

TYLER CRAFT

Hand in Hoof

Copyright © 2023 by Tyler Craft

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, scanning, or otherwise without written permission from the publisher. It is illegal to copy this book, post it to a website, or distribute it by any other means without permission.

First edition

*This book was professionally typeset on Reedsy.
Find out more at reedsy.com*

Preface

Preface

I can't seem to resist...

How is one to sit idly by while they are spurned by the love of their life, awake at the darkest hours of night with an empty stomach, deprived of status and wealth while the perfect meal ticket swims around inside of your head, untapped and waiting?

Perhaps I have damned them. Perhaps I don't care. The websites will say what they will say, and if I am found before I am able to tell these stories, I will accept the imminent prodding and meddling within my brain if it means answers are found.

The happenings of this world beyond the firmament of our reality come to me again and again, merciless with their bombardment. I can hear their screams, the pleas of that which would try to circumvent their ultimate fate, but even in the smallest, most insignificant corners of this world, its nightmares taunt me.

I cannot escape them, and maybe there is a part of me that wants you all to suffer as I do. I could move on to the brighter tales of romance, political intrigue and heroism, but I don't want to do that. If I can't live with the satisfaction that such occurrences are the exception, rather than the rule, then neither can you.

I will write next of the season that brought an unassuming farm village into a depth of depravity that trounces even the worst of Yazyk. I will write of sweet, young Gefidarne, and the

spring that spelled the death of her innocence.

1

Chapter 1

The day the strange traveler came into the village of Býlibær, the final day of normalcy for its people, started out like any other. The men worked the laspea pins, shoveling waste and replacing the feed. The women stitched their hide tunics, prepared meals of backstrap and starchy kjeva shoots, and whispered harmless rumors of their neighbors. Not even Brandari the Divinator had the slightest indication that this day, with its relaxing mountain breezes slipping down from the Giurana Ridge to the East, would be the day everything changed.

The dew clung to the leaves of the sjósetja bushes, and the laspea stirred with the first undulations of the rut. The males were scraping the scales from their spiralling, three-pronged horns, readying their weapons for the battle of suitorship, while the females soaked their dense, bristly coats with stagnant mud, the ideal perfume for any unhitched sow. The stud of the brood, affectionately called Toppur by the people of Býlibær, had already begun rooting his circular trenches around groups of viable females with his spadelike snout, while One-Horn watched from the sidelines, once again vying for alpha status

within the herd.

One-Horn's frequent failures to mate had made him largely unliked by the adults of the village, but a young girl named Gef, the most caring of Býlibær's youth, had taken to him, often grooming and patting him in lieu of sporting with her friends: Dæmt and Ígerð.

This day was different, as the girls of the village gathered with Harfru the shearist, who doubled as their hairdresser. She snipped the girl's hair into square-bottomed, tiered styles that reached down to their shoulders, with blocky layers of red-dyed hair extending from beneath the blonde topcoat, just before the ears. This traditional style had graced the heads of every young girl in the history of the village, the indicator of the day their parents assigned them to their endvinr (life partner). Astol (the day of weddings) was days away, and the grandest festival of the year, Veislagr, would follow soon after.

Gef had her eye on a charming young boy, named Svín, for some time. Their fathers, Kjöt and Almen, had been friends since childhood, and often drank together as adults. Gef was certain they would be paired, and many of the village's women spoke similarly in their private conversations. They often met under the great loðblað tree, where Svín would secret her gifts. Once he gave her a doll depicting the drummer, Layata, who had left the village to further her musical pursuits in Humiland. He told her that his mother had stitched it for him, and joked that she would slash his throat if she knew he had given it away. He had never been shy to bend a few rules for Gef.

The esoterically decorated cart rolled into town just before the sun hit the top of the sky. Aumingi, the village's head chief, moved to meet the visitor at the edge of town.

The Mushaya was a towering man with boulders for muscles,

a shining bald head, skin tanned as leather and bulky armor over his right arm that appeared hewn from some otherworldly mineral.

He presented to the people of Býlibær many foreign trinkets: bronzen drinking glasses from Altland, jewelry from Haaila, and spirits from Edaneria. All were declined by a village jaded from centuries of being marketed to by the semi-common traveling Mushaya that would treat the welcoming village as a checkpoint on their travels across the Urbura lowlands.

