. “And you would deny this asylum for others like you on your world?”

Arwydd nodded. “I’ve asked myself that very question and admit that I am afraid. I fear that what happened on my world will happen here. The very few places that didn’t have war or famine, offered asylum to others, sympathetic to their horrors. We welcomed them in a benevolent spirit, glad we’d eased the suffering of those caught in circumstances beyond their control.” Arwydd sighed, shuddering slightly.

Sasha gave Arwydd an encouraging nod, “And then?”

“We became... embroiled in their problems, just as Renzik now has to deal with his proximity to Bolsug. We lost our own people to their battles, drained our resources just as Renzik is now burdened with extra patrols, the loss of crops, resources and worst of all, people he’s known and loved. Everyone turned to us for help, and yet hated us as well... for helping... though it was our fault as well. We too became pawns of others and it forced choices on us, like now, having to face the choice of closing the Trawsb--”

Anger flared on Renzik’s face. “Do not pity me or my supposed losses. The price of living is such that it exacts particular payment to the facts of reality. Whether Bolsug, natural disaster or disasters of our own making. Do not be misled by the idea of life being without cost.” His face softened slightly, “But I agree with you, for very different reasons.”

Arwydd’s chin lifted slightly, a somewhat bitter twist appeared on her lips as she said, “We also lost our ability to think. We were partners in our own destruction for the sake of ideas we didn’t understand, people we didn’t understand.”

I remembered Renzik’s comment to Sasha, about how it would hurt her to bestow her own benevolence upon the Travelers, expecting the same in return.

Arwydd looked up, her hands unconsciously protecting her yet to be born baby. “Please don’t let them come, they are subtle somehow, insidious... manipulative... they can lie so easily, and believe their own lies... there is no defense against it that I know of.”

Doubt gnawed at me as I attempted to reconcile my own experience, Arwydd’s, my desire for the Trawsbren to remain open so that I could achieve my desire of becoming a full fledged Virlen. And so much more. For the first time in recent memory, I felt my mind in full conflict with no solution in sight.

Renzik paced, a frown on his face that mirrored my own though I was sure it was for very different reasons. Fear began to edge at my consciousness. Fear that somehow, due to no fault of my own, my life was about to change irrevocably.

“I find it hard to find even a single positive example of a Traveler—“ Renzik frowned, looking apologetic. “I apologize, Arwydd. I was, of course, referring to all the others.”

Arwydd managed a smile. “I know what my people are like, and yet, I don’t know how to explain the subtlety of the problem.”

Drandar put his hand on Arwydd’s shoulder as he addressed the rest of us. “Arwydd, in the last year, has shared with me horror stories beyond imagination that truly scare me—“

“Enough to close the Trawsbren?” Renzik cut in.

Drandar shook his head. “No,” he added for emphasis. “In fact, they compel me to advocate keeping the Trawsbren open for the simple reason that there are people like Arwydd out there... and perhaps it is love for her that urges me to say that I can not bear the thought of any other individual to suffer as she has. I would not wish upon another sentient being a life condemned to madness.”

I sighed in confusion, feeling my life slipping away with his words, feeling the building conflict within me. Yes, he was advocating keeping the Trawsbren open, which matched my desire and yet my mind grasped the contradiction but refused to reveal it to me in a way I could understand.

Renzik sighed heavily, shaking his head.

Drandar nodded in understanding and his voice became more urgent. “Renzik, they think nothing of killing their young, at any time. Those they don’t kill are subjected to bizarre mutilating rituals from the time they are born to the time they are adults, when they then carry them out on their young. They are ware-housed in crèches all their lives, drugged to maintain order. Generations upon generations of ignorance, fear and superstition. They know only war and violence, pillaging, all of which is legal and accepted as normal and desirable on their world. It is an art form on their world.”

Drandar paused, his eyes intent as they swept over each face in turn, including mine. I could feel the depth of his passion but I only felt relief that his eyes did not linger on me.

“But there are those like Arwydd, who somehow survive the mutilation, survive the horrors. There must be some hope for those who have struggled. We can afford to be benevolent because we **are** different from them. Arwydd is proof that there is sentient life on their world... and so we must extend our benevolence to them... the Trawsbren must remain open. Let those that can, choose freedom, it requires the same price from everyone and we can not deny any that.”

I stepped forward even before it became a conscious thought on my part. All eyes turned to me suddenly and I nearly shrank back into the shadows as I realized I had no idea what I wanted to say.

Renzik’s brow furrowed as he addressed me. “Elad, was there something you wished to add to this?”

I nodded, trying for force the chaotic torrent of words from my lips. “I too would advocate the Trawsbren remain open. I know you have reason to fear the ones from the Mists, I fear them myself and it is why many are leaving Bolsug’s--.”

“Does no one see the danger they pose? Do we invite wild animals to our hearth in the hopes they will become like us?” Renzik exclaimed angrily.

I shook my head, “No... the point... I wanted to make is that we—“ I shook my head

in confusion, clearing my throat as I struggled to put my thoughts in order. “Not all Travelers are insane... not all violent... as Arwydd has shown. We can learn your customs and your crafts—“

Renzik stepped toward me, his face livid. “‘We’? ‘Your’? You speak as if you are one of them!”

