

XIV. The Leave-taking

Foanru sat with his back propped against the wall, gazing with unfocused eyes at the flames that danced along the edges of the peat bricks and warmed the little paddock in which they'd taken shelter from the wind. He was utterly spent. Even scooting forward to tend the fire was more effort than he could manage. Yet sleep would not come.

There was just too much to take in, too much horror, too much sadness, and when he closed his eyes it all roiled through his mind like waves churned by a gale, shattering slumber as easily as a winter storm dashes a stray swimmer against the rocks. Would that he could be like his avian companion, who after the rescue had hopped off to find food—dried fish from a shattered jar, thankfully, not the corpses of the dead—before roosting comfortably on the wall above. But such piece of mind was not for him. Even this place, which stood on the other side of the ridge above the village, offering no view of the wreckage or the sea beyond, did little to allay the horrors.

Huddled in her corner, wrapped in the torn remnants of a cloak he had found abandoned on the grass—he couldn't bring himself to take things from the dead, no matter how usable—Jalforn shifted, whimpering softly in her sleep. She, too, was having nightmares, likely worse than his own, though thankfully they had not roused her. She needed sleep desperately, more so than he, after all she'd endured. She was unresponsive when he pulled her out, and until she had finally coughed into the outside air, he was sure she'd be lost. She'd gained some strength since then, and even taken some water, but he'd had to carry her here, for her legs would not bear her, and she'd only spoken a few words upon waking, before drifting back to slumber. To look at her now as the dim light flickered across her face, he could barely see the budding woman whom Voluoni and the rest had taunted those few days before. To his eyes, she was still but a child, in need of protection and a great deal of healing. As he had been, not to long ago. He hadn't been much older than her when the plague came.

She had not been the only one he'd found in the cellar. Five had hidden there, though only four still lived. Balmour was the fifth,

Krealinah's cousin, two years her junior. Her body had blocked his way to the others and he'd been forced to push her aside, the unseeing stare seeming to follow him as he brought the others out, one by one. He'd brought her out too, after the others, wrapped her, and prayed to Hlaniya for her spirit's safe passage to the next world. But he could do no more. He had to reserve what energy he had for the living.

Of these, Gilyaln, Jalforn's sister who now slept fitfully by her side, was in the best shape. It was her that he'd heard in the dark, and when he'd found her, she was pressed against the wall, gasping the clean air that trickled through a crack between the foundation rocks, the baby, his baby, clutched tight against her chest. Rolianah had been more affected than the older girl—she'd been groggy and slow to respond when he'd pulled her out, her breath shockingly shallow—but she'd rallied once she expelled the smoke from her lungs, letting out a great wail that would have brought the invaders upon them in seconds, had any still remained on the island.

Krealinah was the worst, barely breathing and terribly wounded too, by a deep gash in her side where the invader's spearhead had smitten her. He'd bound it as best he could, but even his inexpert knowledge of such things told him that a wound so deep and gruesome left little chance for survival. He remembered from his youth, when Oltji, his neighbor's son some three years younger than he, had been overconfident on the rocks and stumbled and fell. He'd been pierced deep, the sharp stones tearing into his viscera, and though he'd lingered for a week and more, the fever and racking pain never left him as the poison spread within. Already, though he wanted desperately to deny it, the stain on the blanket he'd wrapped her in was spreading, and he dared not check on the wound lest he make it worse. And he'd been so relieved, so full of joy when he first saw her...

Without her, they would all have perished alongside Balmuor, or been dragged off to a fate unimaginably worse, beside which the Voluoni's odious attentions paled in comparison. Krealinah must have remembered the cellar from their very first tryst there, so long ago, and remembered too the crack in the rear, through which the pale radiance of the full moon had filtered in, making her pale skin almost luminous against his. They might have remained there, overlooked and safe, had

it not been for Voluoni's cowardly attempt to spare his own life. That too had been in vain. When he'd finally returned to the man after seeing to the others, troubled by the nagging sense that even such a sleazy lout as him deserved some compassion, he'd found him already cold. Though feeling guilty over his relief, he'd left the man where he lay.

Krealinah was barely capable of speech, so great was her pain, and she kept slipping in and out of consciousness while he tended to her, likely a small mercy. But Gilyaln had done her best to relate what had happened, though even with much questioning Fohanru was not sure he understood all the details.

She and her sister had been inside with their mother when the men came. They had been making bread. Gilyaln had been kneading the dough while Jalforn tended the oven and their mother repaired some stockings, Gilyaln's blue stockings which she wore now over her other pair, having insisted that Fohanru retrieve them from her house. Despite having to step over the mangled body that he only recognized as Kreli's uncle from the distinctive bald pate with the shock of hair over the front since his face had been mauled beyond recognition, he'd retrieved them from the ruin, torn as they were. He understood wanting to have this last memento.

Their first warning had been the screams. Confused and fearful, they'd rushed outside, only to see the invaders in the water, and more pouring over the ridge. Their mother had panicked, ran, begging the children to follow. But Gilyaln had fallen in her haste, stumbling in a hole, and Jalforn had stayed with her to help. By the time she was righted, their mother was gone, lost in the confusion. People were screaming, running in all directions as they found every exit blocked, and all the while the spears rained among them. There was nowhere to go to, nowhere to hide. They stood, terrified, in the midst of it all, clutching one another in terror as they waited for doom find them.

But Krealinah and Balmuor had come instead, rushing out of Kreli's house, she holding the baby clutched against her chest. Voluoni had come too, brandishing some sort of makeshift club, but he'd quickly realized that this enemy was beyond his ability and raced off, while the two women stopped by the girls, urging them along.

