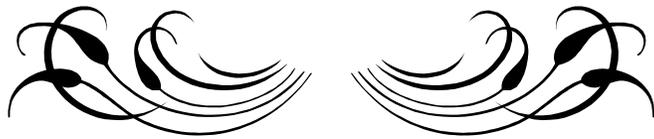


# Return of the Ülanre



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## I. The Past

In the ancient songs of the Hùloril, it is said that when the first wooden ship sighted the Denkyali after surviving the storm that drove it far from familiar waters, the men aboard looked upon the isles as if seeing a lost paradise. Here, the songs say, they found trees in abundance, tall, thick, and dark, never culled by axes or fire. Among them lived a multitude of beasts and birds, though of what sort the songs do not say, for men cannot recall. Seals and walrus lined the shores, in such numbers that the first men could barely pick their way through to find shelter, and the pillars of rock that broke the waves offshore like the teeth of a long-dead giant swarmed with all manner of seabird. Springs there were amidst the forest, bubbling from the rocky ground to flow beneath the leaves to the cliff, whence they tumbled into the ocean below, joining the great spray of the waves. Even in winter, when the sun was hidden for all but a few short hours, little snow fell and the ocean was free of ice. To the sailors who first strode upon its rocky shores and beheld the fog drifting through the trees in the pale morning light, it seemed indeed that the gods had answered their prayers. Food was abundant and easy to come by, and they found wood for the repairing of their ship and the building of shelter for their stay. Soon they left, but they brought back tales of the Denkyali, the isles beyond the cold, gray expanse of sea. And others heard their tales.

First came the catchers of fish, searching for new grounds, and they found the Denkyali teeming with all manner of creatures. Soon houses grew on the shores, and sheds for the drying of the catch, and workshops for the repair of nets and boats. The men stayed longer and longer into the season, finding the weather pleasant, if cool and damp, until one and another chose to stay, moving their families there permanently. More and more followed, at first for the promise of the islands' bounty, later in fear as war came ever more frequently to their homeland. They brought men and women of all sorts, farmers and herders as well as fishers. Villages were built and trees felled for the crafting of houses and of ships. The years passed. Forests were harvested, but none returned in their place, the land given instead to

meager farms that yielded little and less with every passing year, and to pastorage, which yielded better. The beasts and birds of the woods became more and more rare, until they were seen and heard no more. In their place, the animals of the Hùloril grazed, consuming what they could of the plants that grew so slowly in the dim northern light. In time the plants changed, so that only the hardiest remained, grasses and moss and brambles where one stood great trees and verdant brush, leaving the isles as great mats of green and brown. The seal and walrus too left, driven out by men who hunted them for meat, until to see one laid up ashore was a matter for wonder and surprise. But the seabirds and fish remained.

With the loss of the trees, the villages came to be made of stone and thatch, and heat came from peat rather than wood. Ships they could no longer build, only small coracles of woven reeds and grass, enough to travel from island to island and fish close to shore, but no farther, for they stood no chance against the currents and storms of the open sea. And then the ships from home ceased to appear. Why, the Hùloril never learned. Perhaps the enemies who had been threatening the people had succeeded in overwhelming them, or perhaps the winds had changed and there was no longer easy passage to the isles. What was known was that one year the looked-for ships didn't appear, nor the next, nor the one after that, until their very existence was forgotten in all but song.

In time, the Hùloril forgot much of what had gone before, and the tales of great plants that reached far above the head and of long shores and great lands teeming with people seemed like dreams, pictures fashioned from tales of ancient days, and no more. And for a long time too, the world outside forgot about them and their islands.

But there was one other thing the old songs told of, in their darkest and most distressing hints, lines in ancient lays that few now understood and fewer recounted, and that was that although the Hùloril had found the Denkyali empty of people, they knew they were not the first to come.