The Mushaya insisted that he had something that would entice the villagers. He presented unto them a box, seemingly formed from the same material in which his arm was clad. It was black as the night and etched in strange, runic patterns and geometry. He told them it was called a Keshdu, that it was technology created by the long-extinct Apsuu Muulki people, and that it would allow them to bring a more honest level of reverence to the upcoming festival. It would, in his words, allow them to commune directly with their laspea, and thank them personally for their contributions of flesh, pelts and bone. The village was skeptical, but the Mushaya simply smirked at their questioning. Before the eyes of the entire village, the man placed the box between Aumingi and Toppur the stud.

Aumingi spoke with much apprehension toward Toppur, asking if the laspea could understand his words.

“Yes,” came a crackling, hollow voice from the Keshdu.

This was enough to send the village into an uproar, conversations breaking out to the point that Aumingi had to silence them in order to continue his correspondence with Toppur, who added that his true name was Weinorgh.

Aumingi respected Weinorgh’s plea to be addressed by his laspea title, and thanked him for his kind’s selfless sacrifices.

Weinorgh shared no such reverence for the slaughter of his species, expressing both fear and resentment in terms even a toddler could comprehend.

“We don’t want to die.” the box spake on Weinorgh’s behalf, “We are afraid.”

Aumingi was taken aback by this sentiment, as was the village at large. None of them had ever considered any level of sentience or personhood within their laspea, and the sudden revelation of Weinorgh’s fears (mixed intermittently with cries for food and access to the females) caused them to reconsider their preconceived notions of their livelihoods, as well as their primary food source.

“What do you desire?” asked Aumingi of Weinorgh.

“To live.” Replied Weinorgh with a mouthful of dried grass.

2

Chapter 2

A summit was called on the evening of first communion, and a mandate was passed for all able-minded adults to attend. As night fell upon the hill that housed the Hithús (meeting den), they gathered before Aumingi's throne, and deliberated the meaning of what had transpired.

"The laspea appear to have minds, just as men do." argued Aumingi.

The villagers looked to Brandari the Divinator, whose lip quivered as he stalled his speech. He jostled the Kynkri Stones (petrified testicles of a retired laspea stud), and gazed upon them. Brandari recounted their transcendent signs, stating that a mind makes a man.

This was met with tumult by the villagers, who were starkly contrasted on the subject.

"Two legs makes a man." grumbled Eymd the grisled.

"We can't eat something that thinks!" opined mjúkur the milkmaid.

Aumingi toiled over these points, and it was decided that Weinorgh would be brought in to speak on his own behalf. The

laspea were released from their pins and brought to the hithús. With the Keshdu in the center of the room, the village began to deliberate with the laspea delegation.

This went on for some time, with many philosophical quandaries being presented to Weinorgh.

“Do you feel love?” Asked Reyna, mother of Gef and wift of Kjöt.

Weinorgh turned his snout toward the straw bedding of the space, which was interpreted by the people of Býlibær to be a deep lamentation. Certainly, it was submitted, he is expressing grief for a lost mate. Perhaps it was the sow, Gydie, who had been sent to the block earlier in the month.

Weinorgh reacted to the name, expressing that she was known as Rweerle to her kind, and that her protection of the young had left a void among the herd.

“Nonsense,” argued Brúttó the Butcher, “a laspea cannot love. Only a person can love.”

It was at this point that one of the sows, who introduced herself as Hworhwl, interjected, expressing a desire for Brúttó to ‘love’ her, as he had done many nights prior.

Brúttó denied the allegations set forth by Hworhwl, claiming he would never have physical relations with livestock.

Though there was much disgust (along with some audible laughter) throughout the room, the sentiment was posited that, perhaps, if she desired it and had the mind to request it, there was no right to pass judgment upon them, so long as they bound themselves through marriage.

Red faced, Brúttó stormed out of the hithús.

With this in mind, Aumingi stated that laspea should be seen as equals.

The issue of food was brought up, and to this there was no easy

answer. Alternatives were presented, from roots and tubers to trading with the Mushaya for whatever they brought by. Such conclusions were deemed infeasible, and a compromise seemed like the only option. They struck an accord with Weirnogh, that a lottery would be held at the end of each month. At such time, both a laspea and a human would be selected, and each would be put up for food. This was presented to Weirnogh in the form of a question.

