

A Smoldering Silence

It wasn't a sound that woke Janner Igiby. It was a silence.

Something was wrong.

He strained into a sitting position, wincing at the pain in his neck, shoulders, and thighs. Every time he moved he was reminded of the claws and teeth that had caused his wounds.

He expected to see the bearer of those claws and teeth asleep in the bunk beside him, but his brother was gone. Sunlight fell through the porthole and slid to and fro across the empty mattress like a pendulum, keeping time with the rocking of the boat. The other bunk's bedclothes were in a heap on the floor, which was typical; Kalmar never made his bed back in Glipwood, either. What wasn't typical was his absence.

For weeks, Janner and Kalmar had lain in their bunks all day, Janner recovering from his wounds, Kalmar keeping him company. Every time Janner woke, he found his furry brother in his bunk, usually with a sketchbook in his lap. The *skritch-skritch* of Kalmar's quill each morning was as comforting as birdsong. Janner liked to lie awake for a few minutes before he opened his eyes, listening to Kalmar's breathing, reminding himself that the creature beside him was, in fact, his little brother. He still wasn't used to the way he looked, covered in fur, or to the husky growl at the edge of his eleven-year-old voice. But his breathing was the same, and so were his eyes. If ever Janner doubted, he just had to look at those bright blue eyes to know that beneath the wolfish fur was a little boy.

Janner took a deep breath and swung his feet to the floor. His wounds stung. His thighs were wrapped in bandages, and he winced when he saw the

dark stains there. Nia and Leeli would have to change the dressing again, and that meant more pain. Janner took a moment to muster the energy to stand, something he had seldom done alone since he'd been wounded. He shuddered at the cold memory: the shock of the icy water when he plunged in after Kalmar; the hot sting of claws digging into his thighs as the little Grey Fang kicked against his embrace; claws scraping against his back and tearing his shirt to shreds; and, worst of all, the sharp teeth as they bit into his shoulder and neck—his brother's teeth.

The ship creaked and fell silent again. Since the day they had sailed away from the Ice Prairies, the ship had seemed like a living thing. It groaned like an old man sleeping; it coughed when the sails luffed; it sighed when they tacked into a happy wind. The crew shouted and laughed at all hours of the day, and even at night Janner was kept company by the slapping of waves against the hull and the murmur of sailors keeping watch.

And then there was the heartbeat of the ship: Podo Helmer. Janner's peg-legged grandfather marched from fore to aft, starboard to port, the steady *tap-clunk, tap-clunk* of his footsteps beating deep into the night, keeping the ship alive and all its passengers with it. The old man's voice boomed and belled, a presence so constant that if Janner ever wondered where Podo was, he had but to listen for a moment to hear either a barked command, a burst of laughter, or the beat of his wooden stump on the deck.

But now the ship's heart had stopped beating, and that was the silence that had woken Janner. Neither the odd calm of the waters, nor the silence of the crew, nor even Kalmar's absence was as troubling as the utter stillness of Podo Helmer. It was as if the old man had disappeared.

Then, as if to confirm Janner's sense of dread, there came to his nostrils the unmistakable smell of smoke. Janner stood, too fast, and the pain in his legs, neck, and back made him dizzy. But he didn't care. He had to find out what was happening on deck, even if just to be sure that he wasn't stuck in a nightmare.

Janner took three steps toward the stairs and the hatch flew open. Light poured into the hold.

“Janner! My boy, what are you doing out of bed? In the words of Mil-dresh Enwort, ‘You’ve been badly wounded by your brother’s lawful attack!’” Oskar N. Reteep’s round form filled the hatchway, blocking the sunlight like an eclipse.

“Mister Reteep, what’s wrong? Where did everybody go? Why do I smell smoke?” Janner took a step forward and winced as another pang shot up his leg.

Oskar jiggled down the stairs to Janner’s side. “Easy, there. That’s it, lad.” He took Janner by the arm and helped him forward.

Janner asked again, “What’s happening?”

Oskar pushed up his spectacles and wiped his sweaty pate. “Everything’s all right, lad. Everything’s all right.” Oskar, who used to spend all his time puffing on a pipe at his desk in the rear office of Books and Crannies, who had only ever read about real adventures, and who had never been on a ship before, was as close to being a sailor as he would ever be. He was barefoot, his breeches were cut off at the shin, and he wore a sleeveless shirt, which allowed him to proudly display his new tattoo. And though he was no smaller and no less squishy, he seemed healthier.

“If everything’s all right, why do I smell smoke? Are the Fangs back?”

