

## XI. The Grotto

By the time he crawled back into his house, sweaty, filthy, hungry, and exhausted, he had already widened the hole beneath the rock to where a smaller person might be able to squirm through, though not one of his girth. There was much more to be done before he could be certain it would do for a hiding place, but already he was convinced it would. He'd thrust the shovel inside when the hole was large enough and it found no edge, either below or on the far side. Why such an open space was present beneath the rock didn't bother him overmuch. He had needed one, and he had found one. And he still had a few days left before it had to be ready.

He dropped the last load of dirt on the tarp, then stopped to wipe his brow. He couldn't see far inside, but it was clear that he had dug into no mere cavity made by compressed ground beneath the rock. Instead, it was a substantial space, much larger than the minimum necessary to meet his needs. And now he'd widened the entrance enough for him to squeeze through.

He was already prepared for the next step. It was too dark to see much inside as the overhanging rock allowed only the barest light to enter, but he'd spent some time that morning fashioning a pair of torches, tightly-bound bundles of dried grass that would burn slowly but reasonably brightly when lit, and he quickly had one ablaze off the brick of tightly-wrapped smoldering peat he'd brought with him. Holding the flame before him, he dropped to his belly and squirmed in.

As he'd surmised, it was no mere hole. It was, in fact, a passage, running north-south like the rock that capped it, and clearly made by human hands. He was looking in from atop the western wall, and from his vantage he could see stones on the floor, the product of a breach made long ago and refilled with soil rather than being rebuilt. It was the only place, in fact, where he could have easily dug his way in. Opposite his entrance, and also to his right and left, walls of unmortared stone rose from the bedrock floor to the very edge of the capping rock, the individual stones too large to readily dislodge from

without. He silently thanked the gods for his good luck; he had been tempted to start on the east side, but had chosen otherwise for what, in retrospect, were purely arbitrary reasons.

On the southern edge, the floor rose in a series of stairs ending where they met the capping rock, clearly meant as the way in before the place was sealed. To the north, the passage descended rapidly, tunneling down so that the stacked-stone retaining walls were quickly replaced by bedrock. His torchlight only penetrated a few yards in that direction before the tunnel vanished into darkness.

He could have been content there. He had found the perfect hiding place. In fact, many more than just Krealinah and the child could have hidden here unnoticed, and comfortably too. But now that he had discovered it, buried so long outside the knowledge of living people and in the midst of the island he'd thought he knew as well as his own mind, how could he let it go unexplored? And he had time, now that he had the answer to his prayers. Certainly, there was no harm in taking the few minutes it would take to nose around.

Without further thought, he backed out, twisted around, and re-entered, lowering himself down to the floor.

The ceiling was low, perhaps four feet or less, low enough that it was more comfortable to crawl than crouch, though moving on his hands and knees was made more awkward with the need to hold the torch aloft. But there was plenty of room to maneuver, and soon he was descending. For several minutes he crept on, deeper and deeper into the island with each foot, the orange torchlight flickering riotously against the walls. And then, suddenly, after yards and yards without change, it seemed that the tunnel before him ended, with only blackness beyond.

He stopped, wary though there was no sign of danger, listening to the air. But he heard and saw nothing, only silence and the inexplicable darkness. After a short while, he moved again, more tentatively now.

A few feet later, he released the breath he hadn't realized he was holding. The blackness had only been a trick of the light, a seeming void where in fact the tunnel had opened up into a much larger chamber, the passage he was in high enough above the floor that nothing was visible until he was close enough to see the light shining

on the far wall. There was nothing to fear at all, despite what his nerves might say.

He did not, he decided then, much care for being underground. Leave that to the voles in their burrows. Oh, he could manage it if he had to—to hide away with Krealinah and the child, say, if it came to that—but only the direst circumstance would convince him to do *this* again. Which meant that he had to explore everything this one time to know what was there and be certain it was safe. Not that he gave any credence to the stories of great man-eating worms that burrowed through the rocks, as told by old men at the market when they had too much ale running through their veins. But if there was something, an unstable patch of ceiling, say, better to find it now than for Krealinah to stumble across it in the dark.

