

Chapter 3

Visitors from the Sea

The surf crashed lazily onto the beach, the edge of the water gliding smoothly across the golden sand. Gray and white sandpipers scurried just beyond the surf's reach, their spindly legs flashing back and forth like little wind-up toys some child had brought to the beach and then forgotten. Overhead, terns and gulls wheeled about, their raucous cries echoing off of the rocky cliffs that rose up like jagged teeth from the sand's edge. The air, slightly chilled, smelled of salt and seaweed. In most ways, it appeared to be a day like any other on the coast. But what started out as an ordinary afternoon would end quite differently. For this was the day **they** returned.

A gull was the first to spot the intruder, just a tiny patch of color on the horizon. Unconcerned, the gull continued to soar freely, much more interested in fish than strange apparitions on the sea. Occasionally the gull's eyes swept out to the horizon and noticed the object growing slowly larger as it approached the shore.

Soon, small no longer, the object revealed itself to be a ship. Long and narrow, the wooden-bodied vessel swept up at both the front and rear. Extending from the rear, an extension of the ship curled up and over, like the tail of a serpent, its surface painted a deep emerald green. At the front, the wood of the hull projected up and out, the far end carved in the shape of a dragon's head. Its jaws

gaped wide and a large sphere of glistening jet sparkled in each of the wooden eye sockets. Above the deck, a single sky-blue sail bellied in the freshening breeze that pushed the ship toward land.

“Furl sail.” A dry voice spoke from somewhere on board. Nothing obvious marked the voice as that of a captain. No swearing or shouting, no impatience or short-tempered outbursts. Just a calm and quiet voice, like one might expect from a cloistered monk. Quiet, but with a depth of power and withheld menace that compelled instant obedience. Muscular rats sprang to the shrouds, quickly lowering and securing the sail.

“Ply oars.” Again, the voice gave its soft command. Almost at once the ship seemed to sprout legs as multiple sets of long oars extended out from the sides. The broadened ends of the oars hung poised over the waves as the rats awaited their next order.

“Call cadence to shore.” Once more the voice made itself known, giving a final terse command. A short, gnarled rat grabbed a wide drum from the vessel’s side and began to beat a steady rhythm as the rowers dipped their oars into the ocean’s surface in unison and pulled back strongly. In and out of the water the oars churned, driving the dragonship swiftly toward the waiting shore.

The captain stood at the vessel’s prow, his eyes scanning the surrounding shoreline. A head taller than the rest of his crew, he stood motionless, his silvery-gray fur rippling in the salty ocean breeze. He wore thick boots of glistening eelskin and a gray leather doublet embroidered with