

X. The Plan

Foanru drifted through the market in a haze, a maelstrom of impotent anger and crushing despair flooding his mind. He'd passed all the booths already, twice, and barely noticed a thing. And yet he still had to stock up for the winter, especially if he was responsible for mouths beyond his own. No matter what plan he came to, that was a necessity. But he just couldn't focus. He wanted to scream, to hit someone...

"Ya want something?" the man sitting cross-legged on the ground behind the wares laid out on the blanket asked. He was a southern trader, from one of the western isles, selling brightly-dyed blankets and rolls of cloth. Foanru had seen him here a few times, but didn't know his name. He'd managed the storm, unlike so many of his fellows; the ranks of off-island traders were much thinner this year than usual, even today.

"Sorry," Foanru mumbled in reply. "Just looking. You interested in buying..."

"Carving like that?" the man asked, noting the whalebone seal cradled in Foanru's hand. "Nah, I've no need for fancy trinkets. What'd I do with such a thing?"

"Mmm," Foanru answered, nodding, though his shoulders slumped. That was the other thing, he *had* to sell the piece, and for a good price too, if he wanted to get the stores he needed. Sure, he'd sold the jars of fish, and quickly too, but they hadn't brought much since there were plenty in Tlongow who could produce the same. This piece should have brought in plenty to buy enough barley and vegetables to feed three for months—he *would* find some way to bring Krealinah; he refused to think otherwise—but so far, the only traders who'd even given him offers had suggested far less than he received for even his cruder works. It was all because Hrantl, his usual buyer, was among those who had not made the trip. It was all thanks to that cursed storm. Why in the gods' names did it have to come *now*, of all times?

Krealinah had already come and gone. She'd been closely escorted by her mother-in-law, who carried the child, and had moved

expressionlessly through the market as she chose and paid for goods from various sellers. She only spared him a few fleeting, furtive glances before she was hustled back off to the house. Maybe they had found her missing that morning and feared she might try something rash, after her treatment the day before. If so, how long would their vigilance continue? Perhaps in ten days' time she might not even be able to get away with the child.

He hated himself for hoping that might be true, since it would mean she couldn't carry out her plan. But if he had to live through what she did, would he not also consider death a preferable option, once the child was safe?

For a half-hour longer, he moved between sellers, asking about the figurine. In the end, he found one willing to part with half what Hrantl would have paid and accepted the offer, anxious to gather what supplies he could afford and leave this place. He would not see her again that day, of that he was certain, and it would be best to be on the water early, to ensure he returned home before the setting of the sun.

Over the next few days, the stone was forgotten and his regular chores attended to with only half his mind as he wracked his brain, searching for some way to save them all. It had only taken a short while taking stock of his stores and questioning how long they would last to see the major flaw in Krealinah's plan, that he couldn't survive on Klewstra entirely on his own efforts. He needed regular supplies from the market, cloth, peat, barley, rope, all the things he couldn't make or grow on his own and still have time to bring in the catch, care for the house—that would take more doing too, if he had the baby to care for—and the rest. And there was no way he could leave the baby here unattended for that long, nor that he could show up in Tlongow with the child in his arms without raising questions. True, there were other markets, farther away, but those were journeys of a day or more, across unfamiliar and unpredictable seas.

No, he had to bring Krealinah. How else could their daughter survive?

That left him with the problem of convincing the villagers that she hadn't fled, that there was no need to come looking for her. They

could set the scene so that it appeared that she had jumped from the cliff along with the child—leave her shawl and other garments behind, perhaps, the things she would need if she were to try to run but which would be a hindrance in jumping to her doom. But without a body, would they be convinced? She had thought not. It would be better if she could say certain things beforehand, lay hints of what she was supposedly planning, but there wouldn't be time...

Unless he came on the ninth day. He could do that, try to find some time alone with her to plan. He'd have to be very careful, to stow his things where they wouldn't be found. But it could be done.

