

The Castaway

"I think I'll go fishing," Gurun said.

"You should be getting ready for your wedding," her father answered.

Gurun was sixteen; this day was her birthday. Tomorrow she would be married to a man named Lokk. He was her father's friend, and his farm lay next to theirs. To combine the two properties would greatly enhance both families' political position. The facts that Lokk was twenty years older than Gurun and had a large, unsightly wart on his cheek were unimportant.

"I'm as ready as I'll ever be," she said. Her father nodded. He knew his daughter didn't love Lokk, but also knew that she would do what was best for her family. Bertig, son of Flosa, had many troubles that would go away if he had more votes in the District Meeting; and every tenant on the land had a vote. If Lokk's tenants voted with him all the time, Bertig's enemies would have their claws clipped.

He made a noise in his beard. "Go ahead, go fishing," he said. "I don't think you will throw yourself into the sea."

"Don't give me ideas," she said; and he laughed at that.

Gurun stepped outside. Like all the homes on Fogo Island, her family's house resembled a low, sprawling hill of sod. Bertig was a wealthy man with a wife, four children, his old mother, and a crew of servants living with him. But there was no better way to build on Fogo Island; no other kind of house would survive the winter winds. Besides, lumber was always hard to come by. Long ago, when people from the south first settled the islands of the northern sea, they quickly learned to fear the winter. Those who survived the first winter only did so by taking shelter in barrows. These had been built to hold the bones of the dead: there was no one living on the islands when the settlers came there. What had become of the natives, no one knew. Only their tombs survived. And so the new arrivals patterned their homes on the houses of the dead.

But this was a fine and sunny summer morning. You might have thought it brisk and chilly, but to Gurun it seemed a perfect day for fishing.

Like most of the islanders she was tall and fair, pale-skinned, blue-eyed. She wore a one-piece woolen dress, cinched at the waist with a sealskin belt, and sealskin moccasins. That was all she needed.

She launched her little skiff into the cove and paddled out to sea. The day was still, without a breeze: no point in raising the sail. When the water was as still as this, it often meant a storm was coming. But the sky was clear of clouds, and it was

not quite the season for storms, and Gurun was good with boats. Lokk had promised to take her along when he went whaling.

All over the horizon rose the peaks of snow-clad mountains. Every island had at least one. No one ever sailed out of sight of the mountains. These northern seas were prone to fog, and you had to be careful not to sail too far from land. In each settlement there were men who blew horns to guide boats overtaken by the fog.

Gurun baited her hook and let out her line. Inside of ten minutes she had two fine codfish. The waters this year teemed with fish. That was a good thing, for you had to catch more than enough to live on during the summer, and sun-dry the surplus to keep you through the winter. It did not strike Gurun's people as a hard life. It was the only life they'd known for centuries, and they were happy in it.

Suddenly the line went taut and the boat lurched forward. Gurun hung on with both hands, bracing her feet against the gunwales.

"Praise God, it's a big one!" she cried. A halibut, maybe. She mustn't lose it. She prayed the Lord to bless her line so it wouldn't break. When the fish tired of towing the boat, she could begin to haul it in.

So intent was she on fighting the fish that she didn't notice the sky darkening overhead and black clouds sweeping in from the north. She didn't notice anything until the wind began to blow her hair into her eyes. All she could do was shake her head. She didn't dare let go of the line with either hand.

"I won't let go!" she thought. "I won't lose this one!"

The fish towed the boat farther out to sea. The wind blew. The clouds piled up, blotting out the sun. Then it began to rain, and Gurun realized she'd been caught by a storm. But still she would not let go.

When the line finally broke, the storm had Gurun's boat in its teeth. Between the driving rain and the darkness, she could hardly see.

