

XIX. The Choice

“I have two questions,” Fohanru said.

“Ask.”

“First, what had you expected you would find here? You didn’t expect this, I assume.”

“No. Truthfully, we did not know what we would find. We knew only that the alarm had been raised, which could entail all manner of possibilities. And so, we came prepared. Our number is such that most would think twice before confrontation, and my companions’ talents range farther than mere weaponry and strength of body. Also, the *Dolphin Singer* is among the fastest ships on these waters, and nimbler than those of the Teshwans, though larger. We had thought first to discover what had triggered the alarm, and then to decide what would—or could—be done to stop it.”

“But you haven’t found it.”

“Not yet. But we now know where we must next look, and that what we seek has even farther than we had feared.”

“To the north.”

“Yes, perhaps even to the Walls of Ice themselves.”

“When do you go?”

“Soon. Perhaps even tomorrow. Already, it is later in the year than I would choose for such a voyage, even with Mahila as captain. But our choices are limited. By spring, the Teshwans will have overtaken these islands, and avoiding entanglements with them will be far harder than slipping past the ships we saw on the way here.”

“You saw those who attacked Tlongow? Where were they headed? The other islands must be warned...” He stopped, suddenly seeing the sympathy and sorrow in the other man’s eyes. “What is it?” he asked, nearly certain that he didn’t want to know the answer.

“I do not believe there *are* others to warn, Fohanru,” he replied gently.

“There must be...”

“I am sorry. But Mahila brought us past several of your islands before we landed here in our efforts to avoid the Teshwans’ eyes. Everywhere it was the same, villages burned, fields plundered, people

either taken or slain and left to rot. Not a thing remained, not so much as a single sheep left to graze.”

“All...?”

“Everywhere we saw,” he repeated. “They left nothing in their wake. Unless other small groups survived as you did, and the possibility is remote, you five are the only remaining free Hùloril.”

“But they can’t have destroyed them all. They say that there are hundreds of islands in the Denkyali...”

“The earliest villages we saw had been destroyed long ago, Fohanru. They have been here for months, working their way through.”

“How? How could none escape to warn the others?”

“Because you have nowhere to run to. And you saw their ships. Would you have been able to out-paddle them in your little boat, or even escape unseen across the flat, open ocean? You were as mice trapped within a bucket, with no way out but through them.”

He closed his eyes. “But there *could* be others...”

“Fohanru, I am sorry. We cannot spare the resources to scour these islands for survivors. That could take weeks, even months, with but one ship, and we do not have enough food and water for that, nor are we even sure we would find any alive. And I fear that those taken are forever lost. The Teshwans will have taken them to their own lands, to become chattel or to be sold to far-off lands. To free them would mean taking on their whole people. It would mean an army, and that we do not have.”

“But how can I abandon my people he asked in despair?”

Fohanru stared desperately at the ground, trying to think. There had to be some way, some means of saving at least a few. But he could think of nothing. Nor did Korvan answer, for there was nothing to be said. But such horror and cruelty... what would drive men to such deeds, where they would slaughter an entire people without remorse, without thought? How his blood boiled at the thought of it, at what he wished he could do to them to redress the wrongs they had caused...

Korvan looked at him sadly. He had, he realized, found his own answer, and he didn’t much care for it.

“You had a second question,” the other man reminded him softly.

He swallowed and nodded. “The morning the Teshwans attacked, the stone gave me a vision, one of the future. It showed me the attack on Tlongow, exactly as it happened, though before it truly occurred. It knew, I think, what the vision would do, that I would race there directly, with no thought for ought else, and also that I would arrive when they had already left.”

Korvan watched him intently, but said nothing.

“Now, you say that this thing that showing me these things, whatever it is, it does them with purpose. So, it must have wanted me in Tlongow when I was for a reason. And as much as I wish it was the case, I doubt it was to save Kreli and the others, since I didn’t see them at all in the vision. I think I was shown the attack to get me away from here when the Teshwans came.”

“That seems very possible,” the other man agreed.

“But why? It needed me to send the alarm, I understand that. But once it was sent, why bother with me at all? Just to keep the stone away from the Teshwans?”

“No, I do not think so.”

“No,” Foanru echoed. “From what you said before, they couldn’t even use it, could they?”

“It is highly doubtful,” Korvan agreed.

“And yet it kept me alive, all the same.”

“And it knew you sufficiently well to do so,” Korvan added, “which may be more important still.”

“Mind, I cannot be certain of its motivations, but I think it did so because it needs you to have a connection to this world, and the beings of the world beyond often crave such connections, for in a sense it nourishes them to have roots in this world of ours. It gives them not only the power to fulfil tasks like sending its message, but also gives them a solidity, a *realness*, that they lack in their natural state. It has expended great energy on you to build this connection, more than you might think if it can guess how you will react so well. Perhaps so much that it has little remaining with which to forge another such bond. Without you, it would lose its hold here, perhaps for a very long time.”

“What does it want from me?”