And then there was the second problem, one which he had to be sure of. For no matter what they did, there was always the chance Voluoni's people would not believe it, that they would come looking for her. And the first place they would check, after scouring Olnimta, would be here. Which meant he had to find a place where they could hide, a place for two to fit, undiscovered, unheard, while searchers combed the island from end to end. For they would not take his word that he had not seen them, not the strange dark boy who lived alone on the island, known to be an acquaintance of hers, though none knew the full extent of their relationship.

He had begun searching the day following his return. At first, he had thought to hide them among the rocks that bordered the shores, for there many places there, inlets and cavities that he had hidden among when he played with the other children in his youth, before the sickness came. But either they were insufficiently secluded to ensure that they would not be stumbled upon, or they were too low and subject to flooding by the sea when the tide rose. Next, he thought of the half-ruined houses clustered together on the side of the island, but they too would not do. Within, there were no hiding places, no secret alcoves or cellars, only the stone walls and the rotting debris of their former owners, easily sifted through and overturned. Nothing he could hide them beneath in any of the houses would pass the scrutiny of a determined searcher for very long.

Now greatly troubled and with only a few days remaining, he began scouring the island itself, looking for some forgotten hollow or other spot that might do, but though he paced the familiar ground time and

again, he knew already that there was nothing. That had been one of the things the shepherds had always bragged of, that there was no place on the entire island a sheep could go to hide from them and remain unfound for any length of time.

Increasingly desperate, he scoured every place a second time, and then a third, hoping he had overlooked *something*...

Suddenly, the answer struck him, so clear and obvious that he burned with shame for not having thought of it sooner. He would make his own hiding place. It was simple, really. There were plenty of rocks on the island. Many were outcrops of the bedrock, beyond his skill to do anything with in the few remaining days, but some were loose, resting atop the grass and moss that coated the surface. He could dig beneath one of these, make his own little hollow supported on top by the boulder itself, and then cover the entrance with turf. If he did it right, by laying a net across the opening and stacking the turf on top, it should be indistinguishable from the surrounding grass. Of course, he had to find some way of disposing of the dirt, but he could take one of the old sealskin coverings that still hung, torn, inside the abandoned homes and dump the excavated soil somewhere far from the hiding spot where it wouldn't be noticed. The sea, perhaps, or his little garden.

The more he considered it, the more convinced he became that this was the right way, the only way. And so, after coming in as soon as he could with the day's catch, he grabbed the sharpened whale jaw that served as a shovel and the first piece of whole, unused cloth he could find, and began.

The spot he'd chosen was in the center of the island, lower than the cliffs overlooking the Jülanrec but well above the cluster of stone houses. Here, a long, flat stone lay, oriented vaguely north to south, covered in the moss and lichens of ages but not yet colonized by the long grasses that clustered in great tufts around it. Long ago, some resident had scratched a picture or message of some sort onto its surface, but it had been pounded mercilessly by the elements in the intervening years, so that only a scattering of undecipherable marks remained to mar its face. He chose the west side for his excavations

as it seemed to rise higher above the ground there, giving him hope that he would have less to dig through.

He dug well past sundown, striving through the dusk until the light of the waning gibbous moon shone on his efforts, only stopping to quench his thirst and not bothering to eat at all. First, he uprooted the tenacious clumps of grass, a tricky business as their roots ran deeper than he'd anticipated, and piled them off to the side for reuse. And then he began to scrape his way through the hard, pebbly dirt, moving much more slowly than he would have imagined from his limited experience with the soft, cultivated soil enriched with composted seaweed that filled the garden plots near the houses. It was only when the moon had already risen well into the sky that his shovel slipped through what should have been solid ground or more of the overhanging rock into the space beyond, almost knocking him off his feet in surprise.

Immediately, he was on his knees, brushing away the dirt to look inside, dim in the pale light from the moon. He stared for a moment, utterly taken aback. And then he smiled. This was going to work.

With renewed vigor, he attacked the ground as though his very life depended on it.