

## XVIII. The Message

The black bird glanced up the stone where it had been tearing into a biscuit like the one Fohanru had enjoyed earlier, croaking in greeting as they approached. Korvan chuckled and leaned over it, stroking its head as he spoke a few unintelligible words to it.

“It’s yours?” Fohanru asked.

Korvan shook his head. “Not as a sheep belongs to a man, no. She comes and goes as she pleases—or, sometimes, at my request—but never at my command. But Koppi has been my friend for many years.”

“Oh.”

“Come,” he said, leading the way into the tent.

The canvas shelter was large enough to stand in, lit from within by a fire held within a metal basket raised on feet off the ground. They’d laid Kveli out beside the fire, where the warmth could reach her most easily, placing her upon a roll of blankets with cushions for her head and back. She was drinking something from a steaming cup as he entered, but she put it away when she saw him, handing it to Mahila and smiling bravely at him, though she still looked pale and exhausted. She seemed alert, and her eyes shone more brightly than they had in some time. They’d found clothes for her too, he realized, though the top she wore now was too big, and slid off her shoulder, revealing the smooth skin of her collar, and the dark bruises scattered across it.

Quickly, he strode to her, crouching beside her as she gazed into his eyes.

“Hi,” he said gently, his voice almost a whisper.

“Hi yourself,” she answered, as she always did. He swallowed, forcing back the tears that were rising unbidden to his eyes.

“How are you feeling?” he asked.

“I’ve been better.”

“Yeah...”

“It doesn’t hurt so much anymore, though.”

“That’s good,” he replied, taking her hand. It felt chilly to his touch, not hot as it had before, and when his other hand strayed across her shoulder to adjust the fabric, that too felt warm but not feverish.

“How’s Roli?”

“She’s fine,” he answered. “Jalforn’s been looking after her. She’s so gentle with her...”

“Good.”

“Do you want to see her? I could go get—”

“No, not yet. I just want...” she closed her eyes, and he could feel her hand start to tremble in his. He leaned over her, wrapped her in his arms as best he could from where he sat without brushing against her wounds. He felt her begin to sob as she pressed herself against his chest.

“Shhh,” he whispered to her. “It’s okay.”

“I’m so scared,” she said. “I don’t want to die, Foanru, not now. I thought I was ready, when things were so bad with Voluoni, but when they came... I’ve saw the light leave her, right before me... How can the gods be so cruel?”

“I don’t know,” he answered. “And you’re not...” He looked up at Korvan, his eyes pleading.

“Nothing is sure,” the other man answered. “But she’s young, and strong, and her body is still fighting.”

“I’m not going to let anything happen to you,” he promised her, though he knew the words to be empty. “I’m yours, from now until the end, and I’ll never leave you.”

After a time, Korvan fetched the girls. Kreli was even able to hold Rolianah, though she had to do so with great care to keep errant limbs from aggravating her wounds, and she returned the child to Jalforn after only a brief time. Foanru stepped back and smiled as she cooed over their daughter and chatted with the girls about her care. This was almost Kreli as he remembered her, from her youth before the plague, before Voluoni and all the rest, when she would chat merrily with her friends as they spun the wool or scrubbed the laundry, the sunlight dancing in her hair.

“She seems almost well,” he said softly to Korvan, who had stepped in beside him.

“She has a strong spirit,” the other man replied. “She told me some, about her husband, when we saw his handiwork. She has borne much. More than any should be asked to.”

“Yes,” Foanru agreed. “I just wish I had done more.”

“So do all who seek to right what is wrong in this world, I think.”

“What are her chances?”

“I cannot say. Her spirit is strong, as I said, but her wound is deep. Much damage was done, and the infection has spread far. We have done what we can, broken the fever and given her medicine for the poison in her veins, but much now is on her. You see that she seems better now, but much of that is from the medicines we gave, which dull the pain and relieve the mind.” He smiled tightly. “As you say, would that I could have been here sooner, before the poison spread so deep. Now, we are left to wait and see.”

Foanru felt the ball of sickening anxiety begin to boil in his belly again, and yet when he watched her play with baby, he could scarcely believe death still stalked so close beside her. But she *would* make it through. She had to.

“Come,” Korvan said, “let us leave them. We have much to speak of, you and I.”

Foanru nodded mutely, his eyes lingering on Kreli’s face a while longer as she laughed alongside Gilyaln at the faces Rolianah was making. And then he followed Korvan out into the dark.

