

PRAGTA OF THE HAPPY HOUSE

by Greg Stolze

Malaym huddled in the ship's hold and cried. Before yesterday, she had never seen anyone die and now, one dawn later, she had seen too many. In an hour, the city of Borzhu had convulsed, burned, and been overturned. A cataclysm taller than the sky and brighter than the sun had befallen the only home she'd ever known and now she was in darkness, and it smelled terrible, and all around her were others, like her, weeping and shivering.

"Malaym." The voice was her mother, Hjarta, accompanied by a hand on her shoulder. Malaym turned and embraced her, hard, and her quiet tears escalated again to sobs.

"Shh, yes, let it out." Hjarta had never been the soft and cuddly type, but she tried. She was rawboned and sturdy and well-fit for effort. She'd toiled out her youth in one of the dyeing houses, before hiring on with a dress shop to drape and sew.

"Gourah is alive, surely?" Gourah was Malaym's other mother. Malaym hated asking it, and knew Hjarta would hate answering, but it was like it slipped out of her mouth unconsidered.

"We do not know. We cannot know," Hjarta said with a sigh. "All my heart hopes she is, on another boat or perhaps on that massive *creature* but there is nothing we can do about that now."

"What then? What can we do?"

"We can work," Hjarta said, pulling the girl to her feet as she, herself, stood.

"Work? I can't sail!" She did not resist as her mother pulled her towards the thin lines of dim light that picked out the hatch upward to the rowers' chamber.

"You can cook, or clean, or put things in place, or hold something while someone more knowledgeable does their job," Hjarta said firmly. As they reached the ladder up, she leaned close and whispered, "We

cannot pay passage. We ride at these sailors' sufferance. Should things take a turn, who will they shield and protect? The guest who sought labor, or the one who wept in the darkness?"

"You don't think...?"

"I think they are good people who saved our lives and we ought be grateful," Hjarta said, louder, as she pushed up the trap door and led Malaym upwards. "I also think that doing some action, perhaps in the daylight, will be healthier and less sorrow-making than lying inert in the dark."

The great oars were shipped, and the benches were not being used for rowing but as more bed space for sailors and shocked, motionless Borzhuvians. Malaym and Hjarta quietly slipped past the big drum beside the steps and down the thin corridor, taking care not to step on hands or hair. The next set of steps took them up into the open air, and even in her misery, Malaym was glad of it.

"Excuse me, good sir, is there any way we might be of use?" Hjarta asked the first person she saw tugging a rope and not obviously in a hurry.

"Geh?" he replied, and Hjarta repeated her question in poor-to-middling Aifo. The reply contained the word "Zutha" and a gesture at a tired, imposing woman with thick black hair and a round, pretty face, who was bellowing at the sailors while leaning on a railing one deck further up.

"Ma'am?" Hjarta asked, as Malaym squinted and recognized the woman as the one who'd bullied everyone into a line the night before, fleeing, before hearing that deafening crack from up on the mountain and...

"Ma'am," Hjarta repeated, somehow toeing a perfect line between impatient and deferential. "Is there anything we can do?"

"Do? Tell me what you can do and I'll say if you can do it," Zutha replied.

"I am an expert seamstress and my daughter here is clean of limb, sensible, and not a shrieker or a layabout."

Malaym glanced at Hjarta, who had often expressed her motherly love but never quite complimented her in these specific terms.

“We want neither layabouts nor shriekers, to be certain. Report to the sailmaker, lady seamstress, exactly down one level from here—just take the middle door between the forecandle stairs and turn left.” She turned an eye on Malaym and bit her lower lip. “You faint at the sight of blood?”

“Pardon?”

“Seeing blood—does it un-gut you?” Zutha clarified.

“We lived right—” Hjarta started, but Zutha raised a finger and, to Malaym’s mild surprise, Hjarta went quiet.

“Speak, seamstress’ daughter.”

“No,” Malaym said. “I don’t think it does.”

“We lived near a butcher, she’s seen a thousand pigs and cows slitted if she’s seen one,” Hjarta added.

“Good. You’re to help the surgeon, Tizhur,” Zutha said, and gave brisk instructions on where the ship’s doctor could be found. Malaym blinked.

“Aught else? Go then.” With that, Zutha nodded, turned, and walked away.

“That went well,” Hjarta murmured.

“Well,” Malaym echoed.

When she arrived at medical cabin Malaym found it small, and crowded, and with a different stink than the rest of the boat. The hold, where she had slept, was rank with the odors of foul bilgewater and sad, desperate people. This room smelled more of blood, smoke, pungent herbs and something acidic.

The surgeon herself was extremely short, as was her hair, but as if to compensate she was broad across the shoulders and hips. When Malaym knocked and was bade to enter, a patient was sitting on a stool too short for his long legs. He was an old man, with gray beard and eyebrows. The doctor was examining a bandage on his arm.

“I can come back later...?”

“State your business,” the doctor said, probing the arm as the man winced. His teeth were terrible.

“Are you Tizhur?” When the other woman nodded, Malaym nodded back and said, “I was sent to help.”

“Help? Help what?”

“Help you.”

“Hm. All right. Look at this man, right in the eyes.” Turning to the graybeard, she said, “Stare at her, please.”

Malaym looked at his bloodshot brown orbs and he, helplessly, locked gazes with her as the doctor said “Great,” and briskly tore off the cloth that had dried onto his wound. The man yelped.

“Let that dry in the air on deck until the six-bell rings, then have my mate Andri put on a fresh bandage,” she said, throwing the soiled cloth into a basket thick with them. “Off you go.”

Wordlessly, the man left.

“Was that...? Did...?”

“Looking at a wound makes it hurt more, that’s just a fact,” Tizhur said. “Now, I have been patting heads and setting bones all night, I’m dead on my feet and cannot give you the instruction you’d require to be of any use at all here. I’ll sleep when Andri comes on at midshift, which can’t come soon enough, but... Hm. Yes. *Yes*. I think I have a job for you. In fact, I think I have *the* job for you. Come with me to the captain’s cabin.”

It was just two doors down from the surgery, and in the few steps, the doctor told Malaym that Captain Rait had rescued someone from Borzhu, a woman who was a longtime friend and associate of his. “Tore up her leg wicked fierce,” Tizhur said dispassionately, “Burning up fevered, now. The captain clucks over her like a hen with but one chick, and there is not one thing I can do except wipe her head when she sweats and pull the blankets on her when she shivers. Which, I suppose, is two things. More specifically, they are the two things *you* can do.” She opened the door and said, “Meet Pragta.”

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