

XV. The Úlanre

Only when they reached the shores of Klewstra and he saw the broken jug, the dried fish it had contained strewn across ground muddied by the passage of heavily-booted feet, did he remember the northbound boat. Commanding the others to stay with the coracles, he raced off, charging up the slope until the ruined houses came into view. There he stopped in his tracks, staring in shock and denial.

It was gone. They'd burnt it all, everything of his that hadn't been on the coracle, his goods, his stores for the winter, his tools, everything.

All at once, uncontrollable shudders coursed through his limbs, and he dropped to his knees, burying his head in his hands as the awful truth hit him like a towering wave smashing him against the beach and threatening to drag him below. For he now saw the true nature of their situation. The invaders had not come merely for plunder or sport. They had come to eradicate the Hùloril, every last one. Perhaps Tlongow had been their last conquest—it was the farthest out of the villages, after all—or perhaps there were other communities still unaware of the coming peril, with only days or weeks left to them. What drove those men to such wickedness he could not fathom, but there was no denying their efficiency, destroying even when they found no one living there.

And if he was right, if he and those with him really were the last, how could they survive? He could provide some, yes, but they had no shelter, almost no food beyond what he could catch, and no means of trading for necessities like clothing, or blankets against the cold, or tools, or sustenance to last when the catch was lean. Thankfully, he had no sheep, or they might have slaughtered one and thrown it in to poison the well, as they had for the main water source in Tlongow. Yes, they might last days, months even, on his efforts and what help the others could provide. But someday their luck would run out. And then the invaders would have killed them as surely as if they'd landed the blow themselves.

He didn't turn at the sound of the footsteps, only when he felt the small hand rest on his shoulder. He saw that Gilyaln, too, was crying,

though she could not know the full import of what they saw. Still, he was glad of the comfort she offered.

Overhead, soaring on the chill wind, the black bird croaked mournfully.

But he was not one to give up so readily. By the time he returned to the others, his hand clasped in Gilyaln's, he was already beginning to devise plans to keep them through the winter, though he could not think beyond that. After all, he'd found a way to save Krealinah from Voluoni, even if it had come to naught because of the invaders. He could find a way through this. He had to.

His first priority was shelter. Already, the wind had strengthened as they crossed the open water to Klewstra, raising the waves into roiling hills and vales, terrifying the girls so that Gilyaln clung to her sister, eyes clamped tight while Foanru fought the sea. It had only worsened after they came ashore, and the clouds darkening the western horizon promised a grueling night. In time he might repair one of the houses and rethatch the roof, but for now their only option was the hidden grotto with the statue.

By the time the drops began to fall, a few at first and then a torrent pounding relentlessly against the stone that formed their roof, sending the black bird away to find shelter of its own, he had just finished bringing the last of their rescued stores inside, piling them in a dry corner before leaning against the stone wall to watch the rain and wind slash into the grass outside. The others watched with him, Jalforn gently rocking the baby on her lap as she fed the girl the watered down remains of the meal he'd cooked for breakfast, Gilyaln at her side, nestling against her as drowsiness set in.

Kreli had woken again after a long lapse, and now her head rested on his lap as she huddled against him, wrapped tight in her sheepskin blankets. She was shivering despite the frightening heat that radiated from her skin, something that had already begun before they even entered the boat. Now the fever had truly taken over, and red blotches colored her neck and cheeks. He wished dearly for a fire, which might at least have helped her be more comfortable, but there had been no time to gather fuel before the rain, and now anything they found would

be wet and useless. At least the surrounding soil kept out the worst of the chill.

“Foanru?” Kreli whispered.

He blinked, startled. It was the first time since the fever set in that she’d said anything to indicate that she was aware of what was happening around her.

“Yes?”

She turned her head until her blue eyes found his and smiled softly. “You’re here,” she muttered. “I thought I was dreaming.”

“I’m here,” he answered, brushing a stray whisp of auburn hair off her sweat-bathed brow and away from her eyes.

“I’m glad.”

“Me too.”

“Where are we?”

He smiled sadly and felt a tear trail from his eye. “We’re home,” he answered softly. “Klewstra, where you belong.”

She furrowed her brow. “But... What about Voluoni?”

“He’s gone. He can’t hurt you anymore.”

“But he’ll come for Rolianah... Rolianah!” She started, her eyes darting about quickly in panic.

“Shh, it’s okay. She’s here, right behind you. Here, see?” He helped her turn so she could see the child. Jalforn peered back with a sad smile while the baby glanced briefly at her mother before turning back to the cold mush.

Krealinah stared for a moment, then sighed and turned back. “This is real?”

“Yes,” he replied. “Of course.”

“It’s just, I’ve had such awful dreams...”

He nodded mutely. It was better that the memories fade like whisps in the night.

“I don’t know this place.”

“No,” he agreed. “It’s a cave I found. I was going to hide you here. It’s under the Flute Stone.” He used the name they had called it as children, when Polnu the shepherd had entertained listeners here with his piping, while the stars blazed in the heavens and the flock grazed placidly around them.

“Oh,” she answered, the effort of making sense of what he’d said clearly too much for her now.

“Where does the cave go?” Jalforn asked as she wiped the baby’s face clean.

“There’s a room down there,” he answered. “Not very far. Inside is a statue of a man, the Ülanre.” As he spoke, he could almost hear his grandfather’s voice in his head, whispering tales from long ago.

“What’s that?” Beside her Gilyaln raised her head, her eyes suddenly shining with interest.

“You’ve not heard the story? Perhaps it wasn’t told in Tlongow. My grandfather used to tell it. Do you remember, Kreli?”