The man strode away from the camp, treading purposefully without misstep through tufts and hollows despite the dim light until he stopped some yards from the bluff overlooking the sea. In the distance, the sparkling reflection of the firmament on the undulating ocean was broken by the piercing finger of the Jülanrec, stretching toward the cloudless sky.

“Twenty-four days ago,” Korvan began, his voice barely audible above the surf, “a signal was sent, something that had not happened in many, many long years. There had been indications beforehand, flickers, for perhaps four weeks, but such things are not unheard of, and nearly always amount to nothing. But this was different, strong and clear. And that signal came from here—from there, more

precisely.” He pointed to the dark shadow in the midst of the water. “You know of what I speak?”

Twenty-four days. So much had happened, it was hard to be sure of the time, but that seemed to match. “Yes.”

“That was when you took the stone?”

“Yes,” Foanru repeated, more softly this time.

“And when you took it, you *saw* things, did you not? Things others could not see, places and peoples unfamiliar, the like of which you had never laid eyes on before, as you did with Beluonim’s song.”

“Yes. But how...?”

“I beg your patience and forbearance. I have my own theories of what has happened, but I cannot be certain yet, not until I have a full picture of the matter. Fortunately, I expect that you can fill in many if not most of the gaps in the story, but until all the pieces are present, I must hold off on explanations, lest I misspeak. But I promise that I will tell what I know when I can, and answer all questions to the best of my ability. Agreed?”

“I suppose...”

Korvan smiled. “Good. And I assure you that I will not let you return to rest this evening without providing some explanation. Now, for you to remove the stone, the seal must have broken. When did it break? Was it your doing?”

“The seal... do you mean the shell that was around it?”

“The shell. Yes, that is a good way of describing it.”

“It broke in the storm—that was some days before I found it. I first saw the hole the morning after it had cleared, when I was salvaging the wrecked boat. That’s how I got to it—I climbed the pole from the boat. I couldn’t have reached the top of the Jūlanrec without it.”

“Jūlanrec?”

“That’s its name, the rock where the stone was.”

Korvan gave Foanru a quizzical look. “An ancient name,” he mused. “I wonder...” He shook his head. “But you said you found a boat.”

“Yes. It was like yours—well, like theirs, at least. Not as large as yours.”

“By ‘theirs’ you mean the Teshwans—the men who attacked the islands?”

“Yes. It was the same, or at least very nearly so.”

“Was it newly lost, do you think?”

Foanru thought back, then shrugged. “I cannot say.”

“No, I suppose it wouldn’t be clear. But were it lost in the storm... Was this storm exceptionally fierce?”

“The seas were rough, and there was a wind, but it was no fiercer than many I’ve weathered. I wouldn’t want to be on it, all the same.”

“But was it enough to break a seal like the one on the Jūlanrec?”

“It’s possible, I suppose, but I wouldn’t have thought so if I hadn’t seen it broken. As I said, many storms of equal or greater strength have passed through before, and it always held.”

“Nor is it likely to have capsized the Teshwan ship—they are among the best mariners upon the seas, and their ships are made for these waters. Though I suppose it could have been lost days before, in waters far from here...” He shook his head. “Tell me, did you notice anything else unusual in recent months, prior to the storm? There might have been strange weather, perhaps, or a disturbance among the animals?”

“No, nothing. Though the birds didn’t like the Jūlanrec after the storm. They wouldn’t so much as approach it until the stone was removed.”

“Hmm. Interesting...”

“Is that important?”

“It might be. But that was late. Something woke it, and likely well before the storm.”

“What woke?”

“In good time.”

“Sorry.”

“Do not be. Your curiosity and anxiety to know are entirely understandable. But there are still more pieces to be examined. Now, the seal broke in the storm—or perhaps *with* the storm, for the storm may not have been the agent. Following that, you used the post—the mast, I presume—from the wrecked ship to retrieve it. But how did

you know to look there? Surely the stone would not have been visible from shore.”

“No. But I could see the hole in which it lay, and there was something about it that kept drawing my eye. Until one day I *saw* it, a boat, like the one that had washed up on shore, one of theirs, the Teshwans’. It was but a glimpse, but it was clear as day. I think it was the one that came here after sacking Tlongow, but of course it wasn’t there, not really. Not yet. But after that I had to take a closer look.”

“It was calling to you.” Korvan mused. “You kept finding yourself looking to it, didn’t you? Even though you’d seen it a thousand times, even when there was nothing new to see?”

