

# FARGOER

Free first chapter



PETTERI HANNILA

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# END OF INNOCENCE

## WALKERS IN THE FOREST

SUMMER SUN scorched the wilderness beyond the unknown expanse. Two girls moved through the forest with sure steps, although no trails or signs of men were visible to guide their way. The girls looked so much alike they could have been sisters. Both were slim and short, as women of Kainu tended to be. Their long hair was as dark as the autumn evening and stood out from their pale, clear skin. Only their noses and cheekbones were slightly tanned by the scorch of the summer.

The girls were sweating despite only wearing light shoes and belts made of deerskin. From their belts dangled roughly chiseled stone knives sheathed in leather. The Kainu knew iron, but its use was inappropriate for the task at hand. So they'd been given the stone knives for this age-old tradition, a tradition that dated back a long way, to the gloom of history. Countless girls before had carried those same knives on the same path that led them now. The girls had both seen thirteen summers. As they had each started to bleed, they were now ready to draw blood and reach maturity.

Despite their many similarities, the girl running ahead was more heavily built, and her brown eyes shone with a sense of nobility befitting a chieftain's daughter. Even at her young age, Aure was used to giving commands and getting what she wanted. Not too far behind her ran Vierra, and what she lacked in nobility and stature she made up for with tenacity and sheer stubbornness. In her deep-



green eyes glimmered a determination and optimism typical of the young. The girls had played together since they were babies, and through their childhood had remained best friends.

Normally a trip to the woods like this would have been filled with the girls' endless chatter and the occasional laugh. Now, however, they were silent, and the girls were filled with anticipation and excitement. They had waited for this day as the deer wait for the spring. Finally, they would take the crucial step that would bring them from their childhood play into the world of adults.

The hot afternoon sun forced them to slow down their pace. Summer had been exceptionally warm, and the region was as dry as dust. Gray rocks, yellow shrubs, and tussocks, some still green, were mixed among murky tree roots. Rays of light beamed through the branches, scattering the colors into a flickering and tattered shambles. The buzz of the horseflies and the singing of the birds made music for the spectacle.. The forest floor was pocketed with islets of musty air and the strong, suffocating stench of plants. Nature was slowly withering, waiting for rain.

The girls' eyes were looking for signs of water in the dry woods. Finally, they found a river that had dried out to a meager stream. It slowly snaked in between the large rocks and drew the girls irresistibly. The sound of the trickle and the soft breeze tempted them to rest. The plants near the stream were lush and verdant, and Vierra and Aure had to clear their way through the bushes to reach the water.

Between the rocks, in the knee-deep waters of the creek, was one of the few places that the relentless heat couldn't reach. The girls drank greedily and drenched themselves in the cool water. Normally a hot day like this would have been spent swimming, fishing, and maybe even bickering over who had the larger catch. Now there was no time for swimming, nor would it have been possible in the shallow stream.

But something else in the forest was also thirsty. While the girls were drinking, a bear cub emerged from the thicket. It came from upwind and didn't notice the bathing girls until it was only twenty paces away. It froze, too afraid to run away or come closer, and let loose a miserable call.

The girls felt the cold whisper of death shiver up their spines as they saw the cub. Where there was a cub, the mother was never too far away. They crept to the opposite shore, keeping their eyes on the animal and the thicket from which it had emerged. It was hard to walk backwards in the rocky stream. Painfully, slowly, and carefully, they ascended from the bottom to the bank, until they reached the border of the nearby thicket.

The bushes started to rustle, and all of a sudden the mother bear came rushing up, head down, through the shrub to its offspring. It ran to the creek and, upon seeing the girls, rose on its hind legs and released a roar that froze the girls' blood in their veins. Unfortunately their escape options were few; darting headlong into the woods would have been hopeless, for no one can outrun a mother bear in anger. On the other hand, staying put was equally dangerous, since a stone knife in the hands of a young girl wouldn't stop the beast.

