

II. The Storm

The northernmost of the Denkyali was Klewstra, which in the language of the Hùloril meant “Three-Tree Island.” The eponymous trees were long since gone, so long that the word itself had lost meaning to the inhabitants, and Klewstra was left a denuded mass of rock jutting forth from the sea like the upper joint of some giant’s thumb, the northwestern end high and steep, the land sloping gently down to the rocky southwestern shore. Long grasses and heather coated its surface, whipped about by the merciless autumn winds, broken here and there by piles of lichen-encrusted stone, remains of old dwellings, now collapsed and empty. Only one still stood intact, a squat thing rising a few feet above the surrounding grass, its walls pierced by two thin windows and an only slightly thicker door, over which aged sealskin curtains hung, trembling visibly in the face of the wind despite their fastenings.

Beyond the house, near the edge of the soaring cliffs that rose high above the roiling ocean, stood the island’s only resident. He was tall and thin, with the overly large nose and narrow, hairless chin that proclaimed him just on the cusp of manhood. His hair was dark and long—it would have fallen to his shoulders if the wind wasn’t whipping it about—and his skin was a rich bronze that set off the striking green of his eyes. He had the look of his mother, they said in Tlongow, the nearest village, built on Olnimta, a six-hour sea journey from this forbidding rock. His name was Fohanru, a solid Hùloril name that meant “Man of Great Wisdom.” The Hùloril were optimistic when naming their children.

Fohanru stood here often, watching his beloved sky and the waves below. On a clear day, he could see for miles, even beyond the distant Rijali, two narrow fingers of rock that looked like tiny black specks from this vantage when they could be seen, the farthest land to the north and west of any in the Denkyali. He had paddled out there once in his little coracle of reeds and skin, on a day when the sea had been as calm as the waters of the little rain-ponds among the rocks, but found no mooring, only the great pillars of stone and throngs of shrieking birds that circled round them and perched in great white

masses on their tips. Beyond lay only water, stretching out forever into the immeasurable distance. He had not returned.

Today, though, dangerous-looking clouds of deepening gray choked the sky, roiling and churning in the wind as the sea below was whipped into a frenzy of battling waves that crashed against the cliff, spraying foam almost to the top and filling the air with the smells of ocean and storm. The Rijali were lost amid the tumult and dark, along with many of the other outlying rocks that rose from the waves. It would be a bad one today. Certainly, the seabirds sensed it. They had all found their roosts some time ago, hunkering between the rocks and tufts of grass with their heads pulled in toward their breasts, sparing no thought for the one inhabitant of the island who seemed foolishly inclined to allow the storm to take him and sweep him away when it finally came.

Foanru knew he should be seeking shelter, but he loved the feel of the pre-storm air, thick with excitement that made the small hairs on his arms and neck stand erect, and of the stiff wind against his tunic and skin, enough that he had to strain to stay upright. It made him feel alive, powerful—and, somehow, less lonely. And there was still time.

His eyes scanned the clouds and waves, watching the storm as it came ever nearer. There was rain in the distance now, blurring the line between sky and sea into an indistinct blue-gray mass. It wouldn't be long. Soon, it would reach the Julânrec, the lone rock pillar that rose like a spike from the sea about a half-mile from the cliffs, and then here. But still he stood, waiting, until the first drops reached him, just a fine spray now, a mere hint of what was to come. It was with regret that he turned back to the house.

By the time he parted the sealskin flap and ducked beneath the stone lintel into the building beyond, smelling of peat smoke and damp turf, he was soaked to the skin, the storm having advanced more quickly than he had expected. He threw another roll of peat onto the hearth in the center of the room, then peeled off his clothes as the flames began to lick greedily at its edges, filling the round room with warmth and the rich, earthy, calming aroma of the smoke. Soon, his garments were hanging from a rope strung above the fire and he was

sitting on the stone seat his father had carved, staring contentedly into the flames.