“Long ago, it is thought that these beings were but shades, collections of energy with little form or thought, drifting aimlessly through the world beyond. Some there still may be that are of that sort, in the corners of their world with little connection to ours. But for many, the touch of the solid world in which we live was always there, beckoning to them, as a flame at night draws in moths. And so, they came, and with what strength was in them they grasped for what was beyond them. And that touch of the world *changed* them. They took on some of the spirit of what they touched, and at the same time they imbued their essence on those same things, mingling their life forces together, strengthening in their connection to this world to where they could affect in materially, though only occasionally. There are tales among many people of spirits of the land that take the form of animals to those who can see them, the guardians of forest and spring and moor. Such was the form taken by some such things, long ago, and they acted to protect the creatures with which they had bonded, much as yours has protected you.

“After a time, some there were that made connections with people. This was not so easy as to bind themselves to places or even beasts, for humans are stronger in will, and their minds less easily fathomed. But there was more to be nourished on there as well than in the energy of the lands and plants, or even the simple joys and griefs of beasts. And so, tentatively at first, they reached toward these men and women, and found some among them who were closer already in spirit to the other world—those like yourself—whom they could more easily touch. But at first these were just meager efforts. Perhaps a being might feed on a man’s pride, or fear, or joy as a dog feeds on the scraps left by the master, touching the man little yet growing ever closer to him, until it can nudge him toward feeling these things but a little more. But over the years, the connections became closer, and tighter. And, in time, some among the people who had some sight discovered *them*, and found that the bonding could come from both sides.

“The people found that they could feed such beings, and in turn draw from them power, power which they could use over both mind and matter. All thoughts and emotions nourish these spirits, but hate, fear, and pain are the strongest and easiest to produce, and the power

they gave could be used to break and destroy. And, as is so often true of us, many chose the easier route, and fed them with tortures and blood sacrifices and wars, and the beings became strong, and gave great power to their masters in return. But there was another effect, for the sharing of power led to a comingling of spirit, until both were changed to something new, unrecognizable, and terrible.

“But it need not have been this way. Had they nourished the beings with love, with compassion, with curiosity and hope, it may be that the comingling might have elevated both. But for most, it made them monsters.

“It is this comingling that it desires, to be partly in this world through you. In return it will share its power, to *see*, more than almost any man can see, but also other things as yet unrevealed. But it will change you, as you will change it.”

“So, it wishes for me to become a monster.”

“I do not expect it truly wishes for any particular end, only for the connection that nourishes it. What should happen between you, that depends to a great extent on what you feed it, love and kindness or hate and anger. But it does not come to you as an empty slate. Others have touched it before, and they have left some of themselves with it, imprints of memories and personalities that it will bear with it always. It has already been fed, and not all of the nourishment has been good.”

“The statue, when I touched it, I saw things, memories, not like what the stone showed me. Terrible things.”

“What sort of things?”

Foanru quickly described the visions he'd seen in the sketchiest of terms, unwilling to revisit them any more than he had to. Korvan looked pained throughout the recounting, but also thoughtful.

“And how did you feel when you saw this?” he asked after Foanru had finished.

“Sickened, of course. Horrified. To do such things...”

“But no pleasure?”

“No! Of course not! How could anyone...” Then he stopped, remembering Voluoni in the ruins of the village, and the Teshwans he'd seen in the vision. “Plenty would, wouldn't they?”

“I am afraid so. But you did not. And more importantly, *it* did not.”

Foanru stared at him for a moment. “Do know whose memories those were?”

“I can,” Korvan answered. “Perhaps it will show you its own answers, should you choose to become its master.”

“I have a choice?”

Korvan smiled. “There is always a choice. We will leave this place, probably on the morrow. You may join us if you wish. There is little for you here. Winter will be hard, and the Teshwans will likely return. We cannot force you to stay and die, though where we go may be even more perilous, especially for a baby and for Kreli, who even now is but steps from death. But there is room, if you choose to come. But you also may stay. It may even be that we will come this way again on our return. But it may also be that we will not, or too late.

“With the stone, too, there is a choice. You could take it up and learn what there is to learn from it. It would show you many things, knowledge with which you could do great good in this world, perhaps even see ways to hold back the Darkness or prevent tragedies like what befell your people here, and perhaps it would show you even greater powers not yet revealed. But that would mean also taking on the risk of that power, and giving something of yourself to a thing not human, with alien desires of its own. Or you could dispose of it, bury it, or leave it, or throw it into the sea. The choice is yours.”

“Or I could give it to you.”

“No!” he answered sharply, then quickly softened his tone. “No, that bond was ended when the alarm was sent. I can no longer take it.”

Foanru regarded him thoughtfully. There was something there Korvan wasn’t saying, something important. But with all else that had been laid upon him he could not make out what. Perhaps the morning might bring clarity.

“Need I choose now?”

“No, but on whether or not you will come with us when we leave you must choose by morning, else the choice will be made for you. And if you do come, you must choose if the stone and statue come

with or not. But you have much to think on before you choose. I would take the night to ponder it, and I leave it to you whether you sleep with the stone near or not.”