

### III. The Wreck

The storm passed while he dreamed, his mind awash with visions of water and floods sweeping over the battered coast, and when he emerged as the first light of dawn brightened the eastern sky the clouds had broken, and now drifted across the indigo expanse in long streaks of gray touched with gold. The birds had returned, dancing along the shore as they hunted crabs and other tiny creatures amidst the wreckage left by the storm, their cries filling the air.

Foanru hastened down to the beach via the rough stone steps carved into the cliff that bordered the remains of the village. The tide was still receding, but in just a few hours it would return and whatever gifts the storm had brought would be swept back into the ocean. The birds were not the only creatures determined to take advantage of the sea's bounty while they could.

He moved quickly along the beach, stepping lightly around the mats of seaweed that clogged the mud and stones as he scanned the rocks and sand. The shorebirds jumped or fluttered away as he approached, returning to their foraging as soon as he passed. At first, he found little of value, just various shells—he kept some larger ones as they could be used as dishes and containers, stowing them in the woven bag slung over his shoulder—and the remains of various sea creatures churned up by the storm. He spent little time on these, though, not even bothering to disturb the clumps of weed to see if better specimens lay hidden within. It was on the northwestern side, where the fury of the storm had been strongest, that the greatest treasures were likely to be found, driftwood from unknown shores and sometimes the bones of whales or seals, from which his carvings could be fashioned.

The cool water lapped at his feet as he picked his way along the muddy beach, avoiding the sharper rocks that could slice through his sandals and slash his feet. The breeze was strengthening now as he neared where the cliff jutted into the sea, separating the leeward side of the island from the full fury of the west. Even now, with the storm over, the wind on the other side would be strong; only on the calmest

of days were the western waters ever truly free of white capped waves, though at low tide they were of little concern to one on the shore.

The way was rockiest by the point, where sharp stone masses rose from the water well past the low-tide mark, sending spray high into the air when they were beaten by the waves. He knew the best way, though, a path carved through the rocks by generations of passing feet, and soon felt the force of the wind beat salted air against his face as he crested the low ridge.

He stopped suddenly, staring. On the beach, amidst the rock and weed, lay a huge, ribbed mass, deep brown in color, far larger than the porpoises that sometimes played alongside his coracle, almost as large as a small whale, though not so big as the great beasts that roamed farther out and that he habitually avoided with his small coracle, lest he be toppled when they surfaced. It was no carcass, though—had it been, he would surely have smelled it from where he stood.

Cautiously, he made his way down to the thing. As he neared, he could see that it was made—clearly *made*, and not a result of natural processes—from wood, and not the bleached and wave-smoothed wood that typically washed ashore. Instead, it was constructed from long, curved planks, fastened into a shape like a folded leaf, with a great pole that stuck out from one side, reaching longer than twice his height, from which a second, splintered pole hung crazily near the top and to which the frayed ends of rope still clung. More intriguingly, on the nearest end of the thing, where the curved planks narrowed to a point, rose a long crest ending in a carved head, shaped not unlike the unnamed beast he had created the night before or the faded wooden carving that lay among his other possessions. This one was painted, though it had lost much of its color, and stared at him with red-rimmed eyes as he neared.

A boat. What else could it be, with a shape like that? This one, though, would never float again. The rocks had seen to that, shattering its timbers as it was washed ashore so that several holes pierced its side and the end where a second crest might once have risen had been shorn off. What sort of people had these been, the ones who built this boat? They were not from the Denkyali, certainly, not with wood like this. Perhaps mariners from the distant lands the legends spoke of,

blown far off course into stormy waters from which they could not escape? But as he walked around the wreck, taking it in, he saw no remains, only the wooden thing they had left behind.

But what was their loss was surely his gain. Here was wood aplenty, far more than he had ever laid eyes on before, and his for the taking. He started with the loose pieces first, those that had been thrown free when the boat crashed into the sharp rocks of the shore, and when he had all he could carry he ran back with his bounty, dumping it outside the hut and grabbing the precious hand-axe, a legacy from his father's grandfather, and as much rope as he could carry. Soon, he was back at the boat, and the rustling of the wind and cries of the seabirds were joined by the slamming of axe on wood, the clattering of timbers against rock, and the short silences as he tied it up in bundles for eventual transportation up the cliff and piled them on the rocks where the fingers of the tide could not reach them.

He worked through the morning, until the gentle fingers of the waves once again lapped at the base of the boat, now merely a skeleton of its former self. Exhausted, he dropped down onto the great beam that had once run along the boat's bottom and let out a deep breath as he looked over the water. He couldn't see the Rijali from here—he was too low and they so far distant that any view of them would be blocked by the rolling waves—but the Julânrec pierced the waves just a short distance away, its base splashed with foam as the waters roiled past.

Foanru frowned, squinting as he peered more closely at the top of the stone pillar. No, he hadn't been mistaken, for there it was again, a flash of light, the reflection of the sun against... something. And above that, if he moved his head just right, he could see a sliver of sky behind.

There was a window through the top of the pillar, a hole piercing through it like the eye of a needle.

He stared, thoroughly perplexed. He'd lived here all of his life, come to this very spot innumerable times. How could he have missed such a thing? He was certain that every other time he'd looked on the Julânrec it had been as solid and immutable as the cliffs above. At first, he had assumed the shining thing was something brought there by one

of the myriad birds, but now he wasn't so sure. Maybe something had broken loose in the storm, opening the window through the pillar. But what could shine like that?

Come to think of it, where were the birds? They filled the sky around, flying about or hovering in the face of the wind, but they all seemed to be giving the Julânrec wide berth, though it was one of their usual roosting places. Of course, it could just be the pattern of the wind...

He was suddenly brought back to his present predicament when he felt water splash against his calves. In alarm, he saw that the tide had risen much more than he'd realized. Muttering a curse at his own foolishness, he rushed to the pole, the last of the pieces he'd torn from the boat, and hefted it, looking for a spot to stow it on the rocks above, where the greedy waves wouldn't be able to reach it. But the thing was too long, and too awkward, and after a couple of failed tries he gave up. Shaking his head in frustration, and berating himself for waiting as long as he had, he grabbed the thing and took one end, dragging the rest behind him as he made his way back to the stairs. It was slow going, but at least the pole floated, which made the task easier up until he had to drag it up the stairs. By the time he reached the top, he could barely lift his arms, and he flopped down onto the grass, letting the wind course over his body as he stared up at the sky, until his lids were too weary to remain open and he slept.

His dreams were strange, of cruel men in boats as large as an island and terrible creatures with red-rimmed eyes that spouted flames and death. But when he returned from sleep, his stomach complaining terribly from having missed a meal, they dissipated like the morning fog, leaving only vague traces of unease to disturb the waking world.

He returned to the wreckage site the next day to find that nothing remained save the bundles of timbers he had stowed on the high rocks. It was only what he had expected, though he had hoped the sea might leave it for a couple days more since he still had much to scavenge. But at least he had saved what he could.

As he pulled the first of the bundles off the rocks—carefully, lest the rope tear and scatter the precious wood all over the beach—he

glanced back at the Julânrec. From this vantage, it looked as it always had, with no hint of flashing nor window. But still no birds flew above or nearby, nor floated on the water, though many let the waves bob them up and down as they searched for prey just yards away.

He frowned, hefting the bundle over his shoulder as he dropped from the rocks to get a better look.

He didn't see the flash of reflected light again—it was too overcast for that—but there it was, the hole, just as before, and behind it the vast sea, leading off...

He drew back in shock, then looked around the edge. No, there was nothing there, just waves and water. But he could have sworn he saw something else, something moving...