

Chapter 15: Ord the Runaway

I fear the lack of wind does not mean we are close to land. Instead, we are so far from land there is no hope of finding it once again. I do not reveal my concerns. Instead, I spread cheer and encouragement among the others. I worry they will fall into despair without my happy example.

—Diary of Princess Sharmane of Tolaria

Ord was patient in his recovery. He took the herbs his father gave him, ate his mother's food, and alternated between resting and climbing the trees by the cave entrance for exercise. But each day, when he exercised, he took dried meat away from the cave, hidden in his tunic. One day he took a rope he'd made from braided strips of tooth hide. Another day he took two spears out, but returned with one. He took out a skinning knife. He hid his supplies in a huge oak not far from the cave, high up where a large branch made a pocket against the trunk.

He had no intention of staying in the cave. He didn't trust Jen or the twins, and he didn't want to be the cause of a fight between Bruton and Lon. He had decided to spend his life with another tribe. He wouldn't be the first young male to leave his tribe to find another. And he would remember never to speak the No-fur's language, so he wouldn't offend the new tribe.

Ord told no one of his plans. He worried his family would not let him go. His family would be upset and look for him, but if Lon or others in his family died, he would never forgive himself.

After recovering for many sunrises, he told his family he would test his strength by looking for herbs far from the cave. He said good-bye to his parents and family and left the cave, never to return. Tears filled his eyes at the thought of his family worrying a cat had eaten him. He would miss them, but he left knowing he would keep them alive by leaving.

Ord traveled in the trees, headed toward the river. Excitement about his life ahead gradually overwhelmed his grief, so when nightfall approached, Ord did not feel too sad. He rested in the high limbs of a tree overlooking the large river not far from the Water Cave, the river he remembered his father had told him was called the River Zash in No-fur language. He was close enough to hear the sound of the river rushing along the tree-lined bank.

He wore his rope in a circle that draped over his right shoulder and wrapped under his left arm. He lifted it over his head and hung it on a broken limb next to him. Then he tied a knot through the hole at the end of the thick spear handle and tied the other end to a sturdy limb, so the spear would be safe during the night.

Ord turned his attention to his gnawing appetite. He hadn't had time to hunt, so he reached into his pouch and took a piece of dried toth meat to chew on as he settled into the branches high up in the tree. A gentle breeze made the limbs sway, and he moved with them.

Soon the wind would die, and it would be the time when nightmist gathered. Later, rinfall would begin and drench the Earth. He looked up at the branches above, hoping they'd give him some measure of protection from the rin. He knew that if he stayed lower in the tree, he'd be dryer, but then he'd risk a jalag reaching him by climbing on the heavier limbs.

The next day he would follow the river inland. There was a place, a cavern behind the great waterfall, which Nanders used to cross the river and travel up the coast to trade with other tribes once a year. He would find another tribe of Nanders, or die looking

for them.

Tonlot, the god of the toth, the ton, and Nander, be blessed, thought Ord. Tonlot would decide Ord's fate.

Parrots cried out at the last rays of the setting sun. The side of his head where the rock had hit him pulsed with pain from the day's exertions. The green jungle filled with the sound of hunting cats as they roamed the jungle floor, roaring their existence to the world. The sound of the great falls upstream added to the chorus of nature with a deep bass rumbling and an occasional booming of huge rocks rolling and cracking against each other from the push of the water.

Someday he would return to the tribe and kill Jen. He promised himself that. If he lived.

Shouts drifted through the jungle. Ord raised his head in fear, his heart pounding like a running Nander's footsteps. No-fur slavers! The sound of their voices came from downriver. Ord left the safety of his high branches and headed out across the treeway, flying over the huge, interwoven limbs that allowed the Nanders to travel above the jungle floor. He stopped when he reached the branches at the edge of the river.

To his surprise, huge dwellings made of wood, with No-furs on board, floated in the river near the bank. A tree with no branches rested on its side on the roof of each dwelling. Red hides covered most of the tree and kept the rainfall off the No-furs. They crawled over their big dwellings, shouting in Lantish, but speaking so quickly he could barely make out their words.

He stared, fascinated. Father had told him of wood dwellings called ships that floated on the endless water, but he had never seen one until now. These must be slaver ships, he decided. Ord crawled closer, until he was on light branches almost directly over one of them. He settled in to watch the No-furs with the last of the fading light.

The smell of cooking meat rose from the ship. Ord was glad he had already eaten his dried meat, since the slavers' food smelled so wonderful, he was tempted to steal some. These No-furs were not peaceful people. He could see by the flickering light of lanterns a

forest of spears in racks on the deck. Round metal discs that his father had told him about—shields, that was their name—made a ring around the ship. To be used in sword fights, he knew. Then he spied swords in the wooden racks holding the shields. After a long wait, two large, No-fur bulls emerged from beneath the red hide and stood beneath him talking. For the first time in his life, Ord was grateful that his father had taught him Lantish.

“I hope we arrived before the Tolarians,” a No-fur said.

“We did,” the other spoke. “Yolanta nearly killed us rowing in the calm each day. The Tolarians had no idea we were after them, so they would never have rowed as hard. Now we just wait for them to arrive and we attack.”

Ord wondered who the Tolarians were and why these No-furs planned to attack them.

He had to warn his people about these ships. What if they attacked the Water Cave? He followed his scent trail through the dark trees back to where he had left his equipment. He would rise early and warn his people. His plans had changed, but if he saved his people from slavers, perhaps he wouldn't have to leave his home.