I backed up in surprise, raising my hands. “Please... I did not intend to deceive... I came here and since then, it has been one... disaster after another...”

Renzik advanced but Sasha stepped between us and I saw her flash him another triumphant smile before she addressed me, her voice gentle and encouraging.

“Please tell us more... the fact that you have mastered control of Virlius is a compelling argument to keep the Trawsbren open,” she said.

“To close it!” Renzik snapped. “If the other Travelers can do the same, the danger is a thousand times worse!”

I took a deep breath to calm myself and to focus. “You must understand, I was a boy, I thought I was dreaming. To see these gleaming cities that weren’t cities as I knew them. The sparkling glass-like homes nestled in greenery. It was a fairy tale to me. To see people, fresh, bold, strong, friendly. It was the complete antithesis to my former world. I learned the language easily... blended in as ‘foreigners’ from some northern province.

“My life became complete when the Virlen there took interest in me. Initially, I dreaded going to sleep for fear I would wake in my old world... he assumed it was a passion for learning, which in fact it grew to be. I became insatiable and he indulged me... “

I spread my hands in appeal, not even sure what I was pleading for, which side I was speaking for.

“Two years ago Bolsug’s men raided the village and as he prizes Virlens above all others, took me and kept my mother hostage. It was only when she died I was able to make my escape... and came here... a few days ago.”

I felt Renzik’s eyes on me, his expression thoughtful though I did not get any indication of what he was thinking.

Sasha took that moment to add, “That this young man has been able to withstand the trials and discipline required to achieve his rank as Virlen is proof—“

“And how many Travelers in Bolsug’s holding may do so as well?” Renzik demanded harshly.

I shook my head, “I do not think it is possible to them. Those that I have seen, are barely functional, I can not see how they would have the mental discipline—“

“It is likely they will find a way around that and become more dangerous in their short-cuts,” Renzik cut in.

I nodded, feeling oddly deflated, misplaced and out of sorts and worst of all, no clear understanding on where I stood on the matter. What I had seen at Bolsug’s filled me with fear and yet, both myself and Arwydd were Travelers as well.

Sasha sighed, rubbing the bridge of her nose. “Well then, let us meet these Travelers in the hope they can help us decide the truth of our conviction.”

Renzik nodded curtly, though the expression on his face was otherwise inscrutable.

I remained silent though I very much needed to see the Travelers, assure myself they were... what? Some connection to my own past? An indication that I belonged, someplace other than where I’d come from? So much rested upon them.

“Let us see these little pets of yours then,” Renzik said.

Sasha turned, as she headed down the corridor. “So far, they have not shown any violent tendencies and appear to be settling in nicely. In fact, we were about to bring them some food.”

A moment later we heard shouts and the ring of steel and as we rounded the corner, I stared in disbelief, all hope within me dying at the sight.

Guards stood, swords drawn, as the largest male Traveler held the nearly naked female in a vise-like grip while the other two shouted – one was also half naked, his face bloodied, the other wrapped in a towel, dripping water onto the floor.

They all froze as we arrived on the scene, though the woman was released after an urgently whispered exchange. They straightened and the man with the bloodied face stepped forward.

“Not violent like other Travelers?” Renzik said, a mocking smile on his face.

Sasha ignored Renzik, her expression inscrutable as she indicated that Arwydd and I should step up. “Ask them what happened.”

“Me?” I asked in surprise.

“Yes Elad. You have seen Bolsug’s Travelers, tell me if these are the same kind.”

I nodded and swallowed nervously, giving Arwydd an encouraging smile I didn’t feel.

Arwydd smiled at the Travelers. “Hello, I’m Arwydd. Welcome to Viri.”

The bloodied man began to speak, but the woman rushed forward.

I stepped between her and Arwydd, and heard the guards shift as well.

“English! You speak English! I’m Tracy, from New York! These are my friends,” She pointed to each in turn, “Sheridan, John and Ian!”

“I’m Elad...” I offered, dimly remembering being called another name in my youth. I had worked hard to forget it.

Arwydd indicated Renzik and the others, “They would like to know what happened.”

The bloodied man the female had identified as Sheridan stepped forward. “I apologize for the disturbance. It was a personal misunderstanding, prompted by...” He sighed, shaking his head as his hand indicated their surroundings.

The woman who’d introduced herself as Tracy spoke. “What he means is that he never believed in any other world but ours, but now he’s faced with reality and it unhinged him a bit... it’s just what we call ‘tough love’ therapy.”

The man rolled his eyes, but it was clear he was quite shocked.

Tracy continued to speak, hardly pausing for breath. “Nice to meet you guys... you’ve no idea how nice it is that you speak our language... does that mean you’re trapped here too... or that you learned... well... how exactly? I always suspected there could be more to our world, but you’re generally considered a lunatic if you say things like that out loud... so, you sound like a native speaker of English.”