“Will you accept one human for each laspea?” Aumingi asked him.

“Yes.” said Weirnogh, stating also that he held no discrimination toward the flesh of man nor laspea.

The villagers woefully accepted this agreement, with no desire to be held as wicked by the leptossa of past deeds held in the halls of civilized men. If it was fair that they should devour the flesh of laspea, so too should they devour the flesh of men.

And so, that night, a new code of law was established. It was stated that laspea were now to be held as the equals of man. The taboo of love between human and laspea was lifted, and both sows and hogs were added to the pool of potential arranged marriages. This was met with outrage, sadness and terror from the youth of the village, citing the laspea as “disgusting” and “hairy”. The parents of Býlibær were kind hearted, however, and insisted that they accept their new neighbors.

Gef, with her affinity for One-Horn (Who had revealed his name to be Reghrir), was told by her mother, Reyna, the most forward-thinking of Býlibær’s mothers, that she would be the first villager to be wed to a laspea. Though his single horn made him undesirable to the female laspea, Reyna said that his gentleness made him an ideal mate for her daughter.

Fylgi, mother of Gef’s friend Ígerð, was never one to be

outdone. When Reyna had embroidered a banner to decorate the outside of her cabin, Fylgi had stitched two. She was quick to follow Reyna's magnanimous example, pairing her daughter with Stórtön (true name: Argh-ghgh), a black-spotted behemoth with elongated tusks. His strength and youth were often cited as his defining qualities.

Other parents were reticent to follow, insistent that they still preferred to pair their children with other humans. While this was regrettable, it was felt that one day they would come around. They just needed time to see the error of their ways.

3

Chapter 3

The day of Astol had arrived. Such was a spirited occasion, with decorative streamers of blárós flowers and dried ymbrberries decorating the holiday beams. Though it preceded Veislagr, the celebration of the mating season for laspea, Astol was never something to be overlooked by any villager who fancied merriment.

Everyone gathered on the wedding grounds to see their sons and daughters begin their new lives of matrimonial union. Special seating arrangements were hastily constructed, allowing the laspea to sit among the humans as equals for the first time at any event. Góðönd the Woodworker assured Weinorgh that he would work tirelessly over the following year to ensure that seating was more egalitarian next Astol.

Brúttó was married first, his age and relative unsightliness making him more of an honorable mention than an actual participant in the ceremony. He was, nonetheless, the first human being to be wed to a laspea. He knelt under Elski Arch as countless had before. A scowl was plastered across his face as he embraced Hworhwl, his bride, before the watchful eyes of

his neighbors. Hymeca were presented to them, glowing cubes of eternal matrimony used by the Diveh to join people in sacred oneness.

Some error in the accursed things' functionality kept them from working as they normally would, and so it was decided that the villagers would leave the Diveh tradition behind, instead speaking with Weinorgh about what would be a more fitting symbol. A compromise was reached when Weinorgh wandered toward a loose bone, nibbling on it. This was interpreted by Brandari the Divinator to be a symbol of the inability of love to stand without the bone-like foundation of marriage. It was agreed upon, with Mr. and Mrs. Brúttó being the first ever recipients of what would be dubbed Rangtást (Love Bone).

"Thankfully," joked Aumingi, "We were able to iron out those discrepancies before the *real* festivities."

Next came the true weddings, with the youth of the village lining up along either side of Elski Arch. Gef could only watch as Svín was married away to Brúntilde, daughter of Harfru the Shearist. As their hymeca met, glowing bright as the sun for all to see, Gef could have sworn she saw him look over at her.

"A Smile Given is a Smile Gotten." Layata had told her, and so she choked her sadness down into herself.

Next was Ígerð, joined by her groom, Argh-Ghgh. Fylgi could be seen scratching the air with first and second fingers, signifying her approval of her daughter's dedication to egalitarian thinking. Argh-Ghgh grunted at his bride as she knelt to kiss his snout, snapping at her with his elongated jaws. Perhaps, mused some of the women, he was still a bit scared of commitment.

They were wed, and led to the Vondirhús (house of consumption) as Svín left with squinted, uncertain eyes. The door closed behind Mr. and Mrs. Argh-Ghgh, and Gef was next.