Luckily the bear didn't attack, at least not immediately. It towered above the girls on its hind legs in the stream and snapped its jaws menacingly. The girls were trapped, too afraid to move, in a heart-pounding stalemate. The bear was puzzled; these people were small and didn't stink of fire and death. They had no spears, either, which the bear knew to be a threat.

"We can't stand here forever. I'm going to retreat to the thicket," said Vierra finally.

"Don't go... let's sing a soothing song," replied Aure. The confidence that normally filled her voice was gone, replaced by panic and fear.

"Alright, let's try."



They started. At first the sound was pitifully weak, and the girls felt that their fear and the riverside rocks swallowed it whole. But the bear stopped its attack, and slowly the girls grew brave enough to sing louder. Harder and harder they sang until the sound was echoing among the rocks, feeding their courage.

*Ruler of the darkest forest  
Wanderer of hidden path  
Sister of the humankind  
Spare us from your deadly wrath*

*Do not grab with paws so mighty  
Fasten not your jaws  
Show us not your immense power  
Rest your fangs and claws*

*Let the fellow-dweller pass by  
Release us from this bind*

Whether it was the power of the song or something more mundane, the girls couldn't tell. Nevertheless, the bear dropped down on all fours and herded its young back into the thicket. Soon after the mother disappeared, silence fell over the forest once more as though nothing had ever happened. It took much longer for the girls' hearts to calm down.

"There's something to tell over the home fire," said Vierra with a look of relief on her face.

"You will tell no one," Aure snapped. "We're not allowed to tell anything of the journey, not a word. Don't you remember?"

"I know," Vierra sighed.

When their legs could carry them again, they continued their journey through the sweltering forest.



## THE MOTHER

Afternoon was giving way to evening as the girls arrived at a swampy lakeshore. The summer had dried up the beach, leaving only a carpet of moss that grew all the way to the waterfront. Despite the swampy southern edge, the lake had clear water from the many springs that fed it from the bottom. Nobody fished the lake because it was a holy place. Only girls who had reached womanhood came here, and then only once in their lives, during the hottest period of the summer. After their visit, they returned to their people as women and took their place among the adults. Before this, they had to face the First Mother, who weighed every girl's right to adulthood. Aure and Vierra were here for this very reason, and upon their return, they would be celebrated around the fires of their people.

It sometimes happened that a girl sent to become a woman never returned back from her voyage.

Vierra and Aure cut straight, slim trees from the bushes surrounding the swamp and sharpened them into spears with their stone knives. They were crude weapons, but for their purpose they were perfect. After finishing the spears, the girls went to the water's edge, a bit away from each other, and stepped into the shallows. Sunlight had warmed the surface, but on the bottom, the lake was cooler and brought relief to the girls' weary feet. After walking a little deeper, they stopped and stood in the still, shallow water with their spears. The horseflies, fat from the heat of summer, outright enjoyed this game, and soon both girls had several bite marks all over their bodies. Gritting their teeth, they stood still and let the pests go about their business.

Soon small fish began circling around them, curious and unafraid of the large, stationary figures. When nothing happened, few bigger fish followed the small ones, entering the girls' reach.

Aure was the luckier of the two, spearing a big, thick-necked perch. Vierra wasn't far behind: her catch was a small adolescent pike that had wandered within the spear's range. The girls took their stone knives and gutted the fish with care. To slake their thirst, they drank from the lake. The water had a stale taste burned into it by the sun during the hot summer days. Relieved nonetheless, they stood on the beach and waited, shooing away the horseflies. Now they wouldn't have to greet the Mother without an offering.

The scorching sun was setting toward the horizon. The evening cooled the air down to bearable warmth, and the horseflies disappeared only to be replaced by mosquitoes, forcing the girls to slap and flail continuously to drive them away. They missed the protection of their leather clothes, but clothes were forbidden as initiates couldn't have anything taken from another when in the presence of the First Mother. Besides their belts and shoes only a stone knife and an offering were allowed. After the sun had set, dusk quickly took over. This far in the north the midsummer sun wouldn't have allowed the dark to set in, even in the middle of the night, but this late in the summer it would soon give way to the black of night.