The seven Fangs they’d subdued on the ship when they escaped Kimera had gotten rowdier by the day. They had howled and scratched at the stowage walls until it became clear that they wouldn’t stop until they scraped their way out. The Kimerans wanted to execute them, but Nia wouldn’t allow it. Weeks into the voyage, Podo decided to set them adrift on a little skiff with a jug of water, assuring everyone that it was as good as an execution, and that if the Maker wanted them to survive, it was up to him to arrange it. Janner had lain awake many nights, imagining that they’d somehow catch up to them, slip aboard, and kill the crew in their sleep.

Oskar waved his hand as they mounted the first step. “No, no. Those wolves are long gone. Your mother sent me to bring you topside.” Oskar’s face turned grave. “There’s something you need to see.”

Janner had always been impatient when it came to getting answers. With



his legs hurt, the eight steps to the deck were likely to be an arduous journey, and he didn't want to wait that long. "What is it? Please, Mister Reteep?"

"No, lad. This is a thing to see, not to hear about. Now bear up and come on."

Janner took his old friend's arm and eased his way up the steps into the sunlight. When his eyes had adjusted, he saw the open sea for the first time since they'd set sail. He had seen the ocean from the cliffs back home, stretching out forever east, and he had seen it when they escaped the Ice Prairies, with the frozen crags at his back. But now it surrounded him. The effect was dizzying. The Dark Sea of Darkness was vast and terrible to behold; it quickened his pulse and took his breath—and he knew in an instant that he loved it.

He thought of the little sketch of his father sailing alone on his twelfth birthday and how he had gazed at the picture for hours and longed to do the



same. The smell of the sea, the sun on the water, and the knowledge of his father's love for sailing rushed at Janner like a rogue wave and sent his heart spinning.

The exhilaration faded when the breeze shifted and the sharp smell of smoke invaded his thoughts again. He pulled his eyes from the ocean and noticed that everyone on the ship was on deck, standing at the port rail, looking silently south at a cloudy sky. Standing among the crew was a tall, beautiful woman, her left hand on a little girl's shoulder and her right on the shoulder of a little Grey Fang. Beside them stood Podo, shirtless and strong with what looked like a club in one hand.

"Come on, lad," Oskar said, and Nia, Leeli, Kalmar, and Podo turned to greet him.

Seeing them together gave Janner strength. He pulled away from Oskar

and limped into his mother's arms. His legs, neck, and back stung but he didn't care anymore. He had seen each member of his family over the weeks of his recovery, but never all at once. He felt Podo's hand on his head, Leeli's cheek against his shoulder, his mother's arms enfolding him without jarring his wounds—and Kalmar's hand on his forearm.

Then he felt Kalmar's claws, and though he didn't want to, he cringed—only a little, but enough to break the happy spell of his family's welcome.

"Good morning, son," Nia said, taking his face in her hands. She smiled at him, but there was grief in her eyes. Janner could see she'd shed tears recently. Leeli didn't say a word but held Janner's hand and looked out at the gray horizon.

"Mama, what is it?" Janner asked. "Why won't anyone tell me what's happening?"

Nia helped Janner to the railing and pointed at the horizon. "Look."

But Janner didn't see anything unusual. The waters were eerily calm, as if the Dark Sea were holding its breath. It felt like their ship was trespassing. But that wasn't anything to look at, was it? Everyone on the ship was staring at something, but Janner saw only clouds—then he remembered the smell of smoke, and he knew.

"Those aren't clouds, are they?"

Podo shifted on his wooden leg and shook his head. "No, laddie, they aren't."

"It's smoke," Janner said.

All the maps Janner had ever studied sped through his mind. He saw continents and countries fly past, with their rivers and borders and forests. He saw Skree and the Phoob Islands and the wide expanse of the Dark Sea of Darkness, and then he saw in his imagination their ship approaching the Green Hollows in the east. There, just to the south of where Janner guessed they might be, was a little island off the northwestern coast of Dang.

"Anniera," said Janner. "The Shining Isle."

"Aye, lad. Nine long years," Podo said, "and it's still burning."

A Haven in the Hollows

If Janner had ever wondered if Anniera was a real place, now he knew.

He didn't just know by the awful smoke choking the sky or its scent on the wind, but by the look in his mother's eyes. It was as if the churn of the Dark Sea had abandoned the waters and left them calm, only to inhabit the eyes of Nia Wingfeather. When Janner looked up at her, he saw sorrow, anger, pain, and fear passing over her face like colliding waves, stirring the deep waters of remembrance. More than ever, Janner believed. He believed because Anniera wasn't just a story to his mother; it was memory. She had walked there with the man she loved. She had given birth to her children there. For a while, she had lived and breathed the legend of the Shining Isle.

