

*Gerrit Stainer*

## LIGHTNESS

THEY HAD gone at least three miles before Irla realized Taka was missing.

Irla thought he must have misplaced him in the camel's luggage, but a surreptitious pat-down failed to find him. Taka had not been his usual chatty self this morning, but Irla had assumed that was either because Zholeg was talking plenty for all three of them, or because Taka had been sulking. Taka had begged to go to the neighboring polity of Mapangz, where he had been born, to see the rock formations. Irla had told him quite firmly that they could not. They had never got closer than about eight miles to the Mapangz border, and they left it farther behind with every step.

Refusing to admit that Taka could be missing, Irla thought through the night before and found his memory blurred. The cozy cabin, Zholeg's voice, the caretaker's fiddle, a good supper and a few games of cards . . . he was sure he had held Taka close while he slept, as always, his back turned to the others so they didn't see, but after waking up? Somewhere among breakfast and packing he had failed to secure Taka, but he could not remember exactly where or how.

He took a deep breath. They could not turn back: adding another two hours to the day's walking was out of the question. For a while he kept pace with the camel trudging along in ignorant bliss and Zholeg to the other side of it, strolling along happily on this dazzling winter morning. Zholeg was in his twenties with a thick black beard and was a highly respected

Jackrabbit, carrying letters and packages between towns and remote villages with reliable promptness and good cheer. He set a good pace, and it was lucky that he was short: Irla was only thirteen and had barely begun to grow. People might think that, because he was shy and quiet, he didn't have the strength to walk all day for four days in a row—in fact, he was sure his father had volunteered him for this to try to toughen him up. Other Kits from town could have filled in better for Zholeg's sick partner. He wished one of them would have.

His legs were having no trouble keeping pace, so maybe he could check his sling once more . . .

“Looking for something? Do you need to stop for a moment?”

“No.” Irla barked the word out and hoped it hadn't sounded rude.

“It's all right.” Zholeg reined in the camel. “What are you looking for?”

Irla squeezed his eyes shut. “Just a keepsake.” Boys his age weren't supposed to be talking to their toys still. “From my brother.”

“Oh, right. Well, if it isn't here—where did you see it last?”

“At the post last night.”

“Well, that's fortunate. The caretaker will hold onto it and I'll pick it up my next time around.”

Irla swallowed. Of course, it was the only thing they could do. But . . .

“Positive you don't have it here with you?” Zholeg asked.

Irla replaced the flap and sighed. “I'm sure,” he said, keeping the panic from his voice.

“Well then.” Their footsteps crunched on the snow. “I'll bring it back for sure. What does it look like?”

Irla put on a nonchalant voice that he hoped was convincing. “A figure of a cougar, carved from wood. About a hand span long.”

“A cougar? That's appropriate. Like your older brother! Did he carve it then?”

“No, one of his comrades.” But Irla had given him his name.

“Is it painted?”

“Just polished . . . somewhat. It's cottonwood.” Irla was glad he was speaking Zholeg's Fús tongue instead of his own. At home he was careful not to refer to Taka as “he” in case his

father might suspect a lingering childish attachment to an inanimate object.

“Well, I’ll be interested in seeing it.”

Just what Irla hadn’t wanted.

“It’s good to have something to help keep your brother close, eh?”

“Right.” He forced a nervous laugh such as one might expect from a boy merely concerned for his brother on the front lines.

“Your father was talking about him. His squadron’s in Okenadema now?”

“Just took Kefan.” The Cougars were the mightiest and sneakiest fighters in the world. If anyone could pry hostile occupying armies out of those mountains, they could.

“That’s right! Any day now.” Zholeg chattered on about the inevitability of victory, the blessings of open freedom and travel to the south, one or two new constitutions . . . Irla gave minimal responses, mostly to keep the man talking. It was usually wearying to be with someone who talked so much, but now it actually helped—like putting numbing ointment on a cut.