"I wonder if it's true what they say about the boat," said Aure, breaking the long silence.

"I hope it comes soon. Otherwise it'll be so dark that we won't see it, no matter how strange it is."

"If the old hags say that the boat will come, then it'll come."

"I guess so," Vierra laughed uneasily. "It has to have torches burning on it, anyway, if it doesn't arrive soon."

Long before dark, a gloomy figure of a boat appeared on the tranquil, open lake. The girls went to the shore, nervous, and waited. As the boat approached, they saw that it was of plain and simple design, its surface made smooth by age. There were no oars or oarsmen, but everywhere around it water rose up in frothy waves. With a splash, the boat glided onto the shore and surged onto the mossy bank.

“On board, then,” Aure stated and stepped to the back of the boat without hesitation. A glance thrown back to Vierra didn’t share the confidence of the words, however. Vierra followed, not saying anything. Each sought comfort from the other’s eyes, back and forth. If they had been competitive earlier, they were in this together now.

The mysterious old boat slowly slid away from the beach and back into the open lake. The girls heard splashing behind the stern, but neither one dared to look for the source. Unlike other ancient vessels, this old boat had no trace of leaks or cracks and steadily traveled forward, smelling of tangy resin and soil.

A pair of swans was making a stir on the lake, splashing their strong wings against the water and driving a younger intruder away from their nesting place. A loon with its offspring floated with poise on the dark water and started to feed. The night birds were singing, and the lake was full of life as the boat took the girls towards a small, craggy island. The strand was rocky, but the boat glided seamlessly between the rocks and into a grassy cove.

The girls rose from the boat in a hurry and jumped on to the beach. Mosquitoes welcomed them as they entered the withered forest. The strip of spruce was narrow, and the rocky terrain in the middle of the island was more open. As the girls moved to the north, they neared a steep cliff. When they reached its base, an ominous stone wall was in front of them. They had no gear, and the burdens of the day weighed in their limbs.

“Who’s first on top of the cliff?” yelled Aure in challenge, and she stormed to the ridge without waiting for an answer. Vierra yelled and dashed after her friend with whatever strength her tired legs had in them. For a moment, they were just two girls competing again.

Sweating and gasping, the girls pulled themselves to the top. The hasty climb without the protection of clothes had left bruises and marks on their hands and feet.

“I won!” Aure yelled with a familiar mischievousness on her face. She nudged Vierra playfully on the shoulder as she climbed beside her to the mountaintop. Vierra couldn’t say a word from exhaustion, but her green eyes flashed her opinion on losing.

“You cheated, you took a head start,” Vierra snorted after her breath had evened out. Aure had already turned her focus elsewhere.

*I will best you yet*, Vierra thought, but didn’t say it out loud.

The summit was flat, and a beautiful view opened up to the slowly darkening lake. The path that led the girls up the cliff top was uneven, but all of the other edges were straight and steep, with a fall of at least a full-grown tree’s worth onto the beach below. The middle of the plateau was covered with the soot of previous fires, and a stone axe sat beside a pile of firewood, though no tinder could be seen.

“Nothing to start the fire with,” said Vierra with a tired voice. She realized how arduous it would be to get a fire going.

“Like the old ones say, wood against wood.”

“And with words of fire,” Vierra added.

The girls went to work. Each started her own fire on top of the cliff, as dictated by tradition, for every girl who was entering adulthood had to have her own fire. They chose two of the driest pieces of wood and cut small notches into them. They whittled additional wood into chaff, and gathered dry moss and grass. This was easy because there was plenty of wood and kindling around since the rain hadn’t touched the area for many weeks. They placed a piece of wood on top of the campfire rock and started to saw on it sideways using another notched piece of wood. Their furious sawing heated up the wood and a thin, black wisp of smoke rose from the spot they were sawing. The girls blew into it and fed it with the dry grass and moss. They also sang the words of Fire’s Birth to lure its spirit to them.

