

VII. The Stone

The wind whistled outside, pelting the stone walls with rain as he sat huddled within, staring at the pouch laid out atop the driftwood bench while his hanging clothes dried in the heat of the fire. He hadn't yet dared to uncover the stone, not after what he'd seen. Whatever those images had been—and he felt in his core that they were real, and not fancies out of some dream—the last had shaken him so badly that he dreaded looking into the thing again, fearing what else he might see. And yet its call was strong, nagging at him, daring him to return. But the memories of the strange woman's face, of the blood spreading from her wound, and of the cruel man who had slain her were stronger still. And so, the stone remained covered, though his eyes kept straying toward it as he carved the piece of whalebone he'd brought back from Tlongow, and the surface of his carving grew to echo its whorls and tendrils more and more.

That night, his dreams were dark and disturbed, drenched with visions nearly as vivid as those he'd seen through the stone, though they fled with the first flutter of awakening, leaving only faint shadows of dread and a deep weariness that dragged upon him as if he hadn't slept at all in their wake. The still-cinched pouch greeted him upon awakening, the knowledge of what waited inside beckoning to him, but though he took it and slid it through his belt, he did not open the leather bag to look within. Not yet.

For two more days the stone remained within its leather housing, untouched and unviewed. And yet, he kept it with him always, hanging heavily from his belt. Though it was clearly foolish to worry about anything happening to it—the only other beings on the island were the birds, and what use would they have for such a thing, even if they could find their way into the house to carry it off?—he still couldn't bear to let it from his sight. The compulsion had seemed a trifling thing at first, to where he had deliberately removed it again and placed it on the bench before setting out, but he had only made it a few steps before his worry over it became consuming enough that he had to return and restring it onto his belt. Even though he did not draw it out that day,

his hand kept straying toward the pouch to reassure himself that it was still inside.

Aside from its effect on him, it was quickly apparent that the stone had been the reason for the disturbance among the birds that he'd noticed earlier. Even on that first day after he'd removed it from the Jülanrec, it was clear that the animals were no longer troubled by the place, and by mid-day a group of cormorants was again roosting on its top, while puffins and gulls paddled in the waves below. They didn't seem unusually wary of him either, though that might have been because he kept the thing covered, as it had been within its casing before the storm.

Finally, though, the pull of the thing and the fading of the memory of what he had seen overcame his resistance. It was well into the afternoon, and he had just finished stowing his coracle after a very underwhelming day of trying to coax fish into his waiting net. The sun had already sunk low in the sky, painting the undersides of the scattered clouds in brilliant oranges and pinks while the seabirds drifted lazily beneath the splendor, when he went out onto the bluff to watch it set, bringing his bowl of fish-and-onion stew with him. He had been considering it for a long time—all day, in fact—and he had finally come to the conclusion that his worries were groundless. Whatever horrible things he saw, they were not real, though perhaps they had been, once. And despite the distressing sense of being seen he'd received from the cruel-faced man, he was in no danger. And he could always remove his gaze if he did not like what he saw.

And so, once he'd finished his stew and laid the spoon inside the pot, he slowly loosened the thong that bound the pouch together and drew it out, holding it up into the light.

In the yellow-orange light of dusk, the stone looked more gray than green, as it had when the helmeted man had held it in the vision, but the sunlight shown through it marvelously, refracted by the intricately swirling layers to make it seem to glow from within. He had not been able to examine it so closely before, having been beset so quickly by the visions it gave, but now he could see the full, breathtaking mastery of its craftsmanship, a level of skill that made his own carvings, widely renowned among the Hùloril for their artistry and uniqueness, seem

but rude clay blobs of an untutored infant in comparison. As he leaned in closer, following the patterns along its surface, his eyes began to lose their focus...

He was on the white wall again, though this time the sun was high and the sea clear. Below, the harbor spread along the shore, long quays stretching into the water, where brilliantly-painted boats of white, blue, and gold lay moored. Further inland stood the town of tall, delicate buildings, constructed from the same brilliant white material as the fence along the edge of the wall, formed into wondrously delicate lattices of thin tendrils supporting brightly colored cloth—the only visible walls—that rustled in the breeze. How such insubstantial things stood, much less rose to such heights, he couldn't begin to comprehend. On the streets between, and on the wall below, men and women walked, more than he had ever seen in one place. Like the woman from the previous vision, they were astonishingly pale, with long white or even bluish or greenish hair and wide, dark eyes, though some covered the latter with odd, darkened contraptions like cups bound to their heads. Their garments were colorful and varied in a startlingly wide range of designs beyond anything he could have imagined. They moved individually and in groups, walking, talking, sometimes pulling carts or leading long-legged beasts with pack on their backs.