Taka was really the only friend he had at home now, besides his volatile little sister. Since Taka only spoke Thus, the federal language, conversing with him was the best way for Irla to keep his own command of it sharp. His name was from that language; it meant ‘lightness.’ Irla had named him for the wood he was carved from as well as his expert stealth in guarding Irla’s bed at night.

If he thought about this much more he might start crying. He had to keep his mind elsewhere and his feet moving to avoid such humiliation.

But his mind insisted on calculating how many days it would be until he could be with his friend again: nine—almost a full week. He sent a mental call back to the post. He thought he might have heard a faint “I am well,” but it was clear that they couldn’t converse over distances. Taka wasn’t one of the Divine.

Eight nights without his brave friend’s swift, silent step and swishing tail, alert and on patrol?

The first of these nights was something he had been approaching with mixed feelings already: it would be his first time sharing a bed. At least this way he wouldn’t have to explain why he still slept with a toy.

He cleared his throat. “Can you tell me more about our hosts tonight?”

Zholeg chuckled. “You want to know what the girls are like? They’re good girls, well-behaved, don’t snore.”

Irla didn’t respond. Zholeg peered at him over the camel’s neck.

“Are you still worried about it? My partner hadn’t bundled either when he started this route. He’s a city boy like you.”

City? Even in a region less sparsely populated, Útíma would have been counted as a small town.

“You shouldn’t worry. Like I said, they’re all well-behaved, honest girls. Eh, Hímaúz might come across as a bit aloof, but once you get to know her, she’s nice.”

Irla didn’t want to get to know Hímaúz. He didn’t want anything more to do with this whole ill-advised venture. How long until lunch?

“Isn’t this lovely weather? I don’t know what it was doing in Útíma five days ago, but out here the clouds were low and we had flurries coming and going the whole time. It was hard to see for half the day. The worst is being out here when it rains.”

No, the worst was having those you loved taken from you. What could Zholeg know about any of this? Maybe it would be better after all if he would just shut up.

Irla was proud of his brother, but the whole family lived in fear of losing him. Their father was an orphan (and wouldn’t talk about how). How he could stand having a son in harm’s way Irla didn’t know—and his father never explained that either.

After a long time, Zholeg finally said words that mattered, “We’re almost at our midday stop. You keep a good pace. As calm as it is, we should be able to stay decently warm, have a good meal, and still get to Kossiekh well before dark.”

They stopped in a little dell between two hills dotted with junipers where they cooked pancakes in a rough log booth. While they ate, Zholeg started talking again.

“Winter and summer are the peaceful times along this road. In spring and fall, some of the Kits from Kossiekh, about your age, they try to hide up in these hills—ha!—and then they swoop down on us and do silly things like demand tribute or a contest of some kind before they let us pass.” Seeing Irla’s widened eyes, he grinned. “Usually it amounts to a wrestling match and some

foot races, maybe some stone throwing, and then we have lunch together and they send us on our way with a lot of whooping and hollering and trying to see how far they can tail us without being seen. It's actually a pretty old tradition in these hinter parts. I've never wanted to fight, never dreamed of joining a Red order, but I always bedeviled the Jackrabbits around my hometown when I was younger. Your brother never did that? Well that makes sense. It's more of a hinterland thing really."

Like bundling, Irla knew that his people were a minority, but he hadn't realized how little he knew about the customs of the region.

Soon they were on their way again. The snow and ice stayed solid, but Irla soon felt warm keeping up a steady walking pace in the sun. Zholeg stayed surprisingly quiet and Irla distracted his mind by surveying the landscape. They were heading east toward a mountain range high enough to be forested. The whole world was almost entirely reduced to blue and white: in this valley, snow covered the sagebrush and only patches of pinkish dirt peeked through here and there to break it up. Irla thought of his brother Fersak's squadron up in the mountains down south. There must be an awful lot of bright red blood against whatever snow was there.

Against that image, Irla imagined brown wool, whole and unturned. He envisioned the brown of polished musket stocks and the glint of bright steel, white puffs of clouds chasing the oppressors out, the warm glow of a victory bonfire.

