

VIII. The Husband

Foanru set out for Tlongow early, shortly after dawn's first golden fingerprints began to lighten the eastern sky. The wind was brisk, and the clouds were thick, threatening the possibility of another storm, but he was determined to make the trip. This was his last chance to see Krealinah and his daughter before the spring. No matter how much he loved his home, the thought of waiting out those dark, lonely months without her was crushing. And to be unable to see her just one last time beforehand was more than he could bear.

And there was the stone. He needed to speak to someone about it, and she was the only one who would listen. And she was so much cleverer than him; she always had been, even when they were children. If anyone could make sense of what he was seeing, she could.

The waves strengthened dangerously before Olnimta even came into sight, tossing the little boat to and fro as he struggled against them with his paddle, fighting to remain on course while one mighty swell after another raised him on high, only to drop him into the valley between the walls of water. The wind, too, intensified, whipping his hair against his face and threatening to batter him from his course. But still he persevered, fighting for every yard as the driftwood plank slashed into the sea, dragging the craft forward.

The rain began shortly after he passed the rugged crags of Olnimta's northern edge, where the waves pounded against the jagged rocks and splashed spray high into the air above. There were no landings here, though he would at that point have happily clambered ashore and walked the rest of the way despite the difficult terrain, and so he struggled on, battling the worsening weather as the water pelted his face and soaked his clothes.

Finally, he saw it, the small beach his father had used when he was a child to visit the man whose forlorn-looking stone hut, now abandoned and decrepit, sat at the top of the steep stair carved into the cliff. He could not remember the man's name, only that he had perished in the same plague that had taken so many others, for Klewstra had not been its only victim. After many long minutes battling the current and waves, he pulled the coracle onto the shore,

then sank onto the pebbly sand beside it, heedless of the wind, rain, and salt-spray. It was only when he began to shiver as the warmth of his exertions ebbed that he moved again, gathering his things for the climb to the top and then the long trek across the island to the village.

At least, he reflected, he hadn't brought that much to trade.

He followed the path across the island, passing isolated farmsteads and flocks of dismal-looking sheep dripping with rain, his coracle held aloft over his head, his wares in a sack slung over his shoulder. By the time the distant Hilfion rose into view—the trail meandered wide across the island to avoid the rugged highlands rather than taking a direct route to the village—he was so weary that he felt like he could drop at any moment. But at least now he knew where he was; for much of the walk he had only been relying on the hope that any self-respecting path would eventually have to end at the only population center on the island. Too exhausted to trudge the extra mile to his usual campsite, he found a suitable hollow, out of view from both trail and standing stone, and set up his tent. And then, as the rain still fell steadily and noon was only just passed, meaning there would be little of note happening at the village yet anyway, he ate a quick meal and crawled beneath his shelter for a brief rest.

He awoke some hours later. The rain had stopped and the wind receded to a gentle breeze. The sun was low in the sky, though an hour or so still remained before sunset. They wouldn't have started anything yet unless there was another wedding like last month, but perhaps he could find Krealinah.

The village was already bustling with activity. As he descended the steps from the Hilfion, he could see tents being raised and porters carrying goods in from the shore. This was the last of the markets for the year, at least among the northern islands, and traders came from all over for it, knowing they would get good prices as the people of both this and nearby islands prepared to settle in for the winter. Others were milling about and gossiping, or just going about their daily business. The crowd was not yet thick—it was notably lighter than usual for this time of day in fact, even had it been a less prominent

market—but with the storm now over more travelers would surely be coming in, probably well into tomorrow.

He drifted among them, searching for her, but saw no smiling face, only bland indifference or guarded hostility. He was on his way toward her house, up the hill from the center green amidst a cluster of other buildings with thatched roofs and wattle and daub walls over stone foundations, with the vague thought that she might be outside and he could catch her attention, but when he rounded the corner, he saw Voluoni, lounging about within sight of her door along with a gaggle of other men, and decided against it. By the look of them, they had been dipping into their cups for some time, despite the hour, which lent their conversation an air of such boisterous hilarity that all passersby were giving them a wide berth. With Krealinah nowhere to be seen, knowing that he couldn't call on the man's own residence within his sight without his notice, and having no desire to direct the brute's notice toward him, he resolved to do the same. Until he saw the girls.