There stood her lifelong pet, now known to her as Reghrir. She had made him look rather charming, she thought, in his little red mantle. Her Red and white gown, with its red shoulder covering and many hand-stitched stones, made her feel so beautiful.

“How sweet,” said Deiga the Baker to Kjöt, “She is crying with joy.”

Gef was handed her Rangtást, and bade to kiss her groom. As she did, the call of an enraged laspea could be heard from the Vondirhús, along with the yelp of a young girl. Some of the adults ran to check, opening the barn door to find Ígerð, naked and coated in filth. A gut-churning concoction of mud and fluids dripped from her, and a deep gash could be seen in her leg. Ígerð was taken home by Fylgi and her husband, Hálfvi, with the sounds of incomprehensible argumentation coming from them as they walked.

Argh-ghgh was apprehended by some of the men, and was taken to the laspea pin to be held for further sentencing. This was met with disapproval by the watching villagers, who insisted that he be put in a proper holding cell in the Læсахús (jail). The men conceded, and so was the first laspea prisoner taken.

The laspea seemed unbothered by these events, and instead had taken to rooting for food among the seating arrangements, some even taking to chewing on their own seats. One devoured an entire hand-decorated streamer. This was met by outrage from the more backward members of the village, with the more sympathetic labeling it as the sort of excitement and free-spirited behavior that was prone to accompany Astol. Why, it was asked, weren't the humans having as much fun as they were?

And so it was that Gef was wed to Reghrir, and together they too were led toward the Vondirhús.

The orange painted doors were pulled open before them, revealing the interior had been rooted and torn apart by Arghgh, save for the Keshdu, which sat in the center of the space.

Reghrir was easily led by Gef toward the Keshdu, where he told him to sit. He obliged without question, eyeing her hand for the subsequent treat of berry paste that usually followed such a command.

She sat quietly for a moment, deciding at last to ask her new husband some questions.

“Do you love me?” She asked him.

“I love you.” replied Reghrir, “Do you have berry paste?”

“Do you want to be married to me?” She asked.

“Married.” he squealed, “I want berry paste.”

There was a knock at the door, with her mother’s voice coming from the other side.

“Hurry up, my child.” said Reyna, “There are others waiting to enter.”

The pressure was mounting. Gef did love One-Horn-erm... Reghrir... as her pet, and she had always worked hard to take care of him, but her heart belonged to Svín. She removed her dress, watching Reghrir’s eyes as she did so. He watched without so much as a blink, his interest soon wandering toward a bug on the floor. Gef smeared mud on herself so that it would seem as though she had done her wifely duties, and reapplied her dress, leading Reghrir back toward the door as he chewed on his ten-legged snack.

Her mother met her at the door, and Gef wasn’t sure if it was pride or disgust upon her face.

Following the Astol ceremonies came the Dauðval, the hearing to decide what two villagers would give their lives as food for the following month.

On the laspea side, it was decided that Argh-ghgh would go to the block, even though he had only just been wed. He was, indeed, a prisoner, after all. When asked how he felt about the decision, Weinorgh expressed elation that his ever-growing rival would be removed from the herd.

The human side was much more trepidatious, with virtually everyone agreeing that their fellow villagers were mostly well liked. Aumingi asked again again for recommendations, but each time he was met with stalling and stammering.

Kjöt, who had sat empty-eyed and staring off into space since his daughter had stood beneath the Arch, stood at last, offering himself to the block.

“No!” Screamed Reyna! “Think of your daughter!”

He stared blankly at her, tears welling up in his eyes before turning once more to Aumingi, doubling down on his offer.

It was decided, and the pair of them followed newlywed Brúttó toward his shed.

4

Chapter 4

Ígerð missed the group grooming that morning. It was the day of Veislagr, and all of the girls were sat in a circle, brushing one another's hair.

"The infection is worsening," Were the whispers, "the leg has gone dead."

Aumingi hadn't left the Hithús in over a week, locked up there with Weirnogh and the Keshdu. He could be heard speaking into the wee hours of the morning, with some even reporting hearing a blend of tears and laughter. What he and Weirnogh spoke of, none knew. Several of the village's men had been sent to check in, but all had been turned away with a frantic "I'm busy."