“I remember the name...” she answered, looking at him so helplessly that his heart ached.

“Well,” Foanru continued, fighting back his worry, “the Ülanre’s not a that, he’s a who. I found his statue here, just before I came to you, but he’s been here for a long, long time. When I can make us a torch, we can go see him.

“My grandfather used to say that the Ülanre was a man and yet not a man, a traveler on the wind and the rain, master of thunder and snow, and he could see the world not just as it is, but as it had been, and as it would be. He came from the west, from the sea, in the midst of a storm the likes of which the islands had never known before, in which the sky was black as night, though it was midday, and the rain and wind lashed the earth like spears thrown by the gods, tearing grass and stones to shreds, and the waves crashed against the shore, drowning the rocks and sand and threatening even the bluffs above. It was at the worst point of the storm that the people first saw him, when they were huddled inside their huts, afraid that the world was about to end around them. But he appeared before them and raised his hand, and offered words of comfort, saying that this, too, would pass, and that the wind and rain and darkness would soon be spent, and drift away as just the fleeting remnants of memory, and that the sun would rise again, and joy would return. They had but to wait.”

Foanru smiled as he spoke, remembering the old man’s voice as he had related the story so long ago to the children gathered round the fire on a summer night lit by the blinking green motes of darting glow

worms. Krealinah had been there too, enraptured along with the others. He remembered how pretty she had been, and how her face glowed in the firelight. She had caught him looking, then, and he had glanced away quickly, embarrassed, only to hear her giggle beneath her breath.

“The people feared him,” he continued, “and they shrank from him, though he came in peace and meant no harm. Had it not been for their fear of the storm, they might have driven him out or even killed him. But after a day and more, it came to be as he said, and the waters calmed and the clouds passed and the sun returned, as bright as the clearest day of spring. And then the people were soothed, and they asked the Ülanre why he had come among them. And he said in reply that he was searching for his missing eye, for you see he had only one in his head. He had taken the other and given it to the wind so he could see what the wind sees, which is the whole face of the earth and the sky and the sea, for the wind goes where it wills and nothing on the surface of the earth can stand in its way. And as his eye was with the wind, he gained much wisdom, and saw much that was upon the world, even things the birds do not see, for they cannot reach as high as the wind, which flies even to the stars. But still he wished to know more, for though the wind scours the surface of the world and touches the dark void above and even the sun and moon, it does not know what lies beneath the surface, within the earth. And so, he bade the wind to give his eye to the water, which seeps deep into the earth and flows through the narrow places to the dark realms beneath. And the eye was taken by the water, and it showed him much, and more wisdom still came to him. But then the eye was lost, and he had come to the island to find it, for he said that the water had at the last brought it here.

“But the people could not help him, for they did not know much of the earth, only what they scraped from its surface with their hoes and plows, or what they found when they dug for roots and precious rocks. But they did know of a special path beneath the island, though none had taken it, for it was a crack in the cliffs, high above the sea and yet below the surface of the island, and there it was said the wind went to meet the earth. Perhaps, they thought, he might find his eye

there. And so, the Ülanre cast himself into the hole, borne up by the water, which he knew, and pulled in by the wind, over which he had power. And therein he disappeared. The earth took him, and sealed the hole behind him, and he was seen no more.”

“But did he ever find his eye?” Gilyaln asked.

Foanru smiled. “I asked the very same thing, when the story was first told to me. Grandfather said that no one knows.

“But that was just the tale. Perhaps Grandfather had seen the statue when he was young, or perhaps someone else had seen it and told him about it, I do not know. Certainly, I had never heard anyone speak of this place when I was a child. And how much of the tale is truth and how much added I do not know. But the Ülanre is real, as I said. And, as the story says, it is missing an eye. But the eye is not lost, or at least it is no longer.”

And with that, he fished into his pocket and withdrew the stone, holding it before them.

The others peered at it. He himself did not look at it directly. He didn’t expect it would work in the dim light—had he thought it would, he would have warned them against it, and perhaps not let Gilyaln see at all—but he did not wish to see more, not for a while. Not after the last time.

“It doesn’t look like an eye,” Jalforn said softly.

“No,” he agreed. “Or at least, not much. But it has the same look as the statue, a thing of swirls and threads, just as a man made of rain and winds might appear, and it fits where the eye should be.”

Gilyaln furrowed her brow. “Why didn’t you give it back?” she asked. “You said he wants his eye back.”

“It’s just a statue,” Jalforn reminded her.

“No, she asks a good question. And I tried, but I couldn’t. It wouldn’t... it wouldn’t let me.” He sighed. “I never told you why I was in Tlongow yesterday, did I?”

The girls shook their heads.

Kreli stared at him, suddenly troubled. “It wasn’t a dream, was it? Tlongow, the men...”

“Yes,” he answered sadly. “It’s gone.”

Kreli closed her eyes, fighting back sobs.

“Yesterday morning, in the first hour after the sun rose, I was on the beach that we came onto when we landed here.” He continued. “And I looked into this stone. You see, this stone, if you hold it in sunlight, it shows you things, people, places, mostly long ago, I think, but sometimes not. But then I saw Tlongow. And I saw the boat with the men. And I came. I had to.”

“But they came mid-morning,” Jalforn said softly.

He nodded. He had suspected as much, when he saw the boats so close to the village. It showed the future then, as well as the past. He wondered how far...

“It’s magic?” Gilyaln asked, staring in awe.

“Yes,” he answered. “And the statue too.”

“But not magic enough to save Mother and all the others,” Jalforn said bitterly, turning away.

“No,” he agreed sadly, “not magic enough for that.”

They were silent after that, save for the muted sound of Kreli’s sobs.