Up on the wall, a man came into view, walking to the edge and standing before the delicately-patterned fence. He wore a long, calf-length, wide-shouldered, blue robe with long sleeves patterning in gold over tight gold trousers, and his long, pale blue hair was pulled behind his oddly-proportioned ears and held in place by a circlet of what looked like woven gold. He clasped his hands behind his back, his twelve long, slender fingers intertwining as he gazed across the water. And then Foanru saw what he saw, a great, bloated, black shape in the sky, with triangles of red cloth clustered around its edges like moths on a wall. Slowly, it drifted toward the city as the man watched stiffly.

Below, on the streets, word had spread. People stopped what they were doing and stood staring into the sky. Others began to clear the streets, glancing worriedly over their shoulders as they made for shelter. Something new had come to their town, and they were afraid.

Blink.

A rush of light-headedness washed over him, and he closed his eyes tight, fighting off the nausea. That one had been more vivid than the others. He could feel the people's fear, not yet comprehending what they saw but knowing it boded ill. He had wanted to do something, to warn them, but warn them of what? He understood nothing of what he had seen.

He opened his eyes again. The stone still lay in his hand, though now that the sun had sunk below the horizon—when had that happened?—it no longer seemed to glow. It was warm, though, definitely warmer than his hand. He stared at it for several moments, willing it to show him something else, though simultaneously afraid of what it might reveal, but nothing happened. For whatever reason, its displays were over for the evening.

The stone occupied the entirety of his thoughts as he finished his chores for the remainder of the evening. What were the things he was seeing, and, perhaps more importantly, why? What was the thing that bounced against his thigh as he worked? He dearly wished he could show it to someone and see what they made of it. Next time he visited Tlongow, just a few short days from now, he would show it to Krealinah. Perhaps she would have some insight...

When he was done for the night, he crept back inside the house and set the thing on his bench, regarding it closely, hoping once again that it might show him more. When that didn't work, he tried holding it, searching it with his eyes, even picturing some of the scenes he'd already seen as if he might encourage it through example. Then he spoke to it, asking it questions, offering it prayers. But it merely sat there, a dark silhouette against the orange light from the fire. Defeated, he sank back against the wall, glaring at the inert thing before him.

He began to experiment with the stone more and more over the following days. It quickly became evident that only in sunlight could he coax visions from it. Looking upon it in the light of the fire, or the moon, or in no light at all showed nothing. He was also certain that the strange warmth that it generated was as a result of the visions since it occurred at no other time.

He also found that he could only look into the stone for a short time, a few minutes at most, before he was forced to break away, his body shaking from the effort, his insides feeling like they might rebel at any moment, and that was regardless of what he saw. Afterwards he would be weak, his head foggy for several hours, and the one time he tried it in the morning he almost fell out of the coracle while dragging in the nets later in the day and henceforth decided to only attempt visions late in the afternoon. Once, he had allowed himself to watch for too long, longer even than at the Jülanrec, and when he had finally pulled away, he had disgorged his dinner and barely been able to stumble back to the house before he collapsed into a swoon. He had abstained from looking at the thing for two days after that, and relegated himself to only short bouts after he returned.

But return he did, for the things he saw fascinated him, even as he struggled to make sense of them. What he was able to discern was that the visions seemed relegated to three places, the beach with the stone head, the harbor town with the white wall, and his own island of Klewstra. He was forced to conclude that the shore he'd seen with its enormous plants above the cliffs was his home after seeing another vision showing the same view with most but not all of the plants gone and sheep grazing calmly on the grass around them.

Always too, in these visions, he saw some significant event; never was he shown a simple, peaceful scene like men spreading their nets to dry or seals sunning themselves on the rocks. Instead, he saw scenes of violence and fear, of discovery and hope, of destruction and despair. The visions began invading his waking hours as well as his dreams, so that he found himself reviewing one strange sequence after another in a vain effort to piece them together into something coherent. It got to where he could think of little else and found himself becoming less and less attentive to his tasks, until a whole haul was lost because he forgot to properly secure the net. From then on, he forced himself to check and recheck again whenever something needed doing. But even with that precaution, he was still missing things.

And so it was that when the day came to depart once again for the market he had very little to trade, only a pair of clay jars filled with dried fish and a single carving. He had high hopes for the carving,

though. Although a seal in form, the whorls and tendrils of the seeing stone had so infused his imagination when carving it that it resembled an ephemeral reflection of the creature formed by the wind rather than the beast itself. It was undeniably his best work so far; he just hoped a potential buyer would agree. Although he had made certain to purchase as many supplies as possible at last month's market, his barley supply was already looking low, and he had a long winter ahead of him.