He at last did emerge, only two hours before the festival was set to begin. He appeared exhausted, with black bags under his eyes and a stupor to his gait.

The festival was far different from any the village had enjoyed previously. The decorative flags, stitched painstakingly by long dead wives of long dead chiefs, did not fly from the holiday poles this day. It had been determined by the villagers that such displays, which featured skewered laspea with a circle of

pelt-draped individuals frolicking around it, felt a bit passé, if not entirely unacceptable under new social protocol. They were instead replaced by a new set of flags, hastily stitched and shoddily trimmed. They featured laspea and men walking side by side toward the sunrise, which had ostensibly been intended to be smiling, but instead appeared to have the uncanny glare of a madman.

Still, the villagers (both laspea and man alike) gathered around the table for the feast. There was much shared hunger among them, and an air of uncomfotability among them. It had been only a few hours before that Brúttó had been publicly flogged and shamed after Deiga the Baker had caught him cavorting with a laspea (though not the sow Hworhw!). It had, instead, been Bror-rr-rr, a far plumper and very much pregnant sow. Such adulterous acts would not be tolerated under the new law, and Brúttó now bore the welts to prove it.

Some time passed before the smell of smoked meats and boiled vegetables came from the kitchen of Sælker the Chef. The door swung open, and two great cloche were wheeled out on hand carved carts. Before they had even made it to the table, Gef began to feel violently ill. She hadn't seen her father since he trudged toward the butcher's shack, but her mind simply couldn't contend with the idea that they had been serious with their proposal.

Reyna's grin was now gone, having been replaced by a thousand-mile stare. She refused to even turn her eyes toward the table, and instead she bobbed baby Hreint, Gef's infant sister, upon her knee.

"Listen, all," said Aumingi in an exasperated voice, "for today is a momentous one."

He stood from his throne, which now sat alongside the throne

of Weirnogh. He harped on and on about the communion he had with Weirnogh over the previous days, about the great time of change and reparation that lie ahead, and about new laws that would follow this feast. He declared that all laspea were to be moved indoors, and given a spot in the beds of the villagers. Weirnogh had expressed, through experiments unknown to the villagers, an interest in the soft bedding the humans had been privileged to enjoy, and wished to rest his jowls upon such magnificent comforts.

This was met with silence from the villagers, other than Hálfvi, who could be heard gritting his teeth.

Aumingi's speeches had always been long-winded and cumbersome, but Gef found herself dreading his closing statements for the first time in her short life.

He closed with a reference to the village's founder, Fyrstari, claiming that his legacy of non-combative, altruistic leadership had finally come full circle. With that, he lifted his hands, and bade the servers to lift the cloches from their trays.

Beneath the first was Argh-ghgh, slits carved into his flanks for easy access to the tender back meat. He was not skinned, but shaved, with his skin bronzed with a complex marinade. Steam rose from his back, drifting toward the clouds in waves of rapturous flavor.

Beneath the other was something else entirely. Brúttó had done his best with what he had been given, but human flesh was far from his specialty. Kjöt's skin was burnt, overcooked to the point of flaking away, with the mistakes in the butchering job apparent in the uneven, crookedly spaced slabs of dry meat that fell away from his rib cage. The hands that had once held Gef as she cried were now shriveled, the flesh peeled away to reveal charred finger bone. Curled up in a fetal ball, the smoking corpse

of Kjöt filled the area with a pungent odor. Gef regurgitated the previous day's dinner all over the grass.

"Did my best." murmured Sælker, no doubt witnessing the horror etched upon his neighbor's faces.

"Our new neighbors are watching." Said Aumingi, "Do not let them down. Let us show them that we are true in our aims for equity and lasting peace. Eat, my friends."

Gef began sobbing violently, screaming and yanking at her hair.

"Will you not eat the food provided for you?" asked Aumingi.

She could see that the other villagers were removing slabs of her father's back and thigh meat, placing it on their plates for appearances, but avoiding it entirely when it came to actually eating. The laspea, on the other hand, were making short work of both meats, along with the tablecloth and their silverware.

"You see? Our laspea neighbors fret not over their fallen one. They respect our concord enough to hold their end of the bargain, and yet you refuse your own? Will you ever overcome your *disgusting* prejudices, Gefidarne?"