She knew better than to try to fight the storm. All she could do was to wrap herself in the sail and try to stay alive. The boat rushed up the waves and plummeted back down again—up and down, up and down, endlessly. Gurun was used to that: she'd spent much of her life on boats, and she knew this boat would ride the waves. She also knew the rain and the waves were filling the skiff with water, but she was too cold to bail. She knew it would be a miracle if she survived. Her teeth chattered so badly that she couldn't pray aloud. But her father had built this boat with his own hands, and it would stand much more punishment than other boats.

"It's all in God's hands," she thought. "There's nothing I can do."

For how long, or how far, the storm carried her, Gurun had no way to tell. She couldn't even tell night from day. She huddled in the leather sail and munched on biscuits that she'd brought along. When she was hungry again, she ate raw cod. She

might have even slept, although that could have been an illusion.

At some time in the immeasurable future, the rain stopped; the wind died down from a frantic howl to a muted, steady roar; and the darkness lightened. Gurun peeked out from under the sail.

The boat was full of water, a floating island in a sea of fog. With both hands she began to slosh the chilly water overboard.

“Behold, the Lord is with me: I shall not fear the tempests of the earth,” she said, reciting Scripture: one of the songs of King Ozias, from the ancient days. It was a verse dear to the islanders, who knew more about storms and tempests than most people. “Though I be plunged into the depths of the sea, my God shall bring me up again.”

She rested, and finished what was left of the second codfish. It seemed to her that for all the water she’d bailed out of the boat, there was still more in it than there ought to be. That could only mean the boat was leaking faster than she could bail it out. The storm had strained its joints and fastenings more than they could stand.

“At least I won’t have to marry Lakk,” she said to herself. “Although aside from his wart and his boring way of talking, he might not have made such a bad husband after all.”

Yes, this was the end. The boat was riding lower and lower in the water. She now admitted to herself that she should have cut the line when first the wind blew up, and paddled furiously to the nearest island. Under the circumstances, even her father’s worst enemies would have taken care of her: for the storm was the enemy to all.

“Live and learn,” she thought.

In a few minutes the boat would go under. But what was that? She heard something, just ahead of her.

It was the sound of waves lapping. The fog wouldn’t let her see what they were lapping against, but it certainly sounded like a shore. Land! It must be land.

Shedding the sail, Gurun stood up and dove out of the sinking boat. She was already chilled. The water, when it closed over her body, was warmer than the air.

Gurun swam, pausing every few strokes to listen for what she could not see. She was a strong swimmer. In a few minutes her feet touched sand. A few more strokes and she could wade. A few weary strokes brought her to a sandy beach littered with clam shells. She fell to her hands and knees and gasped a prayer of thanks.

Where under heaven was she? Every fiber of her body begged for sleep. But this land looked like tidal flats, and if the tide came in while she was sleeping, she would drown. She had to find higher ground, if there was any. But all around her lay the fog.

She struggled back to her feet. One of her moccasins was missing; she must have kicked it off while swimming. Deciding that one shoe was worse than none, she got rid of the other. The soft sand felt good to her bare feet.

“Hello!” she called; but there was no answer.

For all Gurun knew, she was on a tiny island that would be entirely underwater when the tide came in. She couldn’t stay where she was. Shivering, she turned away from the water and began to walk.

And then, as if by God’s command, a breeze came up and the fog began to lift.

Gurun stood waiting as the fog thinned and melted away. Before long, she saw a dark mass in the distance. A little longer, and the mass resolved itself into stands of shrubbery and low, wind-beaten trees, all perched on rolling dunes.

The sun came out. The foliage turned from grey to green. Beyond the dunes rose hills, and on the hills—

She caught her breath. What were those things up there? Gigantic boxes, cubes, straight lines; they rose above the trees. What were they? You would have recognized them instantly as buildings, but Gurun had never seen an ordinary, above-ground building.

Her mind raced. It churned up verses of Scripture that had to do with houses, palaces, and castles: things from ancient times and far away. Words that had no meaning for the people of the islands, who lived in barrows heaped with turf—what could they know of palaces or castles?

But what else could these enormous objects be but palaces or castles? And where were the people? Inside, perhaps?

Gurun marched toward them to see for herself.