

XX. The Decision

It was morning. Korvan's people were breaking down the camp, moving quietly and efficiently in the gray morning light. After the brilliantly clear evening, clouds had moved in once again, cloaking the sun to where it was but a dim glow on the southeastern horizon. The wind too was stiffening, rustling the grass around his feet as it swayed back and forth. It would be cold today, and likely colder tomorrow. Winter was coming.

As he stood at the apex of the island, of Klewstra, his home, his gaze swept across the expanse of grass, moss, and scattered stone toward the rocky edges overlooking the vast ocean that stretched as far as the eye could see. In the distance across the dark and choppy water he could just barely discern the Rijali, two lonely specks in the west, the very edge of his world. Nearer and on his other side stood the cluster of what had once been houses abut were now but low circles of broken rubble, blackened and empty. He little was visible from here since a low rise all but blocked his view, only the edge of a wall and a blackened heap of refuse he'd pulled out in his searching. But he knew well what lay out of sight, the remains of the house in which he'd lived his entire life.

He loved this place. He loved it with an intensity so deep that he ached to think about it. This was *home*. That was what had kept him here these long years, far more than the dark glances and snide remarks of the Tlongow villagers or the vast distances between here and the unknown shores where he might have lived in peace and anonymity, though the loneliness of his self-imposed isolation had sometimes weighed as heavily on him as if a pile of rocks had been heaped upon his chest. It was as if the soil and rock themselves spoke to him, comforting him as they embraced him in their rich, faintly salty smell while the breezes whispered through the grass and the seabirds flew overhead, calling and jabbering to one another in their simple avian ways. He recalled the wonder of seeing a pod of dolphins, cresting the waves between here and the Jülanrec, the spouting of a great whale as it passed his island on its way to distant waters, the barking of seals, so infrequent on these shores, and the delightful treasures that from time

to time washed upon the beaches, caught amidst the mass of brownish-green seaweed. Even the wind and the storms that rent the air and whipped against his house as he huddled within had a certain feeling of *rightness*, of that sense, deep down, that this was where he belonged. This place was *his*—or, perhaps more truthfully, he belonged to this place, and no other.

The others did not feel as he did. Kreli would have left Tlongow in an instant if she could, following him to the very edge of the Denkyali and beyond, anything to escape the crushing misery that had been thrust upon her. Always, he had found reasons why such an action was untenable, and she had agreed, as his reason had always seemed sound. But had he been truly honest, or had it been his unwillingness to leave this place that had prevented him from acting? And hadn't he, once her need to escape no longer pressed on them, been relieved that he could remain here without guilt, even if it meant burying her in this place?

He closed his eyes and felt the touch of the wind through his hair and against the back of his neck, almost like the gentle pressure of a friend's resting arm. A tear welled beneath his lid, leaking down onto his cheek.

He heard the quick flutter of feathers, and then a low croak. With a sad smile, he reopened his eyes and turned to his avian companion.

"It's not much, is it?" he asked. "Almost nothing at all, compared to the worlds you must know."

Koppi warbled gently in reply.

"True. It is beautiful," he agreed. "I shall miss it, deeply."

The bird tilted her head.

"No, I don't expect we'll ever come back." He sighed. "I just wanted one last long look, before we left."

The bird joined her gaze to his, looking out toward the northern sea. He wondered what she saw there. They said birds' eyes were stronger than those of any men. Was there something there, something invisible to his earthbound sight that she, perhaps, could see? But if there was, she wasn't saying.

They stayed together in silence for several moments. He fancied that she would have stayed with him for as long as he needed, but he had already said his goodbyes. Now, it was time to go.

He had told Krealinah everything that night, even though the hour was late and she had only just awoken from her slumber when he entered the tent. He hadn't intended to, not until morning at least, but she had invited him to her and encouraged him to speak, despite her weariness. And so, he had. He had told all that Korvan had said, recounting it as best he could remember, and all that he was thinking in response. Even his deepest fears, the ones he could scarcely admit to himself, had flowed from him as he strove to purge himself of everything roiling inside. And she had listened. He had stopped several times, worried that it might be too much for her to bear in her condition, but always she had bidden him to continue, even through the descriptions of the terrible things he'd seen through the statue and of the potential implications of what he might choose.

In the end, when he had unburdened his soul and was left with nothing more to say, she reached out and pulled him to her. "I love you Foanru," she whispered, simply, softly. "Always, no matter your choice. Never doubt that."