"She will." Called Reyna, grabbing the fork in her daughter's hand and sticking the nearly petrified hunk of Kjöt's tricep muscle that rested on her plate, "Here, Gef, show them."

Gef refused, throwing the fork down. It pinged violently off of the table, causing a resonant gasp from the village's humans, and a fearful squeal from its laspea.

Gef stormed away from the table, the first time anyone had done so in anyone's memory. She holed herself up in the family home, and waited out the remainder of the festival.

The laspea cleaned up much of the remaining feast, with the village returning silently to their homes, digging through their pantries for something left over.

Stale breads had never been so enthusiastically eaten.

5

Chapter 5

It wasn't long before somebody found him, slumped over in a pool of blood and half-eaten. Aumingi had died during the night, which was ruled to be an apparent suicide due to the slits in his wrist. They were done with far too much precision to have been performed by even the most dextrous laspea. Though Weirnogh had eaten much of Aumingi's flesh, he was not held accountable, as he had been locked inside all night, and had surely done it out of hunger.

A summit was once again called, and the Keshdu was placed before Weirnogh. He expressed a desire to become the village's sole alpha, and the law was without precedent on the matter. He was granted this position, and thusly was Býlibær ruled by a laspea for the first time.

Ígerð had succumbed to her infection, and thusly were the funerals of both her and Aumingi overseen that day. As was customary, the acting chief was in charge of giving them their last rites. Weirnogh decided that they should be placed onto the ground, and eaten. Brandari interpreted this as a step toward more natural burial, and it was deemed to be good.

So did the laspea of the village feast upon the carcasses of Aumingi and Ígerð.

The following weeks were a time of much transition, as Weirnoh found much of man's laws to be baseless in the natural world. So were they cast aside, simplified so that man and laspea could live as they were intended to.

Gone was the social ordinance of cleanliness. Such was unnecessary, and served as bricks in the wall of hubristic artifice that kept mankind cocooned from reality. Gone too was the impetus to close one's door at night. Laspea and man entered and left as they pleased. The houses overflowed with mud and feces.

Infection spread like wildfire, and most of those who didn't flee the village descended into outright madness. Some acculturated themselves quickly, taking to wallowing on all fours through the mud, like Brúttó the Butcher. Others, such as Harfru the Shearist, were far too steeped in their bigotry, crying through the night over the loss of their once lovely township.

Gef made many attempts to appeal to her mother's senses, but was unsuccessful in getting her to leave the village. Reyna rocked baby Hreint in her rocking chair, its legs squelching through watery excrement as the flies sang their lullaby. She insisted that Kjöt would return home to her soon, and that this bad dream would be over.

Gef fled the village, heading Northward toward the Wood of Bygirtyn. Whatever she might find there, it was certain to be a refuge from what she was trapped in. She pleaded with Svín to accompany her, but he declined. He and Brúntilde rather fancied no longer having to harbour concern for cleaning up after themselves.

The Hithús was repurposed to the sleeping quarters of the

laspea, the Chief's throne made into a rather fancy rubbing post, where the males would scratch the rapidly accruing parasites from their sides. The Vondirhús became a den of unbridled debauchery, where Chief Weinorgh would enact his carnal desires upon the females of his kind, along with any submitting humans. Among these was Fylgi who, having lost Ígerð and beaten Hálfvi to death in his sleep, had given herself as Weirnogh's concubine. Now there was no denying that her adherence to a progressive mindset was far more ardent than that of Reyna. She could be proud of that.

It was some time before any other visitors came to the village of Býlibær. One day, on the horizon, could be seen brilliantly painted warriors with feathered masks resembling various predatory beasts, like the powerful lykatra.

The nightmares of all that inhabited the Uburá Lowlands, even those of the mightiest and most skilled warriors, were populated by this sight.

6

Chapter 6

There had once been hundreds of townships that dotted the Ubrura lowlands, each with their own populations and cultures. There were now only a handful.

Santiprthva, known for its avant garde hairstyles and colorful dances had been the first to fall to the Andigo Warlords, its population slain and its riches pillaged.

The same befell Briaca, Kudhak, Pradovrcha and hundreds more. Those that survived, which numbered in the single digits, had fled to Humiland, or tried their luck in the White Waves of the Bazaar Sea.