*Oh, you Seagull, bird of birds  
Strengthen now our pyre*



*Termes mighty, lord of heavens  
Bring to us your fire*

*Give me now the brand of yellow  
Spark of highest heat  
Warmth to lonely forest dweller  
Flame of life unsheathe*

Both girls' patches of moss lit almost at the same time, burning with a small, withering wisp. They fed the fire eagerly with wood shavings until the pile burst into flames. The fire crackled and smoked from the resin within the wood. Dirty and sweaty from the work, the girls were happy nonetheless, as the smoke drove away the mosquitoes and the fire dispelled the feeling of uneasiness that came with the dark. They placed the fish on the tips of their spears and cooked them in the fire. The air was filled with anticipation as the late summer night fell upon them.

"My fish is bigger than yours," Vierra blurted from behind her campfire. She hadn't forgotten the sting of defeat from the climb.

"Pike tastes like mud compared to perch," Aure replied. "Mother will take my present first."

"Surely she will not. You always burn your fish black. Nobody can eat them."

It was hard to say from where she arrived to the fire. Neither Aure nor Vierra saw her approach. Like the girls, she only wore a leather belt, and her sparse hair was tied back with a string. But that was the end of the resemblance. Her extreme old age was evident, as her parched skin was dark and filled with wrinkles. Countless infants had nursed her breasts flat and left them hanging down her skinny sides. As dark as her limbs were, her face was even darker and protruded with a crooked jaw that had only a few teeth left. Despite her wretched appearance, her gaze was sharp as a blade, and a sense of power and wisdom surrounded her. She smelled strongly

of resin and the forest, just like the boat that had carried the girls to the island.

At first she said nothing, and shoved her worn hands towards the girls. They looked at each other and then gave their cooked fish to the hag, watching silently as she ate them in the glow of the fire. She made no distinction between pike or perch, but ate the catch with tails, heads, and bones, swallowing them in big chunks. After this meal, she rubbed her hands together, obviously pleased, and spoke.

“Aure, Vierra,” she started with a voice as deep as it was solemn. “As girls you came here, and as women you wish to leave. But first you must hear of the birth of your people, and then we will see your worth.” She started to sing, her worn voice filled with energy and raw power that belied her age and appearance.

The song began calmly, telling of the birth of the world. The Mother sang a story of a seagull that looked for a nesting place on the shoreless sea, and finally found a rock that pushed through the surface. The song strengthened as it portrayed the rising rage of the sea and the wave that destroyed the seagull’s nest, throwing the eggs into the merciless ocean. It gained a sense of wonder as the seagull sang a crafting song, a song of great magic. From the pieces of the eggs, the wise bird made the world and the sky to cover it. The song gave birth to all plants, animals, and men. For every creature, the seagull made a mate, save for humankind, for they were seeds of sorrow and the source of all evil. Finally, the sea took up the task and created a woman for the man. But this woman, the First Woman, would not bow at the man’s feet, but became instead the ruler of the land, the guardian of her people.

The girls listened to the song, mesmerized. They had heard it before, but the Mother’s voice was different and it carried them through these stormy events. It made the girls forget their excitement and fear for a moment, and they let the tale take them somewhere else, to another place and time in the distant past. Finally, the song died down, allowing the girls to wake up and return to reality.



After singing, the old woman stood up from beside the fire and continued.

“Remember this song and sing it to your children by fire, like your mothers have surely sung to you. Now we shall see what kind of women you really are.”

She approached them, first Aure and then Vierra, and examined them roughly from head to toe, grunting occasionally with approval.

“You will both make good mothers, but only one can be the chieftain. Aure, you are the chieftain’s daughter. Vierra is the chieftain’s niece, and not unworthy to the task. However, the ruler is not chosen by her bloodline but rather by her actions. Here you are equal.”

Her gaze gained cold determination as she continued.

