

IV. The Girl

In the two weeks following the storm, he had had little time to worry about the Julânrec, though his eyes were still drawn to it when he walked that side of the island. From atop the cliff, it appeared no different than before the storm; he was at the wrong angle to look through the hole, and if there really was something shiny and it hadn't been just a trick of the light, he hadn't seen it again. But the birds continued to avoid the place; if anything, they were giving it even wider berth than before. That, more than anything, left him convinced that it wasn't his imagination, and he promised himself a closer look when he was able.

That time was not now, however. The boat-timber was a great boon, for it allowed him to build a real trellis for drying fish, much sturdier and with vastly more capacity than just hanging lines between the abandoned houses in the village. But he had never made anything like it before, only seen old Ploan's trellis in Tlongow, constructed from whale ribs and driftwood, and his inexperience led to a number of false starts and several times where he was tempted to abandon the whole project. Eventually, though it took most of three whole days, he did complete it, bracing it against two of the ruined houses and using up all his extra rope in the process to secure it together—it looked like more rope would have to be one of his first purchases when he went to the market.

But having the trellis meant he could bring in much larger catches, which in turn meant more stored away for the winter and, perhaps more importantly, more to sell in Tlongow. In fact, it had taken four long days' worth of hauls to fill the thing, so that when the seven days were up the fish hung from their mouths via bramble hooks all across its surface and their smell permeated the air when the wind slackened. In a few weeks, they would be dried, and he estimated there would be enough to fill four large jugs, his greatest harvest yet.

There were other tasks too, vegetables and seeds to be harvested from the gardens, repairs to undo the damage to his roof caused by the storm's fury, and carvings to be finished. And then it had rained for

two days, and he'd had to cover the fish and hole up inside until it passed.

He was glad when the day for the market finally came. It was held once a month during the spring, summer, and autumn, on the day of the full moon, though he only went when the seas were safe. Today he was in luck. The ocean was almost calm, the white breakers thin and regular, the beating of the waters against the shore rhythmic and soothing, the sky a light, overcast gray that held no warning of rain. He set out mid-morning, leaving the day before the market began, his coracle stocked with a few carvings, a couple of jugs of fish—not those from his most recent catch, sadly; the rain had assured they would not be ready until after he returned—and some of what remained of his unused boat timbers. Enough, perhaps, that in addition to more rope he might buy a new pair of boots to replace the ones he wore when the cold came, so patched and torn-up now that there was almost more stitching than leather.

The journey was long but pleasant. Though Olnimta could not be seen from Klewstra save as a low line on the horizon on the clearest of days, there were many small, rocky isles between here and there to keep him on course. Still, the trip was tiring, and by the time he finally dragged his little boat ashore a mile or so west of the village, his arms felt as if they might drop off on their own.

Once he had set up his lean-to—no more than a straw-woven barrier with his coracle as the roof—and secured his belongings, he drifted off to the village, joining the other travelers coming in for the day. The village itself only held about a hundred souls, but visitors came from the neighboring settlements to the south and east, as well as homesteads across Olnimta. More exciting were the traders from farther afield, sometimes as far as the southernmost isles, bringing news and goods from across the Denkyali. And though the market itself did not start until morning, the night before was a time for celebration and community. Foanru himself never joined in the merrymaking, nor was he ever made to feel welcome to do so. But he did enjoy watching.

The sun was low in the west and the merriment had already begun by the time he arrived. Villagers were out in their finest dress, eating,

drinking, dancing, and singing along with the band, praising the gods for harvest and fair weather. One young couple, bedecked in wreaths of autumn flowers and berries, danced at the center of the green, and from the way they only had eyes for each other, Foaeru guessed that the merriment was in celebration of their recent nuptials. The groom was a young shepherd from Tlongow whom Foaeru had dealt with on a few occasions but the bride he did not recognize—probably, she came from one of the neighboring islands.

Glomfo, the crippled old ropemaker whose twisted leg prevented him from doing much beyond watching the proceedings and swaying with the music, was the first to notice when Foaeru strode into the light. The old man's eyes narrowed on his craggy face and he stepped back, making a sign of protection over his forehead and breast as he glared at Foaeru suspiciously.

Foaeru sighed. Early on, when he had first appeared in the village after the abandonment of Klewstra, the fears and accusations had hurt him deeply. What deal had he made with the dark spirits that allowed him to live when so many had died, they asked with whispered voices. They dared not drive him out, or confront him directly—perhaps they feared his sorceries too much—nor were they overly reluctant to trade when he brought forth more of the wonderful carvings his grandfather had been known to make. But they would not speak with him except to trade, nor look him in the eye, and he often caught them whispering behind his back or devising some scheme to keep him away. Over time he had grown used to it, and had learned to keep his campsite hidden in out-of-the-way places, lest some of the nastier-tempered youths vandalize it under the anonymity of darkness, as had happened during the first year after the plague. Nor did he do anything to provoke them unnecessarily—one never knew when anger could override fear, and the hatred that seethed beneath the surface bubble up.

