

A Change In The Air Part 1

by Scott Walker

“I’ll be back by dinner, I promise,” Riem assured his wife. “At worst, I’ll be home by dusk.”

“Be home before dinner,” Kirna replied, eyebrows raised. “And make sure this is the last watch you have to run this week.”

Riem finished his mid-day meal and drained the cup of water, then stood up. He started to reach for the sword and dagger on the stand by the door, then remembered that he should leave them behind. If the watch went well, they wouldn't be needed; if it didn't, they wouldn't be useful. Instead, he picked up his oiled satchel, slung it loosely across his back.

“I promise.” Riem kissed Kirna, gave her a long hug, and headed outside. The summer sun was already high in the sky, and Riem expected the watch run to be a hot one. He regretted not having a friend on this run – the company would have been a nice distraction from the heat.

Normally watches were run in pairs, but he was making this one alone. No one else was available for the run, and the clan leader had decided that he couldn't wait for one of the other watch runs to return.

Riem jogged north, quickly making his way through the houses and fields of the small settlement. Less than twenty-five families lived there, working the fields, maintaining the tiny cluster of buildings at the center of the settlement, and managing to be almost entirely self-sufficient. The occasional visits from outsiders - wandering merchant, trader, even an Imperial Administrator or two – were rare but welcome. News of the Empire and the neighboring towns, spices, and fine fabrics were all things that could not be manufactured in the settlement.



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The visit earlier that day brought tidings Riem found difficult to believe. A farmer from the nearest town was headed for Fort Cascade bringing news of raids and a request for help. He stayed only long enough to water his horse and deliver his warning before heading south.

Riem quickly found the large tree at the edge of the furthest field. The forest pushed up thick and close to the fields, and Riem could already feel cool air beckoning to him. He stepped into the trees, taking one last look behind him. There was no sign of anyone in the fields or the immediate area in the forest. Riem quickly stripped, opened his satchel, packed it neatly, and placed it in the nook between two large tree roots. A couple of small branches and a handful of dirt were enough to hide from casual eyes.

The air was cooler on Riem's skin now. He kneeled down and closed his eyes, fighting the urge to rush. The sounds of the forest slowly became sharper, easier to distinguish. He found himself panting, sought to even out his breathing. Eventually, he found his focus and felt himself slipping through the change.

Riem opened his eyes and saw the world anew. His legs ached to be put to use. His nose picked up a whole new group of forest scents. He was ready to make the watch run. Thoughts of Kirna, dinner, his promise to be home by dusk were all gone. In their place, a single, clear, unqualified objective: hunt.



Illustration *Riem* by Andy Underwood

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