Arwydd nodded, “I came here somewhat unexpectedly over 3 years ago, most likely in the same manner you did. Excuse me a moment while I translate.”

Arwydd quickly translated the exchange for Renzik and the others. I needed no translation, and I had to quell the feeling of lightheadedness that washed over me. They seemed normal, not like Bolsug’s people. They were like me, from my world.

“These are not like Bolsug’s,” I said, remembering the screams and shouts, degenerative violence even weeks afterward from those at Bolsug’s. Their cruelty, even to children and pets. Their drunkenness.

Sasha gave Renzik a mocking smile. “As I was saying. If there are functional sentients on their world, surely we can offer them asylum?”

“It’s a bit too soon for that,” Renzik snapped as Eowis handed him a paper. I saw Renzik’s face tighten as he read it. He glanced up and stepped towards the one called Sheridan.

“It seems you have a book in your possession titled “The Psychology of War” and in

fact, it seems to have been written by Sheridan Smythe. Are you the author?"

"I am Sheridan Smythe and yes, I wrote that book," the bloody faced man replied in a slow, even voice.

I groaned inwardly. They had come for war as Renzik had said all along! The Trawsbren would be closed. My link to the cosmos ended. Mine and every other Virlen in this area. Find another holding somewhere? Would Renzik even let me leave, knowing I was a Traveler? Would I be trusted to work with Sasha, perhaps help create a new nexus? I'd be nearly blind and powerless for years... No!

I forced myself to look around, to attend to this problem logically, using the training I'd spent so many years perfecting. There had to be another answer!

The one called Tracy looked as if she desperately wanted to speak and I wondered why she didn't. I stepped closer, "Tracy?"

"Yes, thank goodness. Sheridan and John ordered me not to speak until spoken to...." she said in an urgent, breathy whisper. "Look, we're good people. We were running for our lives, chased by crazed fanatics bent on destruction and death. I'm an actress, no danger to anyone. Ian is a hostage rescue expert, John, the big guy there is a priest and a psychologist... and geez, Sheridan is crippled... bum leg from a terrorist attack way back when... we mean you no harm. We don't even know how we got here... you have to tell them--"

"Please stop," I hissed softly. "Give me a moment to understand. Explain the armor? The book."

I noticed Renzik glaring at me. "I'm asking about the others..." I explained quickly.

He nodded curtly which I took as permission to continue.

I was surprised with the discussion with the woman, Tracy. I learned much, mostly about her personal life, but nothing that could ease my mind of the question of what to do with them. They seemed reasonable and yet, I began to get a sense of what Arwydd had said about their danger being subtle, manipulative.

"Well?" Renzik prompted. "What are your findings?"

I sighed heavily and spread my hands, having no answer to offer. "Arwydd was correct in not having the words to describe the insidiousness of their... thinking. I am also concerned that I am biased, that Arwydd is biased."

Arwydd glared at me indignantly and I could only shrug in apology.

"You have an opinion though?" Renzik asked, a curious expression coming to his face as he approached me.

"I... have an opinion," I said slowly, having to force myself not to back away. "I believe the danger of the Traveler's is very real, though I too am unable to describe it."

Renzik snorted and cursed. "Auribus tenere lupum!"

I nodded helplessly.

"Nice to be considered a wolf rather than a sheep or snake," the bloodied man said.

I stared in open-mouthed surprise and in his language asked, "You understand?"

"Yes, it is a well known Latin phrase - I hold a wolf by the ears, meaning I am in a dangerous situation and dare not let go," he replied before cocking his head to the side. "Am I to conclude this is important?"

"Of course it is!" I said, feeling Renzik's eyes boring into me once more.

I turned to face Renzik, "He understood. He says that expression is common."

Arwydd glanced at me in surprise but said nothing and even I felt a stab of... confusion.

Renzik's brow rose as he stared at Sheridan.

"Absit omen," Sheridan said slowly, clearly working hard to communicate. "Alea iacta est."

I was somewhat relieved to see Renzik looking as confused as I felt at his words. Did he want Arwydd out of the room? Or did he literally mean he hoped there were no omens or signs upon this meeting? That we were in some way crossing a rubicon was all too true.

Renzik scowled. "Alterius non sit qui suus esse potest."

Sheridan nodded though what I thought I saw was calculation on his face. Renzik was offering our most basic tenet, but I did not get the sense of understanding from Sheridan. Let no man belong to another that can belong to himself, I silently translated as I began to understand what was happening.

"Audentes fortuna iuvat," Sheridan said with a smile.

Renzik burst out laughing even as I continued my downward spiral into understanding the danger of these Travelers. Renzik poked me in the ribs, "I like this guy."

"You've exchanged a few phrases with him," I protested before nodding. "But they seem stable enough to give us an understanding of the others?"

Renzik nodded. "And if he's written about the psychology of war, he might prove useful." Renzik clapped me on the back as he smiled at everyone present.

"Seems we have a winner here. I will keep the Trawsbren open for one year in order to allow time to understand these most interesting Travelers."

I tried not to wince, suddenly feeling this was all wrong and helpless to stop it.