

VI. The Pillar

The wind had strengthened the next day and rain was in the air, but that did not deter him. Over the long, restless night he had formulated a plan, and now he was determined to put it into action, regardless of the weather. It was the vision itself that had suggested the idea, with the men crawling all about the boat, including one watching from atop the pole...

The first task was to get his own pole to the beach. It still lay unused outside his hut, too long for the trellis and too unwieldy for the journey to Tlongow, and transporting it to the lower end of the island through a combination of dragging and rolling took the better part of two hours, after which his arms were scratched, battered, and dead tired. But having committed to his plan, he couldn't leave it there at the mercy of the surf, so he trudged up and down the slope again, this time retrieving the much-lighter coracle. He lashed the pole to it (fortunately, the boatsmen had hacked out footholds along its length, which provided purchase for the rope) and dragged it out into the water, immensely pleased to see that it indeed floated, rather than sinking beneath the waves as he had feared. Buoyed by the thought that this might actually work, he pushed the little craft out into the ocean and began paddling to the Jülanrec, dragging the long wooden shaft behind.

After nearly an hour battling the waves, his paddle struck the Jülanrec's rocky base. He dragged the coracle ashore—there wasn't much room, and he had to tie the boat to an outcrop of rock to prevent it from being swept away by the waves—then began the arduous (and highly frustrating) process of pulling in the now soaked and slippery pole from the sea. Once the near end was firmly secure against the rocks, it was time to raise the rest from the water, which meant tying a rope to the far end (and swimming out to do it), finding a spot along the rocky pillar to angle the rope over, and then using it to hoist the pole aloft. The whole process took another exasperating hour in which the rope came undone from the pole twice and the pillar more times than that, but eventually the thing was up, its lower end wedged within a waterlogged crack between the rocks, its upper end resting alongside

the hole he had come to investigate. By then, the wind and rain had intensified, biting through his sodden garments, and he could barely see straight from exhaustion, but he was determined to see this through. Securing his hands and feet in the now-slick notches that spanned the pole's length, he dragged himself up to the top, one agonizing pull after another.

He had been sure to lean the pole away from the hole so it wouldn't block his view of it from the shore, but that had made the pole settle far enough away that he had to stretch out, his fingers grabbing desperately onto the rain-slicked rock as he leaned off the pole to see in. For a moment he lost his grip and nearly slipped, but his foot held and he caught himself before he fell, throwing his body against the Jülanrec's rock bulk and feeling its rough surface against the soaked wool of his tunic. He glanced down at his left, foot hanging precariously over the ten-foot drop above the rugged rock, and willed his heart to stop hammering as he inhaled and exhaled deeply, one ragged breath after another. And then, steeling himself, he crept out the last few inches.

The hole was larger than it had looked. Not only was it deep enough to pierce through the entire pillar, a distance of perhaps five feet, it was also wide enough that if he had wished to hoist himself into it (and thus lose easy access to the pole) he could have squirmed through himself, though with little room to spare. For the longest time, the hole had been plugged. He could still see the remnants of that plug, shards of something like pottery. These were a brilliant white on what he assumed had been the inside—likely, that had been the source of the reflection—but rough and dark on the outside with a texture indistinguishable from the rock around it; it was no wonder no one had noticed it before. Much of what must have been the mass of the plug was gone though, probably thrown into the sea by the storm.

The thing within, which the plug was clearly meant to protect, had not moved. It was a milky-green, translucent stone as large as his fist. It lay in shadow now, set into a small depression in the midst of the aperture, but even in the gloom he could see the carvings upon its surface, lines and tendrils that wrapped around like the wind personified, layer upon layer that drew the eye in, beckoning his gaze

closer and closer. Teetering forward, he reached in, grasped the globe, and drew it out, resting back on his perch as he brought it into the light, holding it aloft so that he could see the patterns of swirls and whorls in the dim light escaping through the clouds, his eyes gazing deeper, deeper...

Blink.

He was looking over the water at a beach, an expanse of bright, yellow-white sand that blazed in the sun, and behind it, rugged gray rocks bursting with green, spikey-leaved plants that poured over them and lodged in their cracks. In their midst stood a great stone head, carved from a single boulder and free of vegetation. Its heavy, stern features glared menacingly over the ocean as the waves lapped the sand below its chin and seabirds, dark ones of a sort Fohanru didn't recognize, floated gently overhead. But all was not well. He could feel their fear before he saw them, two people running swiftly across the sand, a man and a woman. Both were young, no more than a few years from his own age, the man fair-skinned and light-haired like the Hùloril, the woman dark-haired with skin a rich brown like a hedge-nut. They wore little, barely enough to cover their loins, the woman nothing on her chest, but their clothing was brightly-colored and well-made, and their sandals sparkled gold in the sun. He could feel their panic, their despair. They were lost; he could see it as well as they could, though he could not see what the woman did when she glanced furtively over her shoulder and her face twisted in terror. And then, at the corner of his vision, *it* came into view, a monstrous thing of horror, a man-sized beast, its oddly misshapen head painted in blue and red with great fangs that burst from its slobbering jaws. It raced after its prey on oddly long forearms, half-jumping, half-running, its beady eyes mad with bloodlust. But around its neck was a collar of leather and metal, proclaiming it to be no wild beast. And as fast as the pair ran, it was rapidly closing the distance...

Blink.