Janner looked out at the gray sea and the black smoke that hovered above it and grieved for her loss; he grieved, too, for his own. He had lost his home, just as she had. When he thought of the Igiby cottage standing empty and dark, and of the Glipwood Township, now just a ruined village at the edge of the cliffs, he felt a stab of homesickness. How much more, he thought, must his mother long for her kingdom, her city, her people—and her husband?

Since the day they had fled Glipwood, they had been on the run, moving from place to place. From Uncle Artham's tree house to the East Bend of the Blapp, from Dugtown to Kimera, and now across the Dark Sea toward the Green Hollows, which lay somewhere just beyond the horizon.

Janner was tired of running. He wanted a place to call his own, a place where Fangs didn't roam, where Stranders didn't want to cut his throat, and where he and his family could finally be at peace. He wanted rest. He had

even entertained the idea that perhaps reports of Anniera's destruction had been wrong. Maybe they would find a way to live in the land of his dreams; maybe he and his family could even live in Castle Rysen again, where he'd been born. A castle!

Janner's cheeks burned at his foolishness. He was only twelve, but he was old enough to know that life usually didn't turn out like it did in the stories he read. Still, until this moment he had allowed himself the tiny hope that the white shores of Anniera might be waiting for him. Now that hope burned up and floated away with the smoke on the horizon.

"Mama, how could it still be burning?" Leeli asked.

Nia's lips stiffened and her eyes filled with tears. When she didn't speak, Podo answered for her. "I don't know, lass. I suppose if you were determined to cinder everything in the land, it could take years."

"Nine years?" Kalmar asked.

Nia wiped her eyes. When she spoke, Janner heard the tremble of anger in her voice. "Gnag has hate enough in his heart to melt the very foundations of the castle, down to the bones of the isle itself. He won't rest until Anniera sinks into the sea."

"But why?" Janner asked. "Why does he hate it so much? Who is he, even?"

"Who knows? When hate rages long enough, it doesn't need a reason. It burns for the sake of its own heat and devours whatever, or whomever, is set before it. Before the war, rumor came to us about an evil in the mountains—but Throg is a *long* way from Anniera. We never imagined it would come to us." Nia closed her eyes. "By the time we realized the Fangs were after Anniera, it was too late. Your father believed the Symian Strait would protect us—or at least give us time to mount a defense." She shook her head and looked at the children. "The point is, Gnag seemed to come from nowhere, like a crash of lightning. He wanted Anniera. He wanted us dead."

"But he doesn't want *us* dead, Mama," Leeli said. "We only got away because he wants us alive."

Nia sighed. "You're right. I can't make sense of it, except that he knows

what I've known since you were born." She dropped to her knees, turning her back on the smoky sky and looking up at the children's faces. "He knows you're special. You're more precious than you can imagine. It seems that Gnag built his army of Fangs out of people." Kalmar looked away. His wolf ears lay back like the ears of a frightened dog, and Nia pulled him closer. "But when he attacked Anniera, I saw monsters so awful I can't describe them. Gnag has uncovered old secrets. Secrets about the stones and songs, secrets I think Esben—secrets I think your *father* knew something about."

Every time Janner heard the name Esben, his stomach fluttered. It was still hard to believe his father had been a king. But all this talk about power and secrets and stones was frightening.

It was true that the three children could do things Janner couldn't explain. When Leeli sang or played, Janner had heard the sea dragons in his mind. Their words had buzzed in his head like bees in a hive. Sometimes Leeli's song connected the siblings even when they were miles apart, and Kalmar seemed to be able to see—to really *see*—what no one else could, especially when Leeli sang.

Several times now something had awoken within them, something they couldn't explain. Nia had told them it was a gift of the Maker, something they couldn't—and shouldn't—control. But if they couldn't control it, how could Gnag? And why did he want to? How could he know something about them that was mysterious even to their mother?

"I wish he'd leave us alone," Leeli said, resting her chin on the rail and looking down at the water.

"I just want things to be normal again," Kalmar said. "We'll be normal in the Green Hollows, won't we?"

Nia put her hand on Kalmar's furry face. "I hope so."

"How do we know the Green Hollows is still safe?" Janner asked.