“Yes...”

“Yes. It needed—needs—you. It couldn’t send the signal on its own, it just wasn’t strong enough. That’s what we had forgotten. But it found *you*, and instrument it could use, perhaps the first with the sight to set foot on this island for many long ages.”

“An instrument?”

“I apologize. There is no good word for it in your language, at least none known to me. What it needed was someone through whom it could focus its energies and communicate, as a flute focuses the breath into the notes of a tune, though the analogy is inexact because in this instance the instrument influences the one communicating, while a flute has no power over the player.”

Foanru just blinked in incomprehension.

“Now,” Korvan continued, leaving no time for Foanru to collect his thoughts, “was this the first of your visions, this boat?”

“Yes.”

“And before that, did you have any related experiences? Not visions, but perhaps oddly vivid dreams, or the sense of something present but unseen?”

“None of that, but dreams... I’ve always had bad dreams, strong ones, like I’m really there. At least since the sickness struck. But Kreli always thought they were because of how terrible it was. She gets them too, though not nearly as bad as I do, but then her family fled before the worst.”

“What sickness?”

“It’s what killed everyone, or drove them off the island like Kreli and her mother.”

“When?”

“A little more than three years ago. Is it important?”

“It may be. Tell me about it, please, if it’s not too painful.”

He nodded. “It started with the fish...”

Korvan remained silent for a long while after he completed his tale, his eyes fixed on the water in contemplation. For a time, Fohanru let him be, but he began to become impatient, and after some minutes could bear it no longer.

“Well?” Fohanru urged.

Korvan looked up, startled. “Oh! I apologize.”

“The sickness, it’s important then?”

“Yes, very much so. And it is the one thing thus far I could not have guessed at. We did not know what slept there, and for it to have lain dormant so long...”

“Are you going to tell me what’s going on now?”

“Soon. Very soon. Only a few pieces of the puzzle remain, perhaps only one last one. Tell me, how is it that you came to be here?”

“I was born here,” he answered, feeling both confused and a little indignant at the question.

“Certainly, certainly. And yet you are unlike the other Hülöril, in countenance as well as disposition. And unless I am mistaken, you recognized some among my words when I spoke in the tongue of the Atazoni, though perhaps not enough to understand. *Jülanrec* is from that tongue, you know. It means *Finger of Direction*.”

Fohanru nodded. “Yes, I’d heard some before. But I only heard it spoken by my grandfather, and only on occasion. He never taught it to me, nor my mother, I don’t think. Perhaps he meant to someday, but the sickness put an end to that.”

“And no other spoke it?”

“No. His father—my great-grandfather—must have spoken it and taught it to his son. No one else on the island did, nor any of the other islands as far as I know.”

“Your great-grandfather was from elsewhere?”

“Yes. But no, I don’t know where from. No one ever spoke of that, except foolish rumors like that he was the child of Aiklem and the sea. He was found on the shore, brought in by the waves, barely alive. They took him in and nourished him and taught him to speak, but from all I have heard he did not know where he was, nor could he say from where he came.”

“Yet he spoke the tongue of the Atazoni.”

“He must have. But he died before I was born.”

“He was old?”

“Not so old, I don’t think. An unexpected storm at sea. My grandfather was a young man at the time, not yet married.”

“And your grandfather, he resembled you also?”

“Rather than looking like everyone else? Yes, he had my skin and eyes. And he was tall, even in his old age, much taller than me. Taller even than you.”

Korvan nodded. “I took a chance, hoping you might know some of the Atazol tongue, resembling that race as closely as you do, but I thought it a fool’s hope, for none have spoken that tongue as their language from birth that I know of for well beyond a thousand years. Only a handful of the learned know anything of it today, much less can speak it. For it to have survived for so long, and here, of all places, is a mystery I fear may be beyond my means to unravel. For the Atazoni are all but gone, perhaps fewer walk this earth than could fill a small village. Or so I thought. And yet here you are, at the precise time when you are needed, the only survivor of a plague that nearly destroyed all on the island. And this is of greater import than you may realize. For among the Atazoni were some to whom was accorded the gift of sight, far more than among other peoples, though even among the Atazoni the gift was always rare, and that is the gift most desperately needed for this time.”

“So, I’m like you then?”