The wind picked up and began to bite. Irla plodded along, no longer feeling strong or proud of his stamina for walking. He paced his steps to the rhythm of the silent prayer he often chanted for Fersak's safety, to cover the hole left by Taka's absence.

After about two more hours, Kossiekh came into view at the base of the eastern range. Irla fixed his eyes on it as it slowly drew nearer. He could almost imagine it was a mirage, forever floating out of reach.

And then:

"Ah! Our welcoming committee."

Five figures were running towards them, and soon resolved into boys with their hair in long tails, wearing fur-trimmed wool coats and caps. They crowded round, jumping and chattering in the local tongue.

“Who’s this?”

“Hey, you’re only a little older than us!”

“Where are you from?”

Zholeg introduced Irla and explained how he was helping on this circuit since Tib was sick. They exchanged news and banter, then started singing, and over the course of a long song they made their way into town.

The youngsters scampered off through the nearly empty streets as Zholeg led Irla up to a house, built of earth like all the others, with neat new plaster. Zholeg knocked and a lace curtain behind the glass window moved aside, showing a face like a hazelnut framed by black hair.

“They’re here!” The curtain fell back and the face disappeared.

“That was Paskek,” said Zholeg. “She always watches for us.”

The door opened, showing a stout woman with graying braids. “Come in, come in! Herlúf will see to your beast. But this is a youngster! Oh, poor Tib. Give him our best wishes. We hope to see him back here next time? Mobvítis will miss him, the rascal. Well, sit by the stove and be warm, dears. How was your journey?”

The house was all one single room, though there were folded screens leaning against walls, and the enormous stove and oven jutted well into the room, making a kind of division. They sat together on a bench running from the stove along the wall, covered with brightly embroidered blankets and cushions. Irla tried not to stare as he looked around. All of the houses he had visited in Útíma had rooms like his.

The woman gave her name as Shoni and she introduced Irla to her daughters while her husband was outside. Paskek had only barely turned twelve and reminded Irla of his little sister. Mobvítis greeted him cordially, while Hímaúz unnerved him with her gaze before nodding and going back to the stove. Paskek stayed and waved her hands as she talked about their plans for the spring planting.

Soon the man of the house, Herlúf, came in with the village’s resident Jackrabbit. He introduced him but Irla didn’t remember his name. Irla only had to answer minimal questions about himself and his brother because the family knew plenty of men from their village also fighting down south, and their talk soon turned to matters of the war in general, which needed no con-

tribution from him. He was glad it wasn't long before Mobvítis called them all to supper. Hímaúz watched closely as Irla took his first spoonful of red chile. After he started eating with no sign of discomfort, Hímaúz nodded and didn't look at him again for the rest of the meal.

When they finished, they all helped clean up and moved back to the other side of the stove. Shoni brought out a little harp and the evening wore on until the local Jackrabbit took his leave.

And then, with only a couple of candles burning and the stove down to embers, it was time for bed. Irla and Zholeg helped lay out the mattress, pillows, and duvet. Herlúf and Shoni slept in a curtained bed on a platform over the oven.

Irla was the last to step behind the screen to change clothes, and he wished he could just close his eyes and be back in his own bed at home.

"Hey Irla," murmured Zholeg. "Are you falling asleep back there? Come on in so we can all get warm."

He wondered if he would be able to sleep at all.

Hímaúz was standing by the bed. Mobvítis, Zholeg, and Paskek were already under the duvet. Irla sent a silent prayer heavenward and climbed in.

Hímaúz blew out the candle and climbed in next to him. "You're not a farter I hope," she said.

Paskek stifled a giggle.

"Oh, leave him alone," said Mobvítis.

"He's fine," said Zholeg, yawning. "He doesn't snore either."

Irla decided he would just lie on his back and hope he didn't turn on either side. Paskek had snuggled up to him and draped her arm over his chest without any hesitation (at least she had no breasts yet), while Hímaúz had pressed her back up to his right side and was still after only a moment's nestling down.