Before the dozen or so people that remained in Býlibær stood Wudola, a name which was spoken in a whisper around children. He had garnered the title of Duho Výmor (the Painted Storm), for his path of indiscriminate decimation that followed in his wake.

The villagers were paralyzed with fear, and pleaded for Weirnogh's strength to protect them from the bloodthirsty Kao'I'Chtli (Andigo raiders). Fylgi hid behind her master, praying his great tusks, spiraling horns and thick hide would

protect her.

Weirnogh sensed the threat, and dug his hooves into the earth. He charged Wudola, chin tucked and horns brandished with bottomless bravado.

Wudola averted Weirnogh's charge, gripping his horns and using his momentum to slam him to the earth. The warlord pressed his knee to Weirnogh's neck as two of the Kao'I'Chtli tugged as his furry ankles. Weirnogh squealed in terror as one of them took their Tapi'I'Daina, sliding its serrated edge down Weirnogh's soft underbelly and emptying his viscera onto the indifferent earth. Weirnogh grew silent then, and his reign came to an end.

His stout neck was severed, his head thrown toward the villagers. The remaining laspea began to dart in random directions, an unbearable array of feral squeals polluting the midday air.

Wudola looked upon the villagers with profound disgust. The swirling rancidity of the fecal vapors within his sinus and mouth gave him a contempt for Býlibær's defiled denizens that he had not even felt for his most fecund rivals.

With a wave of his hand, the houses were raided by the Andigo, the villagers corralled to the laspea pins. There they were kept throughout the day as Wudola berated them.

"Impure" he called them, unwilling to even look them in their undomesticated eyes.

Though the Andigo were not known for their honorable methods of dispatching their victims, what would transpire this night was something else entirely. To Wudola, these wretched, parasite-infested beasts were not human, and so did not deserve whatever scant dignities were provided the other villages.

As night fell upon the Urbura Lowlands, Wudola had his drummers encircle the village. The beat their Lykatra-skin

drums, and chanted in unison as the houses and buildings burned. No ears beyond the village were to hear what would be enacted upon the people of Býlibær.

Those who had been intimately involved with the laspea, too foul to even rape, were made vessels for the Andigo's most sadistic whimsies. That which natural limitations, and whatever remnants of empathy still lived within the hearts of the Andigo, regularly deemed too heinous was done without pause. This fate befell Fylgi, whose skin was flayed from her body, and worn over the shoulder of one of the Kao'I'Chtli as a trophy.

Gef, who had hid in the distant woodline in hopes that her mother would follow, watched on in agony as Svín's throat was slashed, Hreimt was hurled carelessly into one of the many fires, and Reyna was passed around like a bottle of the cheapest wine. Dozens of times she was raped before her screams at last ceased, and her battered form lay half-buried in the muck. Brúttó was castrated, his new cavity used as an entry point for a rotisserie, which was impaled through his body and out his mouth. The Andigo cackled as he spit-roasted over his own burning home.

"Fresh Rinds!" Joked one of them, slapping his compatriot on the arm.

Wudola took a special interest in Brúntilde, who was made to clean the mud from his callused feet with her tongue. When he had sufficiently subjugated her, he drug her into the Vondirhús by her hair, kicking and screaming. He emerged some time later, limping with exhaustion and swathed in blood. It too was then set ablaze.

The Keshdu had been removed from the ashes of the Hithús, and was presented to Wudola, the one consolatory treasure recovered from the vitiated village.

"Junk..." said Wudola, who tossed it into the conflagration

swelling around the Vondirhus.

The screeching songs of the Andigo continued through the night, and one by one the villagers of Býlibær were ruthlessly culled.

When the sun rose upon the countryside, the Andigo had left. The bodies had not been burned, and had instead been left where they perished. A silence fell across the grasses, with only the sympathetic sigh of the wind to fill what ears remained.

Throughout the day, with nowhere else to go, the laspea began to return to the village. Some twenty or so of Weirnoh's sows remained, along with Reghrir. At last, he would lead the herd.

In his first act as alpha, he began to devour the charred foot of Brúttó. The others followed his example, imbibing of the desiccated flesh that once composed their fellow villagers...

And so the cleanup began.