“I too am descended from the Atazoni, yes. Before I came here, I had assumed that I was among the very few who remained of our race, perhaps one of only a handful, too few even to fill a village. I have studied the lore of my people, as have some others, but we are fading, and soon I believe our line will be lost to time as our threads vanish

into the greater weave of humanity and no distinction remains and the works of our hands and minds disappear as stories are forgotten, parchment crumbles, and even the records on stones are buried beneath the sands or rendered unintelligible by the workings of wind and water. Such has been the fate of many great peoples, strong in their time but now forgotten. And yet the Atazol line long holds true, as you are proof. For you, whose heritage is Hùlor in seven of eight parts, retain their features. And their sight.

“But I think now is the time for me to explain what I can, though there are still pieces of the story that elude me, and perhaps may never be recovered.

“First, I must explain something of this sight that you and I share. Thus far, I am guessing, you have only seen things as one might see them in life, were one there to witness them, yes?”

“I think so, if I understand your meaning.”

“And yet, just as clearly, the things which you see are not truly there.”

“No. I think they’re from long ago, and many of them from places far from here. Though the Teshwan boats were of the future...”

“You were seeing memories, mostly, though not entirely, for those latter were visions of things to come. But, crucially, these were not *your* memories. When you saw them, you were connecting to the mind of another, in similar fashion to how you connected with Beluonim’s mind when you listened to his song, but this connection was much stronger and much deeper, for the other can only connect in this way.”

“Another?”

“Your traditions must tell you that this world that we see, of stones and waves and sky, of creatures that crawl and swim and fly, that this is not all there is, that beyond our sight are other things, other places that we cannot reach merely by sailing off to the horizon but are *elsewhere*.”

“The heavenly halls of the gods and ancestors,” Foanru supplied, nodding.

“The concept is similar,” Korvan conceded, “but I would suggest that even the most keen-sighted man or beast upon the earth cannot look into the heavens and see the land of which you speak, nor could

the strongest bird fly high enough to reach it, not because it is so inestimably distant, but rather because it is somewhere *else* entirely, a place that is not truly a place at all, at least not to our way of understanding, a place where time and distance do not have the same meaning as they do in our world, if they have meaning at all, where past and present are entwined like the threads of a rope. And yet this place—or places—does touch upon our own, and can be glimpsed from time to time. For most, these glimpses never come, or if they do, they are but flickers in the shadows or flashes in sleep, though even such small brushes with the other can change a mind, embedding within a kernel of thought that can grow into great feats of imagination, or terrible deeds of destruction. But for some, the realm beyond ours is closer, easier to access, easier to *see*, or even touch, and one can learn to influence what resides there—or *be* influenced by it.

“For there are beings there, entities not of flesh and blood but nonetheless *real*, with minds and goals of their own, though their thoughts are not as our thoughts and their desires not as our desires. Some there are who have learned to bond with these beings and exert some control over them, and from thus they have gained power too, power with which they can manipulate our world in ways seemingly contrary to nature, allowing them to perform great works—and terrible works also. Some even have learned to anchor these beings to things in our world so that this power would always be accessible to those who understood how to use it, objects such as your stone. But a stone has little lifeforce of its own, so to be bound to it affords such beings little power, while a loving thing has much lifeforce and therefore much power, though few have the knowledge to use even a fragment of their inner strength. For it must be remembered that all lifeforce binds the material of this world to that other world, and that living things already live as shadows in that world, though they see it not.”

Foanru blinked. He had thought he understood that Korvan was talking about the realm of the gods—everyone knew that the gods didn’t just walk around on the earth, though they could if they wished too, but instead lived in their great halls in the heavens and looked down on the earth from above—or perhaps the halls where the spirits

of the dead rested before they returned in new form, but it no longer sounded like that at all. True, one could gain blessings from a god with the proper offerings and the luck of fortune, but this did not sound like that.

Korvan regarded him for a moment, giving him time to ask a question, but he was so far lost that he just nodded for the man to continue.

“It is one of these beings,” he pronounced, “that is bound to your stone. It is not *in* the stone as an apple pit is within the apple, and yet it is accessible through it and part of its essence cannot leave it entirely. Many years ago was it bound to the stone, and that was for but one purpose, to see, and to relay what it saw. Of old, it was one among many, crafted as a scrying device by the Ancients with the purpose of watching over their neighbors and rivals. The memories you saw, I expect, are of those things over which it was set to watch, long ago. But the stone was not all there was. It was merely the *eye*, a part of the whole, set there to be seen through by whoever controlled the receiving body, to which the being is also connected.”