Another shore stretched before him, rugged and rock-strewn with a cliff that rose to the left of his view, reminding him of his own isle, save for the great plants that rose above the bluff, huge things that stretched toward the clouds on long gray stalks, their leaves like the

crowberry, but long and dark. The waves washed the rocky shore below, splashing against the heavy bodies of the seals that lounged on the rocks. The sky above was streaked with clouds whose shadows played across the water and shore, moving lazily over the surface. And then something else came into view, a long, low craft made of wood, like the wreck but much smaller, paddled swiftly through the waves by eight men, pale-skinned and light-haired like the Hùloril, but with clothes of much brighter colors and hair and beards in long braids. They leapt from its back well before reaching the shore, racing into land as they drew the boat along with them, clearly excited. On the rocks, one of the seals raised its head bemusedly while the others paid the exuberant newcomers no mind.

Blink.

He was looking down at a harbor from atop a wall of white stone, carved into massive rectangular blocks that fitted together as neatly as the broken pieces of a pot, a fence of something solid, brilliant, and white separating the edge from the drop beyond. Grim-faced men, their faces hairless and so pale as to be almost blue, their eyes large and dark beneath their helms, carrying great spears and wearing outfits that gleamed brownish-gold in the pink morning light, stood at ready in ranks, watching the sea lit red by the rising sun, upon which innumerable shapes glided toward them, a great armada of boats, too many to count. He could feel the resolve mixed with fear as the men waited for the inevitable, their dark eyes glittering.

Blink.

The beach again, though now the giant head had toppled onto its side so that half its face was covered by sand. Fleecy clouds drifted across the bright blue sky, sometimes bathing the sand below in their cool shade. A man and woman walked along the shore, their fingers entwined, speaking and laughing. Both had bronze skin and soot-black hair like his own. The man wore a blue and yellow tunic, the woman in a long, multicolored dress that left her breasts exposed. Before them, a young, naked child frolicked on the sand, poking at the crabs that scurried by his feet. Suddenly, there was a noise he could not hear. The child continued to play, but the man and woman looked up, worried. He turned to her, said something, and gave her a quick

hug. When he pulled away, she was crying, while he ran back the way he had come.

Blink.

The western shore of Klewstra, a view he knew well, spread out before him, its familiar bluffs topped with mats of green grass, on which a scattering of white-fleeced sheep grazed placidly. Among the rocks below, a little girl in a long dress, her blonde hair pulled back into twin braids, scoured the ground, searching for shells and other treasures. Suddenly, she stopped, staring. Some yards away, splayed out on the rocks, lay a body, the once brightly-colored rags that clung to it shredded and torn. Frightened, she ran off, her screeches quickly bringing others, some of whom looked almost familiar. As a group, the men approached the body carefully, until one among them reached out to poke it gently, then started back as it moved, the arm flopping over to reveal a face, his golden-brown skin battered and bloodied, his long, dark hair caked with seaweed and mud. But his face looked only a little different from that which Foanru saw when he viewed his reflection in the spring.

Blink.

The sky was orange and thick, and tendrils of smoke snaked before his eyes, obscuring the rushing forms of people running, screaming, falling, dying, as the enemy fell on them, tall men with faces hidden behind metal masks, their shirts covered with silvery scales like those of fish, great metal blades in their hands rising and falling as they carved their way through the crowd of panicked people desperate to escape. Some ways away, a man stood on a stair, surveying the carnage, a satisfied smile on his cruel, unmasked face, a strange gleam in his eyes that hinted of power. He turned from the destruction to look behind him, where two men approached, dragging between them a white-clad woman, tall and thin, her pale face, large black eyes, and long silvery-blue hair identifying her as from the same people he had seen earlier. Though battered and bloodied, she glared at the cruel man defiantly, her back rigidly strait as he approached slowly, his eyes moving up her torn dress and broken jewelry to rest on her face. He snarled and spoke, but in return she said nothing, only spat in his face, pulling hard at her captors' grips so that she almost broke free before they threw

her back. One struck her in the gut so that she collapsed, long strands of hair falling over her face. The man who had struck her said something and held out his hand, in which sat a small globe, gray in the orange light. The cruel man took it, his face curving into an avaricious grin. He held it aloft, letting the light from the sun course through it, falling on his brilliant green eyes.

The man's face was suddenly troubled, and Foaeru had the sudden, uncanny and deeply unsettling impression that the man saw *him* as clearly as he saw the man.

The cruel man's gaze suddenly tore away. The woman was shouting something. He spun, and the blade at his side plunged deep into her chest. She stared at him, her ire melting into disbelief as dark blood bubbled from her mouth...

Foaeru tore his gaze away, his whole body shaking, his stomach feeling like it might rebel at any moment. He clenched his eyes shut, refusing to look back at the stone, willing the visions to depart, but the pale woman's face would not fade, her eyes seeking his own, looking for... what?

He forced himself to think about the rain, the cold droplets pelting his skin, soaking his clothes, the breeze rustling his hair, chilling him through his tunic. What he had seen, that was not real. This was real, the stone, the rain, the wind, the ache in his fingers as they clung to the rock. Those other things, they were phantasms, wisps of fancy like dreams. Weren't they? He could still see the cold eyes of the murderer, green as his own...

Tentatively, he opened his lids. The Jülanrec rose before him, as dark and solid as before. The hole was the same, though now the stone sat in his hand, strangely warm. Quickly, he thrust it into his pouch, feeling its weight as it tugged on his belt. Then, after a few deep breaths, he began to descend.