He reached the tunnel's edge and peered down at the floor, some three feet below. It was just more rock, nothing at all worrisome. Twisting around, slowly and painfully on account of the tightness of the passage, he lowered himself into the chamber, and then stood, as the ceiling rose well above his head, though he was counted tall among his people. And then he gazed about him.

The room was oval in shape, with a flat floor and slightly arched ceiling. It had been carved by human hands from the living rock—it was far too regular to have been a natural occurrence—but the skill involved was beyond his ken. Mining was not entirely unknown among the Hùloril, and even on Olnimta the people had chopped their way into one of the hillsides where a now-exhausted copper vein had once run, but those crude efforts were nothing compared to this chamber. The geometry of the room was perfect, almost astonishingly simple, with walls smoothed like the dips worn into the stone stairs outside the village, worn down by the passage of generations of fisherfolk's feet, showing no seam from wall to ceiling, only at the edge where it met the floor. If he could have such control over his own carvings, the things he could make...

There was no other egress from the room nor adornment on the walls save for a single alcove on the western side. It was raised slightly above the floor, and the arched top rose almost to the ceiling. But, unlike the rest of the chamber, it was not empty.

“*Ülanre*,” he whispered as his eyes rested on the thing within. The strange, alien name had arisen unbidden, a long-forgotten memory from the deep recesses of his mind, and yet he was certain that it fit the thing standing before him. His grandfather had spoken of it, long ago, though in the tale it had been a true being, a creature of wind and mist that lived somehow beneath the island. Likely he had not seen the thing himself, had only heard tell of it. And yet, here it stood, so much like how it had been described that he might have thought his grandfather was looking at it as he spoke.

It was a statue, of course, somewhat taller than life size and carved from a single gray-green stone of the same unfamiliar type as the orb resting in the pouch at his side. The workmanship was the same too, using thin tendrils and whorls that wrapped and twisted together to suggest rather than define the form. Close up, it would appear a bewildering chaos of entangled threads, but from where he stood the form was clear, that of a sturdy, youthful man, unadorned by clothing or jewelry, hair tumbling from his head in long plaits that fell past his shoulders, arms at his side with palms open forward, and a calm, thoughtful expression on a handsome face marred by the absence of his right eye, where there was only a gaping, empty socket.

What had grandfather said about the *Ülanre*? A man of secrets and spirits, he had called him, one who understood the voice of the wind and felt the call of the stones. He came from the west, it was said. But for what purpose?

To find his missing eye. Yes, that was it. And as he neared, he could see that the other eye was a separate piece from the rest of the statue, a globe of its own, nearly the size of a fist, made of fine, interwoven tendrils just like rest. It would not take much to pry it out from its casement. Or to replace the one that was missing.

His hand was shaking now. What was he afraid of? It was only a statue. And yet, the stone wasn't just a stone. What of the statue itself? And the missing eye...

He held the stone up to the man's face. It was a perfect match, as he was sure it would be as soon as he saw the empty socket. He could even see the pupil now, when he rotated it just right. It would be a tight squeeze, to insert it in below the lid, especially since the tendrils

looked fine enough that they might snap with the slightest pressure, but if he was careful, and slid it in just so...

It snapped into place.

BLINK.

A long room stretched before him, bordered by tall, white pillars, before which stood stern, grim-faced men with shining helmets and shining brown armor, holding long spears with wicked-looking tips. A fat man with long, oiled hair stood at one end before a large chair of white stone, clothed in white and blue, watching the newcomer striding toward him, a taller man before whom the armed men bowed their heads. Visibly shaken, the fat man stepped forward and dropped to his knees...

BLINK.

Men, women and children were huddled on a floor, its white tiles, patterned with vines and flowers, cracked and broken, with numerous gaps showing the rough surface beneath. One, a slender creature with long, nearly white hair and large brown eyes, looked up pleadingly, reaching out with his delicate, six-fingered hand. A rough blow from a guard sent him reeling. He fell, and his head hit the floor hard. He lay there, unmoving, blood seeping out onto the tiles from his mouth, staining the yellow painted blossom beneath with purplish red.