"The Hollowsfolk are strong, and they've never liked outsiders. If anyone has kept Gnag and his armies out of their country," Nia said with a smile, "it's my kinsmen."

"And once Gnag figures out we're there?" Janner asked. "What then?"

“I don’t know. But the more Gnag seeks you, the more convinced I become that he’s afraid of you. *Afraid*, children. So take heart. After the battle in Kimera, I have a feeling Gnag might have finally learned to leave the Jewels of Anniera alone.”

“And if he isn’t finished with you,” said Oskar, “he’ll look everywhere but right under his nose. If I were Gnag, I’d imagine you three ran west, past the edges of the maps, or south, past the Sunken Mountains—as far away from Dang as possible. But here we are, slipping right into his own backyard.”

“The Green Hollows is Gnag the Nameless’s backyard?” Kalmar asked.

“The southern border of the Hollows is the Killridge Mountains, where they say Gnag sits among the peaks in the Castle Throg and broods on the world’s destruction,” Oskar said.

“But the mountain range is huge,” Nia said. “And treacherous. There’s no way through. The only people crazy enough to live there are the ridgerunners.”

“Ridgerunners! Pah!” said Oskar, trying to sound like a sailor. He spat, but instead of a nice, dense, seaworthy glob plopping into the sea, it was a spray of white spittle, some of which landed on Podo’s arm.

“Keep practicin’, old friend,” Podo said, wiping it off. “Make sure ye get the bubbles out before ye spit. And remember, it helps if ye snort. Improves the consistency. Watch.”

Podo reared back and snorted so long and loud that the whole crew took notice. They watched with admiration as Podo launched a dollop of spit that sailed an astonishing distance before splooshing into the waves. The Kimerans nodded and murmured their approval.

Podo wiped his mouth. “Sorry, lass. Ye have to seize the teachable moments, you know. Carry on.”

“As I was saying,” Nia said with a withering look at Podo, “the ridgerunners are the only ones who live in the mountains.”

“But the ridgerunners serve Gnag the Nameless, don’t they?” asked Leeli. “Zouzab does.”

“The ridgerunners serve themselves,” Nia said. “The only reason Zouzab

was in Skree at all was because Gnag captured him. Or maybe bribed him with fruit.”

“They do have a thing for fruit,” Oskar said.

Janner thought about Mobrik, the ridgerunner in the Fork Factory. If it hadn't been for three apples, Janner would never have been able to bribe the little man, and he'd probably still be covered in soot at the shearing station with Sara Cobbler and the others.

The thought of Sara Cobbler made his heart skip a beat. Every day since he had escaped the factory, he had thought of her bright, courageous eyes. He was haunted by the memory of her trapped behind the portcullis, in the clutches of the Overseer and Mobrik, while he clattered into the night on the carriage. But what could he do? He was on the other side of the world now. Even if he were still in Dugtown, he wasn't sure he could help her.

“But couldn't Gnag just go around the mountains?” Kalmar asked Nia.

“You don't have to worry about that either. The rest of the Hollows is surrounded by a deep, twisted forest. They call it the Blackwood. As far as we know, no one's ever survived it. It's thick with ancient trees, and terrible things live there. The shepherders who wandered close enough to see the forest's edge always returned with the most awful stories. Stories about monsters.”

Leeli shuddered.

“What kind of stories?” Janner asked.

“What kind of monsters?” Kalmar asked.

“The Hollowsfolk call them the *cloven*. Split and twisted things. The scarytales said that Ouster Will was a cloven.” Nia shivered. “The point is, Gnag won't come through the Blackwood, either. Not even Fangs would be so foolish. The Green Hollows is as safe a place as we'll ever find.”

“If there's anything left of it, lass,” Podo said. “Maker knows you're right—the Hollowsfolk are a wiry bunch and more than capable of keeping the Fangs at bay. But it's been nine years. The world has changed. No one ever thought Anniera would fall, either.”

Podo looked south with a surly eye. Janner wondered if the old man

was troubled by memories of Anniera, where Wendolyn—Janner’s grandmother—had been killed by the Fangs of Dang.

One of the Kimeran crewmen shouted, “Captain! Something’s coming!”

All eyes turned to the sailor at the foredeck, who pointed at the smoky southern sky.

“Somebody get me the ’scope!” Podo snarled, and in an instant a sailor handed him a long cylinder. Podo propped his elbow on the rail and squinted into the telescope.

A moment later, Janner saw a shape speeding toward them like an arrow out of the smoke.

“No fear, lads,” Podo said. “It’s the birdman.”

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