

IX. The Morning

“Foanru?”

The distant voice roused him rapidly from sleep. Blinking groggily—it was still dark beneath the tent—he shook himself awake and crawled out of the flap.

“Foanru?” her voice was soft and cracked, as if she was having trouble breathing. She sounded far away, barely audible over the distant waves, though even the slightest whisper of her voice would have roused him from the deepest slumber.

Stars still sparkled across the firmament, though in the southeast a gray-blue glow had already begun to gather on the horizon. At first, he could see nothing in the gloom, but then he caught a hint of movement upon the hill and called out, waving his hand.

She stopped. She’d been wandering across the uneven terrain below the Hilfion, searching for some sign, but now that she saw him, she began running, her skirts flowing around her. He took a few steps, then stopped. “Kreli...”

And then she was in his arms, clutching him tight, sobbing, babbling about not being able to find him and looking all over until she finally came here. Confused, still bleary from sleep, he wrapped his arms around her. She gasped at his touch, though she did not let go, and he sprung back, dropping his hands to her waist as she trembled against him.

The sky continued to brighten. In the southeast, a line of orange began to grow on the horizon.

Eventually, the quivering subsided and looked up, her deep blue eyes wet with tears.

“What is it?” he asked softly.

She swallowed. “He—he hit the baby.”

His eyes widened in horror.

“He was in one of his states,” she said, her voice coming out in gasps. “She was crying. She didn’t understand...” She swallowed. “I thought if I calmed her, maybe... but she wouldn’t stop. And he yelled, and she started wailing, and he...”

“No,” Foanru whispered.

“She fell. Dropped like a stone. I thought maybe he’d... maybe he’d...”

“But he didn’t. She’s not...?”

“No. But I’ve never seen her like that. So...” She shook her head. “I couldn’t take that. Couldn’t see my baby... Something in me snapped. I knew... But I burst at him, exploded. I shouted, screamed, tried to hit him. But I couldn’t...” She gasped, sobbed. “And then, and then, right in front of her, he...” Her breath caught in her throat and she choked, unable to continued.

Foanru closed his eyes, feeling the tears welling behind his lids. Unable to speak himself, he took her hand and led her back to his tent. There he sat her down—she gasped in pain again as her thighs settled onto the mat—and pulled the blanket over her shoulders. Then he sat beside her, helplessly, holding her hand as she fought to regain her composure.

“Is Rolianah safe?” he asked finally.

She nodded shortly. “She’s with his parents. I gave her to them, once I could walk again. He won’t do anything in front of them.”

“They know?”

“It’s a husband’s right to be master over his wife and child,” she said bitterly, not looking at him. “And he’s their son. What will they believe?”

He felt a terrible ache in his chest, wanting desperately do be able to do *something* to ease her suffering.

“What can I do?” he asked gently.

“Hold me, please?”

He stroked her hair gently, staying clear of the ugly yellowing bruises that mottled her back and shoulders, staring at the roof of the tent, now brightened by the tiny motes of light from the rising sun, as she nestled against him, her arms and legs wrapped around his own. He still couldn’t understand why she had wanted this, after all she had suffered, but perhaps some modicum of pleasure helped drive away the pain and horror, if for but a little while. Surely, he could not deny her that.

She was crying again, though softly now, perhaps hoping he wouldn't notice. If so, her efforts were in vain, as he could feel the wet of her tears against his bare chest, the quivering of her skin pressed against his. But he let her keep her silence.

If only there were some way he could take her from this place, somewhere they could live together, away from all of this, the hard land and uncaring people. But if there was, he did not know if it. And the only other places he had ever heard of were those he had seen in the stone, terrible places far away or long ago, if they had even truly existed at all. His thoughts strayed to the object itself, bundled safely in its leather pouch aside his belt in a corner of the tent. He wanted so much to show it to her, to ask her what she thought of it. But he knew now wasn't the time.

"Foanru?"

"Yes?"

"I love you. I always have. There's never been anyone else, even when Voluoni..."

He smiled sadly. "I know. Even then, when I was so mad..." He shook his head, remembering how terribly he'd behaved to her then. But she'd understood, forgiven him. "I love you too. More than anything."

She coughed and wiped her eyes with her hand. "I need to ask you to do something for me. And for Rolianah."

"Of course," he answered, though already dread was starting to grow in his heart. "Anything."

She swallowed, and he felt a tremor in her soft skin as she pressed against him. "I need to get her away from him," she said softly. "I've tried and I've tried, and I can only think of one way. You have to take her."

He glanced down at her in surprise. "Now? But his family..."

"No. They'd never let me give her up," she agreed. She twisted, wincing as she did, so that she lay across him, her eyes meeting his. "They must think she's gone, dead."

He stared back, incredulous. "But how?"

"The cliff, by the western point where the puffins roost. I have been going there often, to hunt for eggs. I will say she has fallen. The

ocean comes right to the cliff. No one would be surprised that there is no body.”

“But I would take her instead.”

“Yes.”

“But doesn’t she still need her mother?”

“I have been weaning her early. Already, she eats mostly solid food, and my milk is almost gone. I have showed you how to care for her otherwise. And I will bring what I can that she needs and that won’t be missed.”

He nodded, remembering helping her change the child on his last visit. Yes, he knew what to do, mostly, and she was old enough that the most difficult part was behind them.

Another thought came into his mind. “But what about you? You’ll be blamed for this.”

“Yes. They may even say that I—that I killed her, on purpose.”

“But they’ll...”

She closed her eyes, trembling again. “A mother must do everything she can to protect her child.”

He stared at her, at the mosaic of bruises and welts across her shoulders, now freed from the warming cover of the blanket, and thought of what else she had endured, the aftereffects of which he could not see, though they surely wounded more deeply than simple blows. And those were merely for the infraction of daring to challenge her husband. If she were thought responsible for the death of what he took to be his child...

“There must be another way,” he said softly. “Perhaps you could both have fallen...”

“There would be a search. Enough would know that I might attempt to flee him that they would come looking for me at my own home.”

“I would hide you...”

“Where?”

He had no good answer for that. “I’ll find a way.”

She smiled sadly, knowing, as he did, that there was nowhere on all of Klewstra where a woman and her baby could just disappear.

“Come back in ten days,” she told him. “Be by the cliff in early morning. And do not let yourself be seen.”

“Kreli, I *will* find a way. I promise.”

She touched him softly on the cheek, but the look in her eyes told him that she had already resigned herself to the worst. He didn’t ask, because he didn’t want her to say it, but he knew that she already intended, when her husband came after her for the supposed crime, to push him over the edge. With her baby safe, what need was there to continue this suffering? And he felt the tears flow as he looked back.

He *would* find a way. He had to.

She left before the sun had wholly turned from orange to white, while the shadows were still long in the blowing grass and the early birds were skittering across the beach, making the most of the time before the villagers appeared to drive them off. He had needed to help her back into her clothes, so hard was it for her to garb herself without doubling over in pain. He watched from the hill as she went, feeling as though he’d lost her already, as though this might be the last time he’d see her.

“Ten days,” he muttered under his breath as she picked her way down the slope, away from the more-traveled path to the Hilfion. What could he do in ten days that would make a difference?