And he had wept, sobbing freely as she wrapped him in her arms and held him to her bosom, heedless of her wounds. And he thought of her, and all she had endured, and of the two girls who slept huddled together on the floor, now bereft of mother and father, and of the terrible shame and humiliation that had burdened so much of their young lives, and of his own daughter, nestled in a basket beside her mother, for whom Kreli had been willing to give her very life to prevent such misery from claiming her life too. And he thought of all the others beyond this small island, all the unknown victims and survivors of circumstances and cruelties as bad as these and worse, so many broken people across this heartless and capricious world, not only Hùloril, but others too, peoples he had never seen or heard of, so many others, but all with voices of their own, though their words might be strange, and griefs and pains no different from his. And he thought of the possibilities that lay just within his grasp, and how, perhaps, he

might have the opportunity to do something, even just a little thing, to push back against the darkness, even though it might mean great peril to himself. Yet even if the peril was such that he might lose himself entirely, how could he weigh that against the lives and happiness of others?

And he gazed over at the face of his daughter, quiet and peaceful in her slumber, her little face scrunched against the cloth that lined the basket, her blanket wrapped about her and yet somehow only covering half of her. And he thought of the other infant, the one he'd seen in Tlongow, its head all but destroyed from when an invader had smashed it against the wall, and of how the same fate could easily have befallen Rolianah, save for her mother's resourcefulness, and that, even so, she would have perished there, in the cellar, smothered by the smoke. Save for his sight.

"You have already made your decision," Kreli said gently.

He looked up, his eyes meeting hers. "No, I..."

She smiled. "Yes, you have. You had had before you even entered, though you hadn't realized it yet."

"But..."

"It's the right decision, Foanru. Even if it is terrifying. Even if, in the end, it takes you away from what you love."

"But it's not just my decision. If it was just me..."

"It's the right choice. And I'll be there with you, for as long as I can."

"But your wounds... Where we'd be going..."

"I've made my choice too, Foanru. And there is no safe choice."

He sighed and bowed his head, both relieved at her response and anxious beyond measure at what the consequences might be. But she was right. There was no safe choice.

"You're certain?"

"I am." She took a deep breath, and he could see suddenly that she had been trembling too. "Come," she added, scooting to the side even though the movement made her wince, "there's room here."

"You're sure? Your wounds..."

"I will be fine. And I want you here."

He said nothing to that, but stripped himself of his boots and belt, then slid beneath the covers beside her. She nestled against him, and in time her breathing became deep and regular. He listened to it in the darkness, willing sleep to come, but the turmoil in his mind would not let him find sleep for a long time.

He sighed as he remembered that night, and the concern on Mahila's face when she entered before sunrise to check on them and found Kreli feverish again, and weaker. Was moving her the right thing for her, or would she be better off here? The sea voyage would try them all, but Mahila and Korvan had done more for her than he ever could, and neither could stay behind for her. But if the end did come, there was no hope that she would be buried with her ancestors, nor would any of them. How would they find their ways through the next world without them? Maybe Korvan knew. He seemed to know so much else.

They passed the flat stone laid over the grotto, he and the bird that hopped quietly alongside him. Four of Korvan's people were there, led by Jeffred, the young man in bright clothes whom he'd met earlier. They were carefully pulling a long bundle wrapped tightly in cloth out of the hole, of which they had almost doubled the size with their metal spades in their attempts to maneuver the thing into the open. It, too, would be making this journey. After resting for countless years hidden from sight, the Ülanre was returning to the world of the living. Or perhaps it already had in the moment when he'd taken the stone from the pillar, or even before then, when he'd first seen the flash of a boat through a hole in the rock.

He regarded the bundle curiously while the men struggled to clear it. It looked like they might need to widen the hole still further, despite their efforts so far. But as he watched, a strange thought struck him. What *had* the statue been meant to represent, with its form like a man yet so oddly indistinct? Was it the thing that it had connected to, this being from elsewhere which seemingly had no true shape of its own? Or was it the man who had bonded with it? And now that it had bonded with him, did that mean *he* was now the Ülanre?

Disturbed, he turned and made his way to the shore.

He found Krealinah below the main deck of the boat, in a small wooden room with a window on one side, on which the shutter had been raised to let in the light. They'd placed her on a straw mattress on the floor but propped her up to sit against a pile of cushions. She looked pale and drained, but smiled as he entered. One of the women was feeding her something thin and fragrant from a bowl, but stopped when he appeared.

He had come alone. The girls were above deck, Jalforn and Gilyaln racing around the boat and marveling at the weave of rope and canvas that connected the sail—Korvan said it caught the wind and used that to be pushed forward—to the mast and rest of the craft. They had no understanding of what they were looking at, and no one was present to enlighten them, and so they made up explanations and names for it all and explained these to Rolianah with solemnity. Fortunately, the baby was far too young to remember and later be confused by this fancy.

He walked into the room, to where Kreli could easily see him.

“Hi,” he said.

“Hi yourself,” she answered weakly.

“Everything's on board. We leave soon.”

“Good. It's time to be moving on.”

He nodded and sat down beside her as she finished her meal.