

### XIII. The Aftermath

He drew the coracle onto the shore in the same abandoned hollow he had used the last time, unwilling to beach closer to the village lest the invaders were still there. He quickly dragged the small craft, still trailing his nets, up the stairs, laying it beside the abandoned hut before rushing off, jogging at quickly despite the distance, hoping that if he arrived sooner, he might be able to do *something*.

What time had it been in the vision? It was day, that much was certain, but when? Where had the sun been? Had it fallen on the invaders' faces or backs? He couldn't remember, he'd been concentrating so closely on the events. But it could even have been this morning...

He ran on.

At first, other than the black bird that continued soaring overhead no matter how often he shoed it away, nothing seemed amiss among the empty hills and moors. It wasn't long, though, before that emptiness became oppressive. There should have been *some* sign of the inhabitants, a few stray sheep, perhaps, or the rise of smoke from a house behind a ridge. But there was nothing, only silence as he raced along the worn track through the silent grass.

He saw the first body a mile out from the village, a man lying face down in the grass, his back wet with red, the wound that had caused his demise dark and ugly. A shepherd probably from his clothes, clearly not one of the invaders. Though part of him urged that he keep on, that there was no time to lose, he couldn't pass without checking, if by some miracle the man still lived and could tell him what had happened. Cautiously, he slowed and approached, his ears alert for sounds of danger. His heart hammering in his chest, he crouched low and reached out.

The body was cold, with no hint of life left within. Too curious to stop himself, he turned the man's cheek, saw the deep stain on the ground beneath, then shrank away as he recognized the face staring back through glassy, sightless eyes. Reofro. He was one of the shepherds who lived on the moors, a widower whose wife had passed years ago, before Foaanru was born, and who'd never taken another.

The man kept mostly to himself, save when he had a bit too much ale in him. He and Foanru had not been friends, but they had no quarrels either. For this to happen...

It wasn't that Foanru was a stranger to death. After the plague, he had seen plenty. But never caused by the malice of another, not outside of his visions at least. That someone could do such a thing, and to a man who had done nothing to deserve it, was beyond his comprehension. What could drive such evil?

"Croak!"

His head shot up, startled. The bird peered at him, then hopped from the rock it had lighted upon and flapped toward the south, traveling a few yards before landing again and eying him intently.

Foanru glared at it, muttering a curse beneath his breath, then resumed running.

Reofro was only the first. Deep down, he had known that would be the case, but until he saw the next group, four in all, part of him had dared imagine that he might not come across any more. These were worse. The invaders had mistreated the bodies cruelly, hacking and tearing them like partly-butchered meat, drawing the attention of gulls and other scavenger birds that fluttered off as he approached, glaring from a safe distance as he passed. He did not stop. If the gulls were already feasting there was no hope for them, and he didn't want to reexperience that jolt of recognition. He ran on, and the gulls settled back to their meals, squabbling amongst themselves despite the ample pickings.

He saw more as he continued, a single body here, a pair there. Twice he saw sheep, senselessly slaughtered and left to rot, but there were far fewer of those than there ought to have been. Likely, they were too valuable to the invaders to kill just for fun. But nowhere was there sign of the murderers, and already the Hilfion was visible in the distance. Perhaps they had already gone, taking what they could of worth with them. Perhaps they had left nothing behind but the dead. He had to know.

He slowed as he approached the black rock. There were no bodies here. From his vision, he guessed that the invaders had slaughtered the shepherds in stealth, out of view, then crept toward the village,

waiting for the signal from their leader. None of those in Tlongow would have made it this far past their tightening noose. The village, he knew, would be a different matter.

Then he saw the smoke.

He crouched as he approached, careful to stay out of sight. Ahead, the black bird hopped along the ground, seemingly more cautious too. Perhaps the invaders had threatened it, maybe loosed their spears at it but found it harder to hit than fleeing villagers. If so, why it had deigned to return was anyone's guess.

He was practically crawling as he crept up the last few feet. Ducking behind a rock, he peeked his head above it and looked down upon the village. And his breath caught in his throat.

The houses were in ruin. Smoke still poured from some, painting the sky gray and black, while others were merely blackened husks. Wreckage lay strewn about on the ground outside, broken coracles, torn up nets, shattered fish-racks, some formed from the very timbers he had rescued from the sea-crushed boat, torn cloth, and all matter of rubbish riddled the ground, as if the place had been mercilessly whipped by the fierce gales of a terrible storm. And sprinkled among the devastation were other forms, large and small, all unmoving...

He glanced out at the water before descending, just to certain, then froze.

A boat was heading north, gliding past the western cliffs as he watched. It was far now, too far to see him, just a flash of red, green, and yellow in the distance, though even from here he could make out the faint form of the arching beast on the cloth that flew above its hull. The very same beast from his first vision, so many days before...

It was bearing north, but there was nothing there, nothing worth plundering. Only Klewstra.

He suddenly felt as if the breath had been sucked from his lungs and he clutched at the ground in terror. How could they know to go there? Could they know about him? And if they landed...

Another movement to the south caught his eye. Two boats more were there, moving toward the other islands. How many places had they sacked already? He had thought Hrantl and the others hadn't made the market because of the storm, but that may not have been

why at all. Perhaps the Hùloril had already fallen, and Tlongow had just been too far an outlier to know until now. Perhaps there was nothing left...

He returned his gaze to the village. Could there be survivors? Might the invaders have left *someone*? A glance at the boats reassured him that they were too far for him to be seen, and yet for some moments he still hesitated, sickened at the thought of what he might find. But, finally, fighting the nauseous dread sinking into his very bones, he began the descent.