BLINK.

A beautiful girl, naked save for the shiny bit of nothing that girded her loins and the near-transparent scarves swirling about her, danced to music he could not hear. Her long tail of red hair coiled hypnotically around her as she gyrated and undulated her hips, stepping expertly across the black and gold tile of the floor, beneath the leering stone figures of misshapen monsters that lined the walls. On a high chair of gold and black stone at the end of the room a massive man, bearded and bald with a cruel cast to his features, gazed upon her with undisguised lust. She danced quickly, flitting to the side where a man stood watching, holding a spear. Suddenly, quicker than he could react, she snatched it from his hand, pulled back, and hurled it across the room.

BLINK.

A battle raged. Long-haired warriors clad in skins and furs, wielding spears tipped with stone and hurtling rocks with bands of leather, were slowly pushed back between the great gray pillars sprouting with leaves as, one and another, they fell, red blood dripping from sudden wounds caused by darts so small they could barely be seen. Farther away, men in metal garments marched unrelentingly forward, stopping only to thrust their blades into whatever warriors still moved as they advanced.

BLINK.

A great boat was cutting through the waves, as large almost as an island, topped by a great collection of red and gold cloth that billowed in the wind. Other boats followed the first, four in all. All were damaged, the wood of their hulls chipped and splintered. Behind them on the horizon, black smoke marred the evening sky, billowing forth from the burning town.

BLINK.

A great stone wall stood before him, built of massive, irregular blocks of stone, fitted together almost perfectly. Men and women patrolled its top, grim-faced, worried, looking down on the valley that stretched out below their mountain fortress, a valley where a great army gathered, its masses blackening the ground with their numbers as they climbed steadily up the slope, while more and more boats moved up the river to add soldiers to the fray.

BLINK.

Rough men clad in metal shirts dragged a woman from a squat, square building that looked as if it were made of clay, throwing her to the ground before them. Laughing, they tore the babe from her arms while she screamed in anguish. One took the child, clubbed it with the handle of his blade, leaving it slumped and bloody while the others held her down, tore at her clothes, and loosened their garments.

BLINK.

A man, tall and bearded with skin browned by the sun, strained against the men holding him, tears in his eyes as he shouted in anger and frustration. Other men dragged a girl who was but a child out of the room, tearing the straw doll from her hands and stomping on it as they leave. Her mother, stricken, lay sobbing on the floor.

BLINK.

A wide shore stretched before him, its pale sands darkened by innumerable boats and men, an invading force the likes of which this part of the world has never seen. Already they were forming ranks, readying to march into the lands beyond. But the ocean was pulling back from the shore, farther and farther, until it was as if miles of it were exposed. The warriors on the sand began milling about, unsure of what was happening. Some began toward higher ground, panicked by the strange behavior of the water, but others stayed, held by their leaders' orders or their own uncertainty. And then they saw the wave, a wall of water as high as the hills, plunging forward, too swiftly to outrun.

Blink.

He felt himself falling, and instinctively his hands reached out, slamming hard against the stone floor but keeping his head from bashing against it. But the fall drove the wind from his lungs, leaving him nauseous and gasping as the world swirled around him. Shaking uncontrollably, he clenched his eyes shut against the waves of disorientation that continued to pummel him.

Finally, the vertigo subsided, and then ceased. Rolling to his side and groaning, his breathing still ragged, he dared to open his eyes. The brand lay some feet away at his side, burning dimly against the stone floor, though more remained than he'd have thought, given all he'd seen. His other right hand was clenched tight around something round and hard, and as he looked up, he saw that the statue appeared as before, the right socket still gaping and empty.

What had that been? It was both like and unlike the visions he'd received from the stone alone, quicker, more intense, more visceral, more terrible, so much so that he still trembled from the memory. And they did not follow the pattern of the other, with no consistency of location, no distance, and no need for the sunlight that seemed necessary for the stone to work. And with it came the strange feeling that he had opened something, something that had been shut away for a long, long time. And perhaps should have stayed that way.