

XII. The Invaders

He was still shaken when he crawled out of the tunnel onto the grass, and for several minutes he lay there, the breeze rustling his hair as he stared into the cloud-covered sky above, breathing in the comforting mundanity of his surroundings. Off in the distance, the seabirds called to one another as they congregated by the shore, searching for food. This was his world, the world as it should be. And those other, awful things, things almost too much to bear, the pain, the horror, the death, they belonged to somewhere and someone else, not to him. But where? And who?

He did not relish sleep that night. Already, his dreams were too much colored by the fears and anger that roiled within. And now this...

But he had a solution to his immediate problem, and still three days to spare. Soon, everything would be right, and Krealinah and Rolianah would be safe. There was still much to do, true, the entrance to the tunnel to be hidden, food to be caught, the house to be put in order. But he would be ready.

He waited a few more minutes, until the light-headed fogginess finally dissipated and he could move normally again, then threw himself into the first task of covering the hole.

Two days passed. It had taken more time to prepare the house than expected. He'd lived alone for too long with too little regard for cleanliness or organization, and turning the midden heap that was his residence into something he could bear for another to see, much less that would be fit for a child, involved a much more profound effort than he had imagined. To ready the place, he'd had to set all other matters aside. But at least there was sufficient food stored for several days, so fishing could wait. And finally, after hours of toil, he had a clearing on the floor where he and Kreli could sleep, an old basin padded with soft wool that would do for a crib for the baby, and walls arranged neatly with the sharper and more dangerous of his possessions carefully out of the reach of little hands. The ramshackle piles of old junk were no more. Some was now neatly arranged along

the walls or in baskets, but much had been carted out and dumped inside the empty houses to join the rest of the refuse. When he looked about now, he saw the swelling as it had once been, long ago when he was a child and it had been a home.

He sighed, imagining how things might have been different if the plague had never come, the people still here, still going about their daily lives, men, women, children, the laughter and song as they worked together at the nets, toiled in the fields, tended the sheep, crafted baskets, wove the cloth. The celebrations, of the harvest, the solstices, the holy days of the gods, the birth of children, the marriages of young people, even the remembrances of those who died. Krealinah would still be here, happily with the father who loved her, not with the uncle who had sold her to a cruel man to strengthen an alliance as partners in the wool trade with no thought to his niece's happiness. Perhaps that father might even have been persuaded to consider the odd, dark-skinned youth who found more solace in the wind and sea than in the company of others.

But there was no use dwelling on what might have been, and still much to be done.

That night, the second following the statue's discovery, his sleep was more troubled than ever, filled with blood and terror, haphazard jumbles of the visions he'd seen intermixed with events from his own life, real and imagined. In his sleeping thoughts, it was Krealinah whom the brutish men dragged from her home, the people of his village, no longer dead, whose houses were set ablaze as they were run down with spears. Time and again, he awoke bathed in sweat, his heart pounding in his chest as he stared about in panic, trying to understand where he was amidst unfamiliar surroundings. It was only when he regained his wits and recognized his own house, though greatly changed from his cleaning, that he was able to nod again. But as soon as he drifted off, the cycle repeated again, until finally, exhausted, he dragged himself from bed and slipped outside, still wrapped tightly in his blanket, to sit on the flat stone overlooking the village and wait for the sun, knowing that no further rest would come.

Sunrise found him on the beach, his coracle just yards from the water, packed with nets and paddle. He sat beside it on one of the more well-worn stones, watching the waves throw spray into the air as they slammed against the battered rocks that faced the sea. The wind was strong now and the waves were choppy, too much so to brave them safely, but the clouds were thinning in the west, and with luck the change would bring calmer waters. But for now, there was little to do but wait, though hopefully not for too long. This was the last day, the last opportunity to bring in a catch before he left. And then...

He closed his eyes, the constant buzz of anxiety threatening to burst forth into panic as all of the things that could go wrong with his plan began to play out again in his mind. What if the weather was bad? What if he couldn't get to her tomorrow, to tell her of the change in plans? What if they didn't let her out? What if...? There was too much that depended on chance. Every little detail was a pivot on which everything could go wrong. And while he waited and worried, the tiny worms of dread ate at him, burrowing inescapably into his every thought.

The stone.

As much as he dreaded what it might show, at least the visions would drag his mind away from the horrible unease that had settled into his every thought. They weren't always terrible things, or at least they hadn't been before the statue...

Carefully, he reached into the pouch and grasped the thing in his hand, running his fingers over the smooth whorls for a few moments before he brought it out and held it before him. Resting his hand on his lap, he gazed in, his vision blurring as he peered deeper, and deeper...