Irla lay awake for a time, listening to the breath-rhythms change, keeping his eyes closed. Now that the time was upon him to be fully alone, he let it sneak up on him instead of tensing himself in preparation.

Alone without Taka—here in this bed between two girls—he thought of his sister Pashra, only a year younger than Paskek. He wondered what she would be doing around the house and around town without him. He remembered her laughing in the observation car when they had ridden the train to Tyban to take

their big sister to school, her worried frown as she confided in him her fears of what their sister might get into in the big city . . . At some point these thoughts lost their sense, and Irla did not try to hold onto them anymore.

But when he awoke it was dark, and he had no idea where he was—for a moment he almost forgot who he was. But had he made an undignified sound?

He was afraid he had. Oh, to be home and away from all this!

There was an arm around him and a whisper. “Shhh, you’re all right. Easy now.”

Hímaúz: that was who was next to him, he remembered. He whispered back, “Did I wake you?”

Her hand spread kindness over his forehead. “Not Paskek, I think. She’s a heavy sleeper. Bad dream? Well it’s over now, whatever it was. Let it go. You’re safe.”

Irla debated with himself for a moment before deciding to relax. He let his breathing slow. He reminded himself that he was not likely to see Hímaúz or any of these girls ever again.

That was a pity, really.

“I get frightened at night sometimes,” he whispered.

“The dark? So did I, not too long ago. And you’re not at home. Well, as I said, you’re safe here. Do you need to get up for anything?”

“No, I’ll be all right.”

“Then lie still. Here, take my hand. There. You’re safe.”

They both lay still.

“Thank you,” he whispered after a while.

Her hand squeezed his.

And then . . . he felt jostling and opened his eyes.

Morning. The others were getting up. Mobvítis was crouched by the stove, kindling new fuel.

Hímaúz took his hand again and pulled him out of bed. He shivered as she handed him over to Zholeg, who threw a blanket over his shoulders. “What say? Brave the cold for the outhouse or get dressed first?”

“Get dressed first.”

Zholeg laughed. “Very well then, I’ll be the first outside. Ha! Twenty-four miles today! Are you ready? I’m not.”

“Wind’s picking up,” said Mobvítis from the stove. “Might bring some snow.”

Zholeg made a face and stepped to the back door. “Brace yourselves,” he said, and slipped out the door in a blink. Irla pulled his blanket close.

Breakfast was blue corn dumplings and fried onions with fermented camel milk and even a dish of buttery stewed apples. They ate quickly and then packed up. Shoni kissed Irla on the cheek before they left and slipped a honey candy into his hand.

As they walked down the main street, Zholeg squinted at the streaked clouds above. “I’ll take my liberty of doubting their prognosis. I don’t think it’ll snow today.” He returned a wave from a passer-by.

“Good,” said Irla, who was thinking that he might survive this after all. This evening they would be staying in Parmeshvi.

They trudged along as they had the previous two days; Irla’s legs, at last, honestly sore. Zholeg was noticeably quieter, which suited Irla fine. They headed due north for a while between fields before the path began following a meandering stream. Irla thought of Taka, of Himaúz, of girls, of walking.

“Up ahead,” said Zholeg, “those hills sticking out from the ridge? That’s the Narrows. We’ll follow the stream through a canyon—that’s where our lunch stop is. A bit later than usual, but it’s over halfway.”

Irla grunted, settled into the numbing rhythm of the stride and let his thoughts drift. Gradually the land started to rise on both sides and the path came in close to the willow thickets beside the stream as it meandered. Their midday shelter was a cabin built where the stream met a tiny tributary, and their hasty, fireless lunch was improved with pies that Shoni had packed. As they walked on between the cliffs, Irla asked Zholeg if the boys from Parmeshvi raided the Jackrabbits, too. Zholeg replied that in the summer the hut served as a base for a training complex that ran the length of the whole canyon. He pointed out cleared patches where gardens were planted, and corrals for beasts.

“Do any from Kossiekh join in?”

“Oh yes.”