The room around him was clogged with clutter, leaving little space for his bed, a reed mattress covered by a precious woolen blanket, or the various clay jugs and pots that held food or served as the means of cooking it. Most of the junk were things he'd rescued from the sea, shells, bones, and driftwood, along with the odd human artifact, such as the faded head of some sort of unfamiliar creature with a toothy grimace that had once been part of some much larger wooden construction. Here, too, he stowed the things he had traded for in Tlongow, the rolls of peat, new wool cloth for garments that he hadn't gotten round to sewing yet, though he would need to soon since his old tunic was becoming strikingly thin, and the tools he used to make his wares. These were the most precious of all, for metal was scarce in the Denkyali. His mother would have been appalled at the state of the place—he was bound to trip over something in the middle of the night at some point and break a leg, she would have said, and where would he be then? But she had moved over three years past now, following his father, and she could no longer berate her son for his present state, stretched out naked beside the fire in the midst of all this mess.

He sighed. He liked the mess, the comfort of familiar things, and he had it arranged how he liked, so he could find what he needed when he wanted it. Like now, when he stretched out from his seat and grabbed the whalebone piece he'd been working on these past few days and the knives he used for carving it. This was the latest of many creations, usually birds and fish, things he saw every day, but also sometimes other things, seals and whales, surely, but more fanciful things too, like the thing he carved now, a long, eel-like creature with a gaping mouth and horns like a ram. He didn't know quite what it was, yet, but the mere sight of it seemed to tickle the edges his memory, as if it was something he had seen long ago, but just couldn't put his finger on. Perhaps when it was done it would come to him.

As he bent to his work and the storm lashed the outer walls and roof of his little hovel in its fury, his mind wandered, remembering.

When he was a young boy, several families had lived on Klewstra, and the voices of men, women, and children had filled the houses that were now broken husks, or converted to crudely-roofed drying sheds for the fish he sold at the market. But that had been long ago. No other human voice but his had brightened the windswept land for over three years now. Three long, lonely years spent doing little but struggling to survive. Perhaps he, too, should have left. But to where could he go? This was his home. All of his memories were here, everything that was *his*. Even Tlongow, where he went monthly to market, wasn't *home*, but rather an alien place where he was an outsider, not a part of their lives except on those infrequent days where he appeared to sell his carvings and buy what supplies he could.

It had started with the fish. It was spring, and the grass was sprinkled with brilliant flowers of white, blue, and gold. The shearing season had just begun when the first corpses washed ashore, fish already dead for some time, rotting before they even came to rest on the rocks. The islanders had thought little of it at first, seeing merely a curiosity and no more. But then came the tide, and with it great mounds of the things, so many that they blanketed the beach and began to rot in the sun, filling the air with their stench and crawling with vermin. The men knew not to eat them, but the seabirds had no such compunctions and they descended on the foul-smelling carrion in droves, gorging themselves as day after day more fish were swept in. It was not until the third day that the birds, too, began to die, at first stumbling about, unable to take flight or even walk straight, then collapsing where they stood to gasp feebly for breath for some hours until the end came. And as they lay dying on their perches or amidst the tufts of grass, the fisherfolk set forth, but when they came back it was with empty nets, for they found no living catch, only the bloated bodies of already-dead fish and the horrible worms and chitinous things that feasted on them.

It was when the sheep fell ill, though, that panic seized them. Their symptoms were the same as the birds, a horrible illness that seemed to eat at them from inside. One after another, it took the beasts, hale and young alike. And with them went all form of sustenance save the few root vegetables saved over from the previous autumn, and they were

quickly exhausted. In their desperation at being unable to bring in a catch, some villagers had slaughtered their sheep and eaten them, only to find that they too became sick. The first, a young boy of perhaps three, died some three weeks after the first of the fish washed ashore. He would not be the last.

Men were sent to barter or beg for food from elsewhere, but the stories they returned with, if they returned at all, were always the same. The pestilence had preceded them. The other villages were in as bad straits as those of Klewstra. There was no food to be had anywhere.

By then, many were sick and more than a few had died. Among them was Foanru's grandfather, who shared their home. He had been thought of as the village seer, for his deep bronze skin, darker than Foanru's own, and wiry white hair that never grew from his face set him apart from the others, as did his strange store of knowledge so different from what others said. Foanru's mother too had grown ill, but it was his grandfather's end, and his inability to stave it off despite all his knowledge, that had convinced the rest that something must be done.