“If you, Aure, become the leader, our kind will prosper at first, but people in surrounding areas will eventually come, and the Kainu shall disappear forever. If you, Vierra, are chosen, our people will suffer greatly but shall be preserved for as long as my eyes can see. In this, I have a serious decision, because if Aure comes back from here alive, she will become the leader. Those of us who have survived have always been tough and resilient, and I say now to fight until only one is left. The survivor will be the chieftain after Aure’s mother passes.”

This cruel suggestion was left hanging in the air, and the girls stared at each other, trying to read intentions. Aure jumped up, drawing the stone blade from her belt, and approached Vierra with a grim look on her face. She wouldn’t let anything come between her and her prize, no more Vierra than the Mother’s predictions. Vierra got up nimbly and backed away from her cousin’s knife. Their eyes met briefly over the gloom of the campfires. In their stare was something new, something that hadn’t been there even in their worst quarrels. Something that could not be found in the eyes of a child.

They started a round of a dangerous game in the blaze of the fires. There was not much space to move about: falling from the edge would mean a plunge downwards in the dark to the waiting rocks below. Vierra backed away for a while but had to finally let her cousin close for fear of falling down. They grabbed each other, weapons in hand, and were soon rolling on the rocky cliff top, wrestling for their lives. They tumbled over Vierra's fire, spewing flames and a high spout of sparks as the burning wood moved violently. Both had wrestled almost as long as they had breathed, and they were equally matched in skill. Still, Aure's sturdiness gave her an edge, and she managed to push her cousin's knife hand to the ground as they struggled on the edge of the cliff. Aure's knife was slowly approaching Vierra's throat, inch by inch, until the jagged edge almost touched the glistening, sweaty skin. Shaking, they were both frozen to this position for a brief moment, and neither one seemed to be able to move forward.

Vierra swooped Aure off from on top of her in one swift motion, causing Aure to fall headfirst over the cliff's edge. Before Aure plunged down into her death, Vierra grabbed her by the arm. Aure's stone knife slipped from her grasp and clattered onto the rocks below, as she dangled in midair, held by her cousin. The girls gazed at each other, their eyes flashing with lightning in the dark. From the background came the eerie voice of the Mother.

"Let her go, Vierra. You will be the chieftain, and our people will live forever."

For a brief moment, Vierra could not reach a decision. She looked into her cousin's eyes and remembered their friendship, the runs through the forests while the village men nodded their approval, saying to one another, "Such great women they will be, but which one will lead?" She remembered how their differences and disputes had grown when they got older. Aure had tried to bend Vierra to her will, as she had bent all the other children of the tribe. Like a small chieftain, she had given orders in their games and chores as the





adults watched from the side, amused. But Vierra hadn't approved of her rule and hadn't given in an inch. And when the spirits had taken Vierra's parents to them, one after another, and Aure's mother had taken the orphan girl under her wing, the competition had risen to a completely new level. Besides the authority, they now also had a common mother from whom they both wanted admiration and attention.

Nobody would blame Vierra if she allowed Aure to fall to her death. The Mother was outright demanding it of her. She would get everything that Aure now had. She would be chieftain, and the Kainu would be preserved forever. Aure would definitely not save her, if it was the other way around.

Vierra yanked Aure back up to the surface with both hands and shouted,

"This is enough! I won't kill my cousin, no matter who tells me to do so, not even if it is you, Mother. In the morning I will leave with or without your blessing."

The night air was cut with a rising, low-pitched laughter from the Mother's throat.

"The chieftain's blood truly runs in your veins. You both will have my blessing, of course. You have brought honor both to yourselves and to your people. Never again shall you enter the children's hut."

The Mother went silent, and neither of the girls said anything either. Aure drew a heavy breath and avoided Vierra's gaze, a rare, secluded look on her face. They revived their fires as the burdens of the day started to slowly take their toll. Both tried to stay awake, but finally sleep took over. The last thing Vierra saw with her sleepy eyes was the Mother, poking the fire with a gentle smile on her wrinkly face.