Irla wondered which language was spoken the most, but didn’t ask. As their path turned this way and that beside the stream, Irla watched the scenery and a little squadron of crows to distract himself from wondering how the night would go.

Soon after coming out of the Narrows, they reached the fields around Parmeshvi, and about a mile from town a farmer came out of a nearby house and asked if they'd like a lift into town. When Irla echoed Zholeg's thanks the farmer looked more closely at him and grinned.

"Where are you from?" he asked in the Corrol language. Irla's language! The man's horses were the biggest Irla had ever seen, the tips of their ears almost coming to his shoulders, and their winter coats were long and thick, well brushed. Zholeg expressed admiration for them, in passable Corrol, and the farmer laughed.

"I don't often have business in town this time of the evening, but I see you poor devils tromping past twice a week and I figure I might as well."

Irla found himself more willing to talk than usual as the sled whisked through the snow toward the town. He told the man about his home and his family and his brother at war, earning approving grunts.

"Your hosts this evening, old Zík, was a Ferret in his day—did you know that? Tsss! ask him to tell some stories and you won't get him to stop."

They reached Parmeshvi at sundown, parted ways with the farmer (who had never given his own name), and made for their lodgings through streets decidedly empty. The house they went to looked even smaller than the one they had stayed in back in Kossiekh, but it had the same round-cornered, earthen construction. Geese in a little pen to the side raised a racket as the Jackrabbit and his companion approached. A couple answered the door together, their wrinkled pink faces breaking into wide smiles.

"Hey," the woman said, also in Corrol, "who's this who came along? And where's Tib? Come in!"

As Zík went outside to see to their camel, his wife, who introduced herself as Somnüd, ushered them to a spot by the stove—this house was divided in half, at least, in comparison to the Kossiekh home. Zholeg explained to her why Irla was there; it was the second time Irla had heard him speak Irla's native language. He listened to his pronunciation and almost missed the questions that the woman asked him.

As soon as Zík had joined them he wanted to know all about Irla's family.

"Irlangt, is it?" he said as he drew up a chair. "A noble name."

"I go by Irla." He ducked his head.

"Very good. And you're from Útíma? Has your family been there long?" Zík winked at Somnüd. "I'm going to see if I can guess the surname. Arnavi? No? How about Ümbüdezh? Well, let me think."

"Oh, stop it," said Somnüd. "Just tell him dear, or we'll never eat. Iriazsush will get here at any moment."

"Iteskis."

"Iteskis? Really! Yes dear, but . . . all right you two, go get washed up, and then we'll talk more while we wait."

After washing, they sat at the table to wait for the local Jack-rabbit. Irla told Zík about his brother. Zík cracked his knuckles. "You must be proud of Fersak."

"I am!" Irla blinked and looked away from Zík's eyes. He must not embarrass himself.

"Well now, young Master Iteskis, how well do you know your family roots?"

Irla said slowly, "I don't know."

Zík tilted his head and squinted. "Well stop me if I tell you what you already knew, but our families were two of the nine that settled our old hometown together."

"When was that?" asked Zholeg.

"In 65," said Somnüd. "Right at the end of the Big Move. Everyone said it was a pretty spot, but nobody wanted to settle there because it was out of the way. All the good farmland that the dissidents left behind had been claimed already, and here was this spot: here were nine families, the last ones to come down, and folks wondering if they could make a living there. But they did." She shook her head. "Oh, hear those silly fowl again. That'll be our Iriazsush."

Iriazsush wore a blue coat like Zholeg's with Jackrabbits embroidered on the sleeves, a blue stocking cap on his head. His beard was lighter in color than Zík's and longer.

Zík ushered the man to the table, holding him by the elbow. "We have a guest with Zholeg—young Irlangt here, from Útíma." He raised his brows as if he wanted to say more.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance," rumbled Iri-

azsush.

“Yes,” said Somnüd. “Dinner’s ready, and you lucky men can help get the table set and then we can dig in.” She went to the oven and drew out a large fragrant meat pie.

“I see I’m too early,” Iriazsush said. Zík laughed and handed him a stack of plates.