But he did not let them drive him away either. Instead, he took up a spot among the shadows, standing quietly and watching the proceedings.

The band was just finishing up the third song since his arrival when he felt a soft touch on his shoulder. “Hi,” she said, quietly, so only he could hear.

He smiled, though he did not turn his head. “Hi yourself. You came.”

“Of course.” Though he could not yet see her, he could picture her smiling at him with her head slightly tilted sideways, wisps of red-gold hair having escaped from her braid to trail across her freckled face. Though in his mind it was sunny, causing her to squint against the glare, and the light sparkled amid her tresses and the moisture on her lips...

“And Voluoni?”

“Drunk already with his mates from Yintrola.” She didn’t bother to hide the disgust in her voice. “And before you ask, Rolianah’s with her grandparents.”

“Oh?”

“So, I’ll be at the Hilfion, then?”

“I’ll leave after the next song.”

He felt the wind of her skirts pass, and she was gone. He closed his eyes, relishing the scent that lingered in the air after she left, willing the heart that hammered in his chest to calm as the band finished their tune to the whistles and claps of the audience.

The Hilfion was a great rock that stood like a lone sentinel atop the bluffs that rose east of the village. It was a steep trek of about half a mile to reach it, unlit save by the moon, but ages ago a stair had been carved into the stone between it and the village, and rites to the gods were still spoken there on the solstices. No song told how the Hilfion came to be there—it was not an outgrowth of the bluff, that much was clear, for the rough black stone was not the same as the yellow-gray of the cliffs, or of any other rock on the island—nor of the meaning of the strange carvings that marred its surface, covering it in faded geometrical shapes still visible beneath layers of lichen and moss.

He did not see Krealinah at first, though she should certainly have arrived before he did, but then he heard a soft giggle and grinned. Marking the source, he stalked slowly in the other direction, making

his way around the rock, moving softly so his boots only gently rustled the dried grass at its base. Half-way round, when he was out of sight of the ascent, he stopped, pressing his back against the wall, and waited.

She was quiet, he had to give her that. Her father's doing, teaching his daughter how to sneak up on the birds' nests without them realizing. But he could still hear the swish of her skirts, moving closer and closer, until he finally saw her, silhouetted in the moonlight. As always, even just her outline was enough to quicken his blood, though it was obscured by the shawl draped over her shoulders and the skirts that brushed her ankles.

She couldn't see him, hidden as he was. He heard her creep closer, hand trailing along the stone, listening for him, expecting him to try to creep up behind her. Closer, closer... He tried to hold in the grin...

She pounced, suddenly, like a sea-hawk striking its prey, and he nearly yelped in surprise as she threw herself into his arms, knocking him back against the stone as she pressed against him, her eyes looking up into his.

"Got you," she whispered.

"Ow," he answered in reply, rubbing the back of his head.

"Oh, did I...?"

"It's okay."

"I'm really..."

His lips found hers, cutting off her apology, and she melted against him with a low sigh. Together, they slid down the surface of the rock, until he was laid out on the ground, his legs beneath her as she straddled him, her mouth contending hungrily with his as he held her to him, moving his hand beneath her tunic to the smooth skin of her back.

Afterward, they lay in each other's arms, the pale white of her freckled skin nearly glowing in the moonlight, contrasting sharply with his deeper tones. He smiled at her and gently kissed her forehead, his free hand running down her arm to the smooth skin of her side. A cold draft blew in from the ocean, and she nestled against him beneath the shawl, shivering as he drew her close.

“I missed you,” she said softly into his chest.

“I missed you too,” he answered. “Every day.”

He felt a drop of wet against his breast. He knew, if things had been different, she would gladly have returned with him to Klewstra, even with all its memories. He had even asked her once, foolishly, knowing there was no way she could. Her uncle would never allow it, and the island was not far enough away to escape his wrath. And now it was too late.

“How is Rolianah?”

“She’s well.” He could feel the smile on her face against his skin.

“You’ll see her tomorrow—I wanted tonight to be for us.”

“I’m not complaining,” he replied with a grin, letting his hand stray to a more intimate area.

Krealinah giggled softly in that way of hers that always stoked his blood. “She’s grown since you last came. You’ll hardly recognize her.”

“It’s only been two months...” He’d missed the last market day due to a storm that had blown in, roiling the sea to dangerous heights. He suspected few others had made the journey either.

“They change a lot at her age.” She looked up at him. “She has your eyes,” she said softly.

He swallowed. The last he had seen the child, she still had the odd, colorless gray eyes of a newborn. “It’s sure, then?”

“I told you, I’ve known from the beginning.”

“And Voluoni?”