Blink.

The carved head of a grimacing beast, red, gold and green, its features frozen in a threatening snarl, stared sightlessly over the water. It perched upon the prow of a boat, one very much like the first vision he had seen all those weeks before, a thing of wood and rope and cloth that cut through the waves like a knife. Behind it stood a man, clad in heavy interlocking rings with a long, wicked-looking blade clenched in one gloved hand as his cold eyes stared out of a scarred visage framed

by a long, plaited yellow beard and outlandish hair, shorn at the sides with the top pulled back and braided. Other men filled the boat behind him, bending their backs over their oars or readying spears and shields. Above the boat rose a great bluff, its craggy face mere yards away. White birds circled overhead, unbothered by the menace below. And at the top of the cliff, a great, black, sentinel rock rose, its sides covered in all-to-familiar carvings.

A shape alit from the rock, a large, black bird of a type unknown to him. It beat its wings, flying rapidly to the west, where Fohanru knew the village lay. The men in the boat paid it no heed.

The craft moved rapidly, every oar-stroke bearing it steadily forward. Soon it rounded the cliff, and the squat houses came into view, smoke trailing from the thatching of their roofs. Men and women toiled in the fields and along the shore, consumed by their labors, unaware of what was coming.

The yellow-haired man grinned, the scars on his face accentuating the cruelty in his features. The men pulled harder, propelling the boat ever more rapidly toward the shore.

The black bird dove, then soared as villagers looked up from their tasks and suddenly laid eyes on the invaders. For a moment they stood and stared, not comprehending what they saw. He recognized, Glomfo the ropemaker, his lap occupied with tight hempen strands, Jongr, the blind old man who'd seen more summers than any, a frown on his sightless face as he heard the first cries, their meaning lost in the fog of his aged mind, Hilreah, Krealinah's mother, bearing the basket of laundry above her head, stopping to gaze worriedly at the newcomers, though not yet sure of the danger. Other faces there were too, men, women, and children he'd seen time and again, looking just as they had when he'd last set eyes upon them.

The boat reached the shallows and the rowing ceased. The villagers stared, not yet making a move. A child shrunk against her mother, trembling.

The yellow haired man raised his blade into the sky and shouted, and the other men added their voices to his. And then he leapt over the side, followed by one after another of his fellows. Fell men clad in

cold metals and bearing blade, spear, and axe dropped into the knee-high water, splashing through it as they raced toward shore.

The people reacted then. Baskets and loads tumbled to the ground, forgotten, as their bearers raced away, crying, screaming. The mother grabbed her child, fled back to her house. Hilreah's basket tumbled to the ground, scattering garments all across the grass as she ran. Old Jongr stood helplessly, unable to see or comprehend the chaos around him, reaching out desperately for someone to take his hand.

The first spears fell among them, adding to the confusion though only a handful found a mark. But among them was a small child, barely three summers old—Foanru remembered his Acceptance Ceremony—dropped as he trailed behind his older sister, the spear lodged through his chest.

And then he saw the others, more men armed and armored, rushing in from the hills, hemming the villagers in, offering no escape, their blades already red with the blood of the slain...

Blink.

He wrenched his gaze from the stone. His whole body shook, his skin felt like ice, his heart hammered fiercely in his chest, and his breath came in short, ragged gasps. As he closed his fingers around it, the nausea that had threatened so often before finally overtook him and he doubled over, disgorging his breakfast onto the rocks while spasms wracked his chest and throat. The world around seemed to dim, punctuated by dancing motes of light. Convulsions rocked him once, again, long after nothing remained to expel, and it was well after that before his vision began to brighten and the shaking to subside, though tears still streamed from his eyes.

He tried desperately to make sense of what he'd seen. It had been Tlongow, of that he was certain. But how? Always before, the stone had shown only the three sites. At least until the statue. And always they had been events from long before, or at least he'd assumed so. And yet there had been that first vision of the ship, so like this one... Maybe it wasn't only showing the past. Maybe...

The waters were still in turmoil. It would be hard going, to reach Olnimta in decent time. But he was on his feet and dragging the little boat into the water before even the last of the tremor left his limbs.

Olnimta was already in sight when he saw the black bird drifting on the wind above the island. It was larger than he'd imagined from his vision, similar in size to the gray geese that flew past in spring and autumn or the sea eagle his father had pointed out once during a fishing trip, but it was undeniably the same, and even more alien-seeming in person. But its presence confirmed that the vision had been real.

And, likely, he was too late to stop it.

The bird croaked, fluttering overhead as he neared the shore, then landing on the bluff to watch him closely as he paddled past.