He knew them, of course. He was a frequent enough visitor to Tlongow that he knew most everyone there, and these two's parents had been friendly enough with his father that he had been present for the younger girl's—Gilyaln's—Acceptance Ceremony, and possibly her older sister Jalforn's as well, though he would have been too young to remember. Their father was among the many who'd perished in the plague, and they lived alone with their mother. And it was their house in front of which the drunken men had stationed themselves. With a sinking heart, Foanru guessed why. Times had been hard after the plague, especially for a widow with two children to feed, and people were pushed to do what under better conditions would have seemed deplorable. And for a still-youthful woman whose looks had not departed, money could be made in other ways, especially when traders came from distant villages, leaving their wives behind. Undoubtedly, Voluoni's band were waiting for one of their number who had gone within.

From the pails and basket of wet clothes they hauled along between them as they struggled past, Foanru supposed the girls had been doing laundry, and had not expected to return to find themselves

barred from their own home. From the stricken look upon her face when she stopped dead in her tracks, it was clear Jalforn, at least, knew what was about. But to the waiting men, her obvious misery and uncertainty about what she should do was a source of terrific mirth.

“Your Mama’s busy now,” one of the men informed the girls, grinning broadly. “*Entertaining.*”

“And looks like she’s going to be busy for a long time,” added another, looking around at his fellows and grinning broadly, “so you’d best be getting lost, eh?”

“Yeah, waitcher turn,” a third slurred as he leaned forward toward them.

The others laughed. A pair of clay jugs were clinked together.

“Now hold off fellows,” Voluoni said slyly, his eyes on the two who stood rooted to the spot, unsure what to do. “You’re welcome to stay and wait with us, to keep us company, eh girls?” A lascivious grin crept across his face as his gaze fell on Jalforn, lingering on her chest, which had just recently begun to show signs of womanhood, and on the uncovered skin above her collar. “Come here and stay with us for a while, mmm?”

“I—” the older girl stammered in reply, her face turning pale.

“Or maybe you’d like to go in yourself? A pretty thing like you...”

“Let’s go,” Gilyaln urged, but Voluoni had stood, and was now just a couple feet away, close enough to grab Jalforn’s shoulders if he wished.

“You’ve grown quite a bit, haven’t you Jalforn?” he asked huskily.

Jalforn shrank back, staring with panicked eyes at the man who towered over her by nearly a foot.

There was a sudden commotion from the edge of the cluster of houses.

“What in Ylemtl’s name do you think you’re doing, boy?” shouted the red-faced man, gesturing furiously at the basket which now lay toppled in the grass, balls of variously colored yarn strewn all about it.

“I’m awfully sorry...” Foanru muttered, diving for the errant balls, some of which had bounced quite a distance from their source, and doing his best to retrieve them quickly.

Over by the widow's house, the men laughed uproariously at the fulminating merchant while Fohanru scrambled about comically, scuttling about like a crab in his quest to gather up the spilled goods. But though he knew they would likely be miming crab motions at him for the rest of the market, he was glad. For when Voluoni finally turned away from the ridiculous scene, he found the former targets of his attention gone, the girls having scampered off between the nearby houses.

In a few more minutes, the yarn was restored to its container and the stray blades of grass picked from its surface. He apologized some more, until the man was calm enough to walk away with only some gruff muttering under his breath, and then stood to take one last look down the way. Krealinah was still nowhere to be seen, but as he left, the widow's door opened, letting out a grinning brute still straightening his belt, while the next in line stood for his turn.

Fohanru turned to hide his disgust and stalked away, determined to wait out the last hours of daylight well out of sight of those brutes.

He sat with his back against the Hilfion, gazing vaguely at the crashing waves and circling birds. It wouldn't be long before the sky faded to pink and gold, and the feathered creatures were intent on making the most of what time they had.

He glanced about quickly, assuring himself that no one was near, then fished the stone from its pouch. Reverently, he held it aloft, letting the sunlight penetrate into its inner depths, and fixed his gaze upon it.

He was once again on the shore with the carved head. He recognized it instantly by now, even though it changed with every viewing; this time, the sculpture had both fallen and was so deeply buried that only the outer edge of an ear could still be seen, its surface worn and faded. Below it on the sand, a large group of barely-clad men, women, and children were gathered, celebrating wildly. Some danced around a large bonfire, throwing about their limbs in abandon, while others played feverishly on drums and pipes. On a platform in the center of the flames, a crude sculpture of dark wood stood, its empty eyes turned toward the sea, the tongues of fire already

blackening its feet. He could feel the celebrants' exultation, their joy in their triumph over the enemy. And then he saw the prisoners, bound and naked, face down in the sand, watched over by stern men with wicker helms and long spears, waiting their turn for the fire.

A pair of dancers split from the throng and grabbed one of the prisoners, a tanned woman with long, dark hair, dragging her forward. For a moment, she looked up, seemingly right at him, and her face twisted in helpless terror. But there was also something familiar about her look, the curve of her cheek, the shape of her eyes, that like a wave brought Krealinah's features to mind.