The islanders made a pact. Those who could would leave, depart from this land of poison for another where they could sustain themselves. When they found it, they would return for those who remained, the very ill and the obstinate few who refused to leave their homes, even in the face of such horror.

Foanru's father, however, would not go, though he urged the others to do so. His wife was ill. He could not abandon her. He would find them when she recovered—or when it was over. And he would care for the others left behind.

Day after day he would go out, taking the tiny coracle deeper and deeper into the sea, searching for some catch. Some days he would return with some small meal, which he would divide between his family and the others too wasted to move from their beds. More often he would come home with nothing. Farther and farther he went. And it seemed that each time he returned there would be fewer mouths to feed, though his catches became steadily less.

And then the day came when he did not return at all.

By then there were only four remaining on the island, Foanru, his mother, and two others. In vain, they waited for his return as the illness overtook them. All were sick now, though Foanru's illness was light compared to the others. It was not long before his mother no longer had the strength to sit outside the hut to watch, though she still called for her husband in the still hours, at least until her voice came no more. She was the last to go; the other two had ceased breathing days before, though through his fever Foanru did not know until a week and more had passed and the bodies were already far gone. With his last strength, Foanru buried his mother, raising the dirt over her in a mound beside her father, beside the empty space where her husband should be. And then he wept, alone, desolate, certain that the only mercy to be found was that he would soon join them.

But it was not to be. Though he swooned with fever for two days, eating nothing and drinking little, in the end it broke. Weakened but not broken, he had taken the last coracle out to sea, and after nearly half a day he had finally caught something, a few herring still wriggling in his net. For the first time in days he tasted something other than water as he bit into one raw, there on the boat, consuming it all with no thought other than his overwhelming hunger. And when he went out again, there were more, and more after that. Whatever had first brought about the great dying was over.

Of his people, one family had left early to join relatives in Tlongow when the husbands died. Those he still saw, though only Krealinah, the middle daughter, a year older than him and his constant playmate when they were younger, would so much as speak with him. To the others, he was a constant reminder of the curse that had befallen them, and some even blamed it on his strangeness, the darkness of his skin and hair. Of the others, though, neither he nor Krealinah had heard any rumor, though she said she had asked every trader who passed through if there was news. What was nearly certain was that they would not be returning—likely, there was no one left to return.

Krealinah had suggested he come to Tlongow, that he leave Klewstra and its ghosts behind, but they both knew that the villagers were superstitious and feared him as if he were himself a ghost, though they happily took his carvings, which fetched good prices from traders

from the south, and took his fish in exchange for cloth and other goods. Nor would he have wanted to go, even if he could. For Klewstra, for all its loneliness, was *his*. He knew every contour, every tuft of grass, every tumble of stone. Here the wind and sea spoke to him, differently even than in Olnimta, though that was but a short distance away. And here he could live as he wished, not bound by the whims of others as Krealinah was, fettered by her uncle into a life she could barely stand. And so, he remained, alone.

The wind was still howling outside, loudly rustling the sealskin curtains and even disturbing the flames that danced across the peat, when he finally set the little whalebone creature down on the driftwood bench beside his other recent carvings. It stood steadily on its six legs, eyeing him with its malevolent gaze, as if it might attempt to spring and bite at any time. He still had some detail work to do on the hindquarters and tail, but the face was finished, and it looked even more sinister than he had intended. He wondered if Hrantl, the trader who bought his wares and sold them on the southern isles, would even be willing to purchase it, it was so strange. He still did not know what it was, though he knew it was *something*, not just a mere thing of his imagination. Perhaps it had come from one of his grandfather's tales, though he could remember nothing like it in them. But there had been so many, and he had not thought to commit them all to memory. And now they were lost.

But it was late, and he was tired. He enjoyed carving, but doing it for hours before the dim light of the fire hurt his hands and made his eyes so weary, they could barely focus. Quickly stowing away his tools and taking care of his other pre-bed duties, he was soon curled up beneath his worn woolen blanket while the peat glowed within the hearth, painting the walls a dim red.