“Yes,” Foanru replied. This at least made some sense. “It’s the Ülanre’s eye. And he can see what the eye can see. So that’s the thing you’re talking about then, the Ülanre.”

Korvan stopped and stared. “How do you know this name?”

“It’s just what my grandfather called him in his stories. To him they were but a tale. But I found it, the statue, beneath the rock that caps the island, and it’s eye is missing, and the stone fits right where it should go. It’s At... it’s the same language as the Jülanrec, right? What does it mean?”

“He who sees into shadows,” Korvan answered softly. “But how...? I have not heard any speak this name in many long years. Who *was* he, your great-grandfather...?”

Foanru frowned. Surely, even an event from Korvan’s infancy would have happened long after his great-grandfather had come to Klewstra.

“But yes, you are correct. The eye and the statue are one, and the being called the Ülanre bound to both, so that of old the user could scry from a distance using the statue and seeing through the eye. It

was a crude way of using the tool, inelegant and ignorant of its true potential, but effective.

“Long after its creation, after its masters had failed and their works fallen, it was moved here and given new purpose, to watch, yes, but not for insurrection or as prelude to invasion, but rather as a warden against the Darkness. Those who would use it, like myself, learned subtler ways, ones that did not allow the direct scrutiny of those who lived beneath the eye’s watch but rather to open ourselves to the receipt of a message, an alarm if you will, should what we feared come to pass. And so the statue too was left here, for though space and time have different meanings for the beings from elsewhere than they do for us, there is still discomfort in the separation of parts of themselves in our existence, and bringing the two into proximity alleviated some of that suffering—and, I think also, helped win its goodwill toward doing what was asked of it.

“For in ancient days, long before the crafters of the stone walked upon this world, a great and terrible Darkness beset the land, an evil bent on remaking the world in its own image. It was driven back at great cost, but already the world had been marred, and its touch could not be fully eradicated. Some things of its devising remained, buried deep, awaiting its return. Rumors spoke of one such thing, buried deep in the High North beyond the Walls of Ice, and those few who remembered set up the stone within the pillar—the Jülanrec—to keep watch over it.

“And so it was for many long years, during which the eye and that which resided within it kept watch. Until three years ago. Then, the thing which had long been feared happened, and the evil stirred.”

“The sickness.”

“Yes. The plague was of its making, though I expect it is but a taste of the destruction it can unleash should it fully awaken. I cannot be sure of the full extent of its power, for no remembrance remains of it, only rumors. As I said, I did not know that this plague was within its power at all, and yet there is little doubt that it is responsible.

“At that time, I believe, the being bound to your stone also awoke. It had one task to which it was committed, to send a message to those of us who remained to hear it, but it found it could not. It was too

weak, for its connection to this world had grown light. But it found someone, one with whom it could commune, one whose strength it could draw upon to fulfil its purpose. You.

“It sensed in you great potential, but it could not connect with you to where it could draw upon your life force to amplify its power. Not yet. But it could do some. Perhaps it could supply you just enough strength to resist what killed all the others. Perhaps, also, it could reach you through your dreams, slowly strengthening the bond. But though the evil had not yet moved again, it was running out of time. For as it showed you, it can see not only into past and present, but also the future, to some extent. It knew what was to come, and that if it did not act the Teshwans would take you unaware and its chance of sending the alert would be lost. And so, it expended what remaining power it had to draw you to it, shattering the shell so you would find it—aided in that, likely, by the violence of the storm—and perhaps even drawing the ship here to provide you with a means of reaching it.”

“You think it sank...?”

“No, it does not have the power to sink a ship, not even at the height of its strength. But it may be able to contact the minds of others, perhaps embed a simple suggestion. A navigator’s perception might be subtly shifted, perhaps, leading the craft against barely seen rocks or into a high wave and thus causing it to flounder. It would be a desperate measure, to be sure, but such things are not unheard of.”

“Oh,” he answered softly, shivers suddenly running down his spine as his hand absently closed around the bag at his waist.

“Such works will have drained it of much of its power, and disturbed things around it greatly. There may have been some sign if it.”

“The birds. They wouldn’t go near the Jülanrec, at least not until after I removed the stone.”

“Yes. They could feel it too. But its ploy worked. You came. And when you took it, you saw some of what it saw, but it too took from you, enough to send the message. Enough to reach me.”

“And so, you came.”

“Yes, and so we came.”