Horrified, he pulled away, just as the panicked woman was dragged toward the flames.

His fist clasped around the stone as he grasped the ground with his other hand, doubling over as the wave of vertigo passed through him. It would depart soon, he knew, especially since he hadn't been in the stone's grip for long—the sun still shone low in the sky, after all, though it was rapidly sinking. After a few moments, he stood unsteadily, using the course surface of the nearly rock for support. Already, the lamps were being lit in the village. It was time to return, and after the vision he had a terrible urge to make sure that Krealinah was still well and to hold her tight in his arms.

But still Krealinah was nowhere to be found. Worse, Voluoni and his hangers-on had moved onto the green, even drunker and rowdier than before. As Fohanru approached, they were making a ruckus under one of the tents while the pained performers tried to drown their crude calls with louder music and the serving girls did their best to ignore the frequent requests for more ale, knowing that fetching it would bring on catcalls and unwanted groping alongside their payment.

Though he was now terribly worried, Fohanru didn't dare ask where Krealinah might be found. He'd seen how possessive Voluoni could be, even with something as simple as one of the traders following her appreciatively with his eyes, and he had no desire to rouse the man's ire, since it would almost certainly be taken out on her later. She'd told him as much, far too many times. He'd always been meticulously careful to reign in his glances when the man was around and had

probably never spoken more than a handful of words to him at a time. He wasn't about to change that now.

Farther from the band, Voluoni's parents were seated on a colorful mat beneath the awning, and they had the child with them. Rolianah was clutched in her grandmother's arms, looking warier and thinner than he was used to seeing her. He passed them by, flashing her a quick smile as he did, but she shrank way, burying her head into her grandmother's shoulder while the older woman glared suspiciously. He quickly backed away. The adults' reactions didn't surprise him—he'd never been greeted by them with anything but suspicion and hostility—but he worried about the child. Then again, it had been a month since he'd seen her, and shyness was a feature of the age, wasn't it?

He made his way to the edge of the crowd, pretending to be enjoying the music, but still he couldn't find her, and the crowd wasn't so large that she could escape his notice for long. Where could she be? With Voluoni occupied and Rolianah with her grandparents, she would usually have sought *him* out. But he could still see no sign of her, and he had looked everywhere. Well, aside from her house. But there were too many people milling about for that. There was no way he could reach the building without someone noticing, and even just calling at the door would be enough to send rumors flying. Still, she could be inside. Maybe she was putting the finishing touches on something for tomorrow's market and couldn't leave until she was done. Or maybe she wasn't feeling well—he hoped it wasn't that. Or maybe something worse... But it couldn't be that bad. He'd seen her mother earlier, dancing alongside her new husband of a year and a half. If something had happened to her only daughter, surely the woman would have been less joyful, and if the worst had happened, she would unquestionably be in mourning, her hair and sleeves unbound with her grief. No, he needn't worry about that. But what if...

He glanced back at Voluoni, who had gotten his hands on some poor child's stuffed doll and looked to be tormenting her with it, grinning cruelly as he held it out of her reach, while the boy sobbed and wailed, his young mother standing by helplessly, powerless to prevent it.

Watching him, Foaeru was more and more convinced that her absence was his fault. What had he done to her? Certainly, there was little he would not sink to, especially if drunk. There had been innumerable nights where Foaeru had stayed away, concocting useless schemes to retaliate against the man for what he'd done, especially that first time, before they'd become lovers, when Krealinah had come to him, weeping, showing him the bruises and telling how she herself had been blamed for them by her in-laws, in whose house she now lived. He'd wanted so badly to do *something*, but even if he had somehow caught the man alone without his ever-present crew of like-minded louts, it would be no use. Anything he did short of killing the man would be taken out on her tenfold, and angering his family would see him cut off from the market, for they were highly influential. And without the market, he couldn't survive for more than a few months on his little island alone, and that was the bitter truth.

And so he watched in mute rage, until the brute tired of the game and tossed the toy aside, forcing the boy to scurry between the legs of the dancers to retrieve it, with the rest of the gang erupting into laughter at the ensuing confusion. The poor child's mother retreated after him, not daring to look at the men taunting her boy.

Disheartened, Foaeru sank onto the ground as the band started another tune. He waited for an hour, then two, but she did not come. After the first hour, Voluoni ceased harassing his fellow merry-makers by dozing off into his cups, and the mood lightened somewhat. But eventually, the last song was played and people began to drift back home. Half-sick with worry by now, but at a loss for what to do about it, he slipped away into the night to trudge back to his hidden campsite.