From there, Krealinah had led them to the cellar, avoiding the open space as much as possible, lucky that the invaders were tightening their net slowly to prevent anyone from slipping through rather than charging in rapidly, making it inevitable that they would have been caught. The women stowed the children inside, and Krealinah would have gone out for others, but by then the invaders were too close. And so, they waited in the dark, while all around them they could hear the screams.

Gilyaln wouldn't say what exactly she'd heard, and he didn't ask. But he did let her clutch at him and bury her head against his side until the wracking sobs left her and she could speak again.

After a time, the cries quieted, and it seemed they might escape after all. But just as they were beginning to let down their guard, they heard men outside. And then they were at the entrance, with torches in their hands.

The two women were fierce in their desperation. Hundreds of clay jugs, both empty and full, filled the cellar, and one after another the women flung them at the opening, driving the men back as pottery shattered against breast and face. But their spears were long and sharp. One struck Krealinah as she reached for more ammunition, and when Balmuor tried to pull her from harm's way a second pierced her, running her through from front to rear. Krealinah struck with renewed fury after that, lobbing missiles until the men retreated and the floor was littered with their shards, but their respite was only for a time. When they returned, it was with bundles of thatch and straw which they jammed into the entrance and set ablaze before leaving, laughing, for their boats. Had Foanru not come when he did, all four would surely have succumbed despite the crack, to join their fellows in the next world.

Jalforn ceased her whimpering, so that the only sounds were the crackle of the fire and the wind that whistled through the stones and grass. And still, sleep would not come.

Dawn shook him awake as the orange glow lit the eastern sky. When sleep had finally come, he could not remember, but it must have

been late, for he felt as groggy as if he'd been awake all night. He shook his head, blinking several times to clear his mind.

And then his eyes lit on the ashen face beside him, and the reality and horror of the day before crashed upon him like a bolt from the sky. Tentatively, he reached out and found her still warm, though barely, and saw that her breath still came, rapid and shallow. Only then did he look to the others. All still slept, even Rolianah, whom he'd expected would have wakened by now, demanding food or a change. Though perhaps she was old enough to sleep through the night; he knew so little of babies' patterns. She would need food soon though, as would they all. On top of that, there was no shelter here should another storm come, or the cold truly set in. And his little coracle had barely room enough for two plus a babe, certainly not five.

Food was the first order. He laid some more fuel on the fire—at least the invaders had spared that—then went off in search of whatever he could find, doing his best to cover or at least avoid looking at the bodies as he poked among the ruins. Some minutes in, he was joined by the black bird, hopping along the ground to pick through the refuse or fluttering atop the blackened walls to tear into some half-burnt morsel it had discovered. Foaanu found himself glad of its company, though it sometimes gave him the uncanny feeling that it understood him when he muttered his thoughts aloud, reacting almost as a person would.

By the time Rolianah's cries brought him hurrying back to the makeshift campsite, he had found a full bag of barley meal and a few blocks of cheese that had luckily been spared plunder and the ravages of the fires. They weren't much, but soon he had the meal boiling inside an empty jar rescued from the cellar while he saw to changing Rolianah and Gilyaln gently fed cheese and water her sister, who had regained some strength, though she was still frail and unready to walk. He'd tried offering cheese to the bird, but it hopped away after one look, its beak lifted with such an air of disdain that he actually chuckled despite the misery of their circumstances.

Krealinah stirred a little, accepting water and smiling at the baby, who calmed for a time after being changed, but she looked

frighteningly pale, and slipped back into sleep long before the food was ready.

After the meal was cooled and eaten, he sat with Gilyaln and Jalforn and explained that he had to go, but would return as soon as he could. They needed a place for the night, and they could not stay here. And there might be other survivors too. Perhaps the invaders had not found all the houses tucked away among the pastures and heathland. He had to be sure. They were to keep the fire going and see to Rolianah and Krealinah, and if they sighted more boats coming near, they were to crawl immediately back into the cellar and wait for him. He did not give instructions for what to do with Kreli in those circumstances; he and they both knew there no choice but to leave her where she lay.

He retraced his path from the day before, leaving the track wherever a side route suggested a homestead might be nearby, but his hopes were repeatedly dashed. The invaders had not burned the outlying homes, not wanting to alert the villagers of their presence, but they had done their damage nonetheless, seemingly determined that nothing useful should remain in their wake. Roofs had been thrown down, goods plundered, and whatever was left broken, seemingly out of sheer glee in its destruction. Here and there some small thing remained, a few jugs of flaxseed oil, a fisherman's nets, some unfinished sheepskins, but little food and no shelter. He wondered again at these men and what could drive such cruelty. And he searched on.

It was only when he found the coracle, undamaged because it had been laid out far enough from the house to escape notice, that his course became clear.

It was midday when they departed. Jalforn was not yet hale enough to paddle, but she had been able to walk to the shore unaided and even carry some of the supplies. She held the baby now, nestled in the second boat with her sister, along with all the cloth and foodstuffs he could find. A tangle of nets and rope attached the craft to his own, which he had carried all across the island from its resting place and which he now paddled vigorously, putting distance between them and

Olnimta as quickly as he could. Curled around him, wrapped in as many blankets as he could spare, was Krealinah. She had woken for a short while when he carried her to the boat, but he wasn't sure that she'd taken in anything he'd said, and now as he strained against the waves, pulling them back toward her former home, she had slipped back into restless slumber.

For a time, the black bird fluttered above, sometimes traveling far enough that he thought it might desert them and remain on the island, but eventually it settled on the girls' boat, watching the sea as they bobbed in the waves.

Soon they passed the point where Krealinah had planned to stage her daughter's death, and Tlongow was no longer in view. To look at the cliffs that rose overhead and seabirds that stretched their wings upon the winds, one might even have thought things were as they had always been, if one didn't know.