

A Change in the Air Part 3

by Scott Walker

Tradition required shifters to be in human form before coming near the village, mostly for practical reasons. It was considered in poor taste to enter the village while shifted, and there was always the chance of not being recognized, especially at night.

Riem didn't shift back to human form until he stood outside the clan leader's door. Still breathing heavily from his near constant sprint back from Fort Cascade, he knocked quickly on the door.

Even in human form, Riem could hear movement from inside, a bolt being pulled back, and finally the click of the door latch. Riem caught the surprised look of Karla's face even though the clan leader was backlit from a healthy fire and several candles.

“Riem? Have you lost your...”

Riem pushed his way past Karla. She closed the door and

turned to follow him, her graceful movement contrasting the age in her face. Happy that no one else was in the main room, Riem moved to the hearth and enjoyed the warmth on his skin.

“M'teoulin.” Riem was having problems finding enough air for words. “M'teoulin. Fort Cascade. Scouting party.”

Karla paused for a moment, then left the room through a door to the right of the fireplace. Riem had begun to catch his breath when Karla returned, carrying pants and a shirt.

“Here.” Karla tossed the clothes to Riem. “Stay here until I return. Don't go home yet.” Karla left the house without waiting for a reply.

By the time Karla returned a few minutes later, Riem was dressed, warm, and had recovered from his run. He watched Karla enter the house, followed by four men. Karla waited until everyone had taken a seat at the large wooden table, then nodded to Riem.



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“There's an active m'teoulin camp far from the White Hills, just west of Fort Cascade. A scouting party of fifteen, perhaps twenty. No sorcerers; at least, none that I saw. The fort looked and smelled normal, nothing out of the ordinary...but I doubt that will last,” Riem reported. “There was also a female ranger I saw at a stream. It wasn't clear whether she knew about the m'teoulin, but she let me pass without stopping me.”

“Anything else?”

“No.”

Karla looked around the table. “This is unheard of in my lifetime. The other clans of Kokothas must be warned, and someone should attempt to contact the fort. They'll be hard pressed to fend off a scouting party of that size, with or without a m'teoulin sorcerer, but they'll at least stand a chance if they're prepared. Stefan, you and Pitr will make for the fort, try to inform them of seriousness of this new threat. Don't waste a lot of time trying to educate or persuade them of what they need to do. Don't tell them where the m'teoulin are. Just tell them to make sure they're well fortified, keep everyone close, and keep the stock in the fort at night. After that, Stefan will head north and warn the clan in Teifern, Pitr will head south for the clan in Denoak. Cole, you head up to Barrel Tree. Sam, you run to Lowfall. Tell the clans we'll be assembling a raiding party here in two nights. Tell them to spare what they can, but be sure to leave at least a small guard in their steadings. Questions?”

“Shouldn't we be asking for men from Fort Cascade for the raid?” Cole asked.

“No,” Karla replied. “They'll either get themselves killed or kill us during the fight. Everyone will be better off if they stay holed up in the fort. Let's hope they do just that. Last thing I need is to worry about defending a fort of women and children after their menfolk found courage and got themselves killed. Anything else?”

The men said nothing, barely moved.

“You leave tonight. Now. I'll inform your families.”

Four of the men stood, made for the door. Karla closed and bolted the door after the others had left, then turned towards Riem. “I want a closer look at that camp. Feel up for another run?”

Riem's grin was answer enough.

“Thought so. Let's see how good your nose is.”

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Illustration *Denoak* by Andy Underwood.

“M'teoulin” and “Kokothas” created by Thomas Ryan in *Rain in the Spring*.

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