After they had made some progress on the pie, Zík asked Irla what more he knew about his family and their hometown.

“I know my great-grandfather was born there. And his father came from Itesco up north.”

“Ah yes,” said Zík, leaning forward, “do you know the story behind that? Four of the families were from Itesco. When they got down here and took on surnames, they all wanted to take the name Iteskis, but decided that wouldn’t do! So they drew lots, and your great-great grandfather—Bershürmu? Yes, well he got it.”

“What about the others,” said Iriazsush, “what names did they choose and how?”

“Well, Terafezh was one of them, of course.”

“Yes, it all started as a joke,” said Somnüd. She shook her head, smiling. “The other families started trying to think of names to take on, and one of the men had really calloused hands.”

Zík told some more stories, reciting more names and dates than Irla could keep straight. But then he leaned back, stroking his beard, and looked more intently at Irla. “So then, your grandfather: is he Lindem or Zhízh?”

Irla ducked his head. “Iriazsush, actually.”

“Ha!” A thick hand slapped the table. “Twice well-met then, my boy.”

Irla looked at Zík, saw the look in his eye, and braced himself. “Well then, your father,” said Zík, “he must be Tisekort!”

Irla blinked. “Yes.”

“Well I never. Little Tisekort has a family! And one of them a Cougar, no less!”

Irla grinned, at the same time feeling a strange tension.

Zík cracked another knuckle. “How wonderful to hear—especially after what happened to him.”

Here it was. Irla held his breath.

Zík peered at Irla and furrowed his brows. “You know the story?”

Somnüd gaped at her husband and then glared, but Irla met the man's eyes and shook his head.

"He only says it was an accident. He's never talked about it."

Zík folded his hands on the table. "I think I'm somewhat surprised by that, but if you want, I'll tell you."

"Now dear, do you really think—"

"And where do you think you're going with that pie?"

"Oh honestly." Somnüd sat back down. "But don't say anything that will wound the poor boy."

Zík peered at Irla in the golden candlelight. "Do you wish to know?"

Irla found himself nodding, and though he still wished Taka were with him, he began to feel a lightness that didn't come from his fearless cougar.

"All right then." The room was silent. Zík sipped his small beer and leaned forward.

"One winter morning, someone from the town's Deer chapter checked in on the family after some of them were missed at their work. They found everyone lying on the floor, dishes still on the table from supper, and the only one alive was Tísekort. He was only two and couldn't tell what happened, but finally the answer came in the barrel of pickled vegetables the family had opened for supper: tucked at the bottom were a few sprigs of deadly nightshade."

"Just enough to poison them." Somnüd sighed. "They concluded it was just a mistake—a lack of care in the making." She offered her wrinkled hand and Irla took it.

"Is that why"—Irla took a deep breath—"he never eats anything pickled? I thought it was just a matter of taste."

"Well," said Zík, picking at his teeth, "sometimes we Corrols can be a bit too close-mouthed."

Somnüd snorted. "Except you."

Zík shrugged. "For years my life depended on keeping my mouth shut. When I retired I decided I'd had enough."

Somnüd and Iriazsush started to laugh, then caught themselves and both looked at Irla.

"Are you all right, dear?" she asked.

He nodded and felt lighter still.

The next day they walked through another canyon and rode the train home. Irla didn't know if or when he would tell his

father what he had learned, but Zholeg praised him, his father was pleased, and he slept soundly until the Jackrabbits came around again. As promised, they brought Taka, along with a letter from Zík with a detailed chart of his family and other southern settlers. And after everyone had gone to bed that night, Irla sat up on his own as he was used to doing.

“You know I’ll never be a Cougar like Fersak,” he said.

“You don’t have to be,” said Taka, lying down next to Irla. “That’s not what our friendship is about.”

“I know.” Irla stroked the wooden shoulder. “Well, what do you think? Should I become a Jackrabbit in four years?”

“You might as well,” replied Taka. “Then I can chase you all over creation.”

Irla laughed, and turned over to sleep.