## THE FIRST AND THE LAST

Vierra winced awake and noticed she was lying on an opening that led inside the cliff. Underneath her, she could feel the cold surface of the rock, and behind her twinkled the bare, star-filled sky. Forward, somewhere in the depths of the corridor, she could see a fluttery gleam of light. Vierra got up and approached it cautiously. Soon the corridor opened up into a big cave. In the middle was a fire, and behind the flames was the Mother. She stood facing the wall, away from Vierra, painting the wall with a color as red as blood. The huge walls of the cave were covered in pictures of men, animals, and life. There were the deer, the salmon, and the moose, the most important game for the Kainu. Amid them were the gallant wolf, bear, and wolverine. The entire history of the tribe was painted on the walls. Somewhere they hunted, somewhere they loved, here and there the children ran around playfully. The gloom of the fire made the wall paintings flicker and overlap. Some showed battles against men or beasts, in which the red paint looked the most like blood. The changing light made one picture disappear, only to reveal another one beneath it. In turn, this one also disappeared and made way for a third. The movement of the lively flame made Vierra doubt her eyes, and she blinked furiously to clear them.

Extending her hearing, Vierra could discern the low voices. The pictures were alive! People were talking and animals grunting. Here and there, children laughed or cried. As Vierra kept looking, the voices became louder and more numerous until they completely filled her head and she had to close her eyes.

The Mother turned towards Vierra, and her wrinkled face was full of surprise.

“What are you doing here? It is not your time yet.”

“I don’t know. I must be dreaming.”



“A dream this is not. There must be a reason that you are here, though. You must know because you are the last.”

“The last what?”

“The last of the Kainu, the last Mother. The greatest of us all, and yet still so small and powerless. Everybody else I will paint to this wall, but in time, you will paint yourself. Then our story will have been told in its entirety, and we will all meet by the fires of the underworld. You will paint it there,” said the Mother, pointing at the only empty spot in the cave wall. Around it were only pictures of women. There were noble young women armed with spears and bows. There were wrinkly old women sitting by their campfires. Others were giving birth, bringing new life to this world. Some dried fish in the strong winds in between winter and spring.

“What do I have to do?” asked Vierra. The fate of their tribe was making her uneasy. She could feel how tiny and insignificant she was in the middle of these majestic walls that surrounded her. “Why isn’t Aure here? Isn’t it she who will be the chieftain?”

“I do not know,” said the Mother, laughing in a tone that was not at all encouraging. “And even if I did, it is not my place to say. Your cousin’s path is not yours to travel.”

“And why did you take my father and mother? Why didn’t you take anything from Aure?”

“The Fargoer does not have a mother, the Wanderer does not have a father. When you have to decide, decide well. When you can’t affect things, bear them. When you do well, do not stop and rejoice because the next challenge will come soon and pass you by. You will perform great deeds, but your path will also be filled with great pain and sorrow. Songs are not sung of such deeds in Kainu campfires, but it doesn’t make them meaningless.”

“That means nothing,” Vierra replied. She tried to keep her anger at bay out of respect to the walls rather than the Mother.

“That is true. Luckily, your life’s troubles are not my troubles. Sleep now, but remember everything, especially this cave. You will



know when it is time.” And Vierra’s eyes closed, and no dream reached her again that night.

The girls awoke to the flies buzzing. The fires had gone out a good while ago and the sun had risen to the cloudless sky, boding another hot day. However, there was a dark front of thunder far on the horizon like a huge, steep line of mountains. The girls got up and quickly readied themselves for their journey home. Both had wide smiles across their faces. Like any children, they quickly forgot the bad things they had suffered and nurtured the good things in their minds. They would be considered adults now, and would soon be celebrated by the hut fires of their people. Their child minds couldn’t yet anticipate what adulthood would bring with it. As they climbed down the cliff towards the strand, their eyes met and their smiles faded. They both knew that the events of the previous evening would be kept a secret.

What had happened on that island had changed them irreversibly, and the joys of childhood had now slipped from their grasp, forever gone.