

V. The Vision

Foanru dragged the coracle onto the shore, struggling with its weight as it was still laden with his purchases from the market. Overhead, the sun was already sinking into the west, painting the sky in pink and gold. Usually, when the weather was good, he would have departed early in the morning of the day following the market, giving him time to finish some needed work on his return before night fell, but Krealinah had managed to get away with Rolianah for a few hours, and he could not pass on the opportunity to spend the time with her, even it only meant sitting and talking as the gulls floated overhead and the little girl mewled and pulled at the tufts of grass. It was already late in the year, and there would only be one more full moon before the market closed for the winter and he wouldn't see them for months. He had to make the best of what time he had.

He smiled sadly as he remembered the touch of Krealinah's lips on his and the fragrance of her skin. Already, the world seemed dimmer. If only he didn't have to leave her...

Silently berating himself for dwelling on things that could never be, he gathered the bundles from inside the boat and lugged them one after another onto the dry rocks above the highwater line. When they were out, he dragged the now much-lighter coracle up the slope and over the grass to rest it in the shadow of the house, where it would stay safe from wind and wave. Then he began porting up his purchases.

He'd done well this time. The timber from the derelict boat had been in high demand, which had allowed him to replenish many of his supplies in exchange, as well as replacing several items that had grown threadbare with use. He was glad for the bounty, especially since the unpredictable weather might prevent him from returning until after winter had passed, but it did make for an exhausting haul. And then he had to stow it all, and check on the fish—fortunately, the netting had kept the birds away, though they were not drying as quickly as he would have liked. By the time he crawled beneath the new woolen blanket beside the lively peat fire, the sun had long since vanished and he was weary to the bone, even with so much of the work left undone, and he fell into a deep, dreamless sleep.

Four days passed. On the second, the mists roiled in, thick and damp, coating everything in a moist sheen and forcing him to smoke the fish to keep them from being ruined. Equally unpleasantly, the wetness turned the gardens into plots of thick mud that stuck to everything—especially him—as he dug out the roots for winter storage. He was exceptionally filthy by the end, and had to take extra time pulling clean water out of the well for his bath and washing his clothes. And beyond that were the innumerable other chores to be completed. It was almost enough to clear his mind of Krealinah, and how much he missed her, and how lonely he was away from her. Almost.

His life was not all toil, though. When he could, he drifted to the top of the cliff to watch the ocean, where the waves seemed to emerge from the blurring fog to beat against the rocks, sending spray back up to join the mist, letting the music of the sea calm his heart and fill his breast. Always, his eyes turned to the Jūlanrec, rising starkly from the waters, a lone dark mass amidst the gray. Just to look at it, there seemed nothing strange, but the birds still had not returned, nor did he see any approach within several yards.

In that time, he did not return to the northern shore from which he had first seen the hole. The trip took several minutes, and he rarely had enough time to spare until it was too dark to make doing so safe. But on the third day, he discovered that there was a spot on the very edge of the northernmost bluff where, if he sat on a particular rock and leaned a little forward, he could see through a sliver of the strange hole that pierced its top. He didn't see anything other than the sea and occasional birds beyond, but the memory of the strange movement from earlier kept him looking.

And then, on the fifth day, when the mist finally cleared as the wind picked up, threatening worse than pervading damp, everything changed.

He had just finished sealing the second jar after two hours of packing it and its fellow with the stiffened fruits of his earlier catch and was resting before taking on the task of repairing the net he had covered it with—some overconfident bird, smelling an unearned meal,

had tried to break through, become entangled rather than reaching its goal, yet managed somehow to free itself, hopelessly tangling and snapping quite a number of fibers in the process. As was his wont, he had taken a seat on the rock overlooking the Jülanrec, and was gazing aimlessly in its direction, his mind wandering as he nibbled on his midday meal.

Behind the hole, something moved.

He blinked, shaken awake. At first, he thought he must have seen some bird, or possibly a seal or porpoise in the water. But when he moved his head, he quickly realized that he could see nothing behind it. But there was definitely something there. Perhaps a bird had gotten close after all, maybe even landed within the hole itself. He looked closer...

It was as if the thin crack had expanded, filling his vision. And as his focus softened, what lay beyond sprang clearly into view.

Before him was the sea, but it was not the same, instead brighter and bluer. The sky above shone with light and was streaked with fast-moving clouds, below which white and gray seabirds swirled. Speeding across the water was a boat, a long, curved thing like the one that had washed ashore, painted in resplendent reds, greens, and yellows, from the timbers that plashed through the water to the high prow with the face of a monstrous beast arching overhead. Like the one he'd found, a long pole thrust up from the center of the craft, holding a great cloth that stretched wide, pulled taut by the wind, displaying the terrible likeness of some hideous creature that strode across its breadth on four clawed legs, its snarling head arched back over its shoulder. Men were upon the craft, small as bugs to his vision, bustling industriously as it moved steadily forward, though toward what he could not see. And he could feel menace radiating from the boat like heat from a fire, and knew that, whatever their destination, they would be unwelcome at their arrival.

He drew back, blinking, feeling for the moment as disoriented and groggy as if he had just woken from a deep sleep. Once again, the Jülanrec was but a pillar of stone amidst the waves, the waters rolling and pitching about it, dousing the rocky base with their spray, with nothing floating atop them save birds fishing for their meals. He

leaned in again, but whatever magic had been behind the vision seemed to have fled, leaving only the thin sliver with its view of the waves beyond.

For the remainder of the day, the image of the boat plagued him, distracting him from his work, then filling his dreams so that he awoke time and again, his mind swarming with strange pictures and stranger theories. But there was no mistaking it, there was some sort of... something... happening with the Jülanrec.

And he would find out what.