“I doubt he’d notice if she sprouted wings and had a beak like a puffin, girl that she is, but I told his parents that my grandfather on my mother’s side had green eyes too. Uncle Tilwaro never met him, and he and Mother were never close, so there’s no suspicion there, especially since she has hair as red as mine.”

He sighed. “I just wish...”

“I know.”

“But she is treated well?”

She was quiet for a moment. “She’s still a baby,” she said finally. “And I have been able to keep her from him when he’s drunk.”

He closed his eyes, and could feel his hand start to tremble, and not from the cold.

“Foanru...” She was looking up at him again, her eyes sad.

He didn’t answer, instead letting the rage flow through him and then subside as she stroked him gently on his chin and chest. He wanted desperately to protect them, had thought over a hundred scenarios in his mind of how to do so, but still came up with nothing.

“I’m just so sorry,” he said softly. “I wish...”

She smiled, though her eyes remained sad. “You’re here. That’s something.” She turned away. “If something happened to you, and you couldn’t come...”

He gripped her hand and squeezed it.

“How is the island?” she asked, clearly trying to change the subject. “When the storm came, I was worried.”

“It wasn’t too bad. I needed to do a few repairs, but nothing that took long. Not as bad as it was here, I think—I saw Borauno’s outbuilding while I was coming in.”

“It was pretty bad,” she agreed. “Rolianah was so scared, we couldn’t get her calmed.”

He looked down at her, alarmed.

“No,” she replied bitterly to his unanswered question, “he was out. Another five-day trip, and little to show for it too. He weathered out the storm on Vloulis, probably in the arms of that harlot he keeps there.”

Foanru sighed. He knew she didn’t care about the other women he kept—as far as she was concerned, the more time he spent with them, the less she had to see him—but that he couldn’t provide for his family without his father doing most of the work did not bode well for the future.

“Boauno’s farm wasn’t the only victim this time around,” he said, hoping to draw her away from things she had no power to change.

“Oh?”

He told her about the boat, doing his best to describe the unfamiliar vessel. As he suspected, she’d never seen anything like it either, though they had both heard the tales told around the fire of how their ancestors had come to these isles.

“I wonder where it came from,” she asked, turning her eyes to the sky, where the stars blazed brightly around the rising moon.

“Far away from here,” he answered.

“I sometimes wonder if there is such a place.”

He gripped her closer, feeling her shiver against him.

“There was something else, too,” he added. “Do you remember the Jülanrec?”

“The stone pillar?”

“That’s it. Something strange happened to it after the storm. There’s a hole in it now.”

“How do you mean?”

“A hole, at the top, that goes all the way through, like the eye of a needle. If you stand in the right place, you can see all the way to the other side.”

“And what do you see?”

He briefly thought about the odd sense he’d had of something moving out there on the ocean, but decided not to mention it. “Water, mostly.”

She snorted.

“But that’s not the strangest part,” he continued.

“I should hope not, or you’ve become a lousy story-teller.”

“When I saw it first, there was something shiny up there too, though I couldn’t see what. And the birds are avoiding it now—they won’t go anywhere near it, I’ve been checking.”

“Okay, that is strange,” she admitted, turning over so she could look him in the eye, her chest pressed against his belly.

“You don’t remember hearing anything about it, do you?”

She shook her head. “I always thought it was just a rock with a funny name.”

“There’s that too. What kind of name *is* Jülanrec?”

She frowned. “I remember my grandmother saying it was an old name, older than the Hùloril. From the Old Times.”

“That can’t be. Before the first boats, the islands were empty.”

“I don’t know, but she didn’t think so. She said the Hilfion was from that time too.” She lowered her voice. “And she used to claim your grandfather’s father was one of the Old Ones himself.”

“What?”

“You didn’t know?”

“Grandfather never spoke of his parents.”

“He died when your grandfather was very young. But Grandmother said she remembered him coming from the sea, when she was very little.”

“On a boat?”

“I don’t know. She only spoke of it once or twice, and I didn’t think to ask. But he was strange, she said, and spoke nonsense at first, like the birds.”

Foanru nodded, remembering the strange speech that his grandfather had sometimes used. “Maybe he came on a boat, like the one that beached in the storm.”

“Maybe,” she answered, though the tone in her voice told him she wasn’t so sure.

“I wonder what it all means?”

“Maybe it’s a sign,” she said. “Maybe it means something’s going to change for you.” He could hear the hope in her voice, and the concern.

“Maybe something will change for both of us,” he answered, squeezing her tight.

She didn’t answer. He knew she had given up hope for that long ago. But he still hadn’t, not yet.

He kissed her again, suddenly sad. “But whatever happens, at least we have tonight.”

In response, she crawled up onto his chest until her lips found his, the softness and warmth of her skin pressed against his own, and he held her tight, wishing he never had to let go.