It was far worse being there, walking among the wreckage with his collar pulled over his nose and mouth to block out the smoke stinging at his eyes. He wandered aimlessly, not sure what he was looking for. He saw many he recognized, too many, men, women, and children whom he'd spoken with, traded with, known for years, all gone. But there were fewer than there should have been, and the one he was both hoping and dreading to stumble across he did not see.

He turned back to the boats, now just pinpricks in the distance. Had they taken the people along with the sheep? Were Krealinah and her child...?

“Croak! Croak!”

The strange bird had taken perch upon a stone wall that had formerly served as a winter paddock and was eying Foanru intently, its head cocked to its side.

He sighed and closed his eyes. “What now?” he muttered.

The bird croaked again, fixing him in its gaze.

“What do you want?” he snapped. “Don’t you see...”

He stopped. The bird turned, now mercifully silent.

There it was again. A low sound, like a voice...

He rushed over.

Foanru found him propped against the blackened wall, his feet splayed before him, right hand clenched over his gut, the sleeve and tunic behind it soaked with red. Red trickled from the corner of his heavily bruised mouth, beneath eyes swollen nearly shut from the beating they’d received. But his chest still rose and fell with labored breaths, and he groaned softly at the sound of Foanru’s approach.

It took Foanru a moment to recognize him, so battered was he, but then, as the man's eyes met his own, he nearly stepped back in shock.

"Voluoni," he whispered.

"You," the man hissed back. "You follow them..."

"Where are the others?"

"How dare..."

"Voluoni," he implored, "where are they? Did any escape?"

"Escape?" He chuckled, his voice rasping. "No one escapes."

"Krealinah, did they take her? Rolianah? What happened to them?"

Voluoni coughed, spitting up more blood. "Oh, I see it now. You wanted her. They leave her for you, eh?"

Foanru stared at him.

"Too late. I told them." He coughed again.

"Told them what," Foanru asked coldly.

He chuckled again. "Wicked hussy. Tried hiding, but I saw... Said I'd tell, if they left me." He coughed. "Knew they were coming. Must have. Told her, didn't you? I've seen how you look..."

Foanru snarled at him. "You told them where she was?"

"You aren't getting her, you devil. Nobody's getting her. And they'll come for you too. Don't keep their deals, do they?" He coughed again, looking down at his chest. The red had spread, soaking through to his chest.

"Where?" Foanru demanded.

"Burned out," the man answered, smiling. "Nobody's getting her."

Foanru stared down at the man, red anger seething inside him. How could he...? His fists clenched, aching to be slammed into that hideously grinning face. But he held himself back. Instead, he closed his eyes and took a deep breath. What good would come of it, beating an already dying man? Voluoni was nothing. And he had to find Kreli, if only to see...

"Where was she?"

"Go bugger yourself."

He tensed again.

“What’re you going to? Hit me?” He laughed, harder this time until it collapsed into a fit of coughing that sprayed blood all across his chin.

Foanru glared for a moment, then stalked off, his teeth clenched in rage. He had to find her, to know... But first he had to think. Where would she have gone? He’d said she was hiding. Where would she hide that she thought no one could find her? The houses were just like those on Klewstra, single-level huts with nowhere to hide. He knew. He’d spent hours...

Except that that wasn’t entirely true.

He was running as soon as the thought came, of the first time they’d been together, a few months after her uncle had sold her to Voluoni. He’d been so afraid they’d be caught it had been hard to focus on the moment, crammed as they were in the narrow space among all the jugs beneath the oil-presser’s workshop...

The building still smoldered, smoke rising in thin tendrils from the scattered thatch strewn over the stone press and broken jugs. But the floor, made of great stone slabs, still held. And perhaps...

He ran around back.

The little cellar door, barely high enough to crawl through, was clogged with bundles of thatch, now blackened and smoking, but still thick enough to block the entrance. He was right, then. Why else would they have bothered? There was a good chance they wouldn’t even have noticed the hole, sheltered as it was between the two great boulders on which the floor slabs rested, had Voluoni not spoken.

He snarled, imagining the gutless wretch pleading for his life, offering his wife in exchange. He felt no pity for him. Hopefully the end would be long in coming, and painful.

But he could spare no thought for the man. He had to get inside. What he would do then, he didn’t know. But he had to get her out of there, if only to give her a proper... No, he wouldn’t think about that. One task at a time. But he couldn’t just grab the thatch. There had to be something...

There, the scattered remains of one of the trellises built from the timbers he’d rescued from the wrecked boat. Not ideal, but at least it would let him touch the blockage without getting burnt. He grabbed

one of the longer planks, then immediately dove into the work, tearing into the mass with manic fervor, scattering blackened, smoldering vegetation out onto the grass.

Standing a safe distance away, the black bird watched in silence.

It took only a few minutes to break through, but for Foanru each of these was like an eternity wasted, and he cursed each moment that passed. When he finally opened a path, he pushed the rest of the debris out of the way as quickly as he could, and then he was on his hands and knees, crawling inside.

The air within was stale, sullied by the smoke, and he was forced to back away to allow the outside breeze entry so he could continue. After a few moments' passing, he pulled his tunic above his nose and reentered. There was little he could see through the gloom, for his body blocked most of the light from outside and smoke still hung in the air, and he moved slowly, feeling his way as his eyes adjusted. He thought he could make out the pale shapes of some of the closer jars, and something darker beyond...

"Ah!" He snatched back his hand, clenching it tight around the gash that had torn into his palm. What the...?

Shards of pottery, all over the floor. He'd have to be careful.

And then, from the far side of the cellar, he heard a gasping cry, quickly squelched.

He stared off into the darkness, unwilling to believe his ears. "Kreli?" he whispered.

A sob, quiet yet hopeful, sounded from the depths of the space. And then he was sweeping away the broken shards with his sleeve, heedless of the cuts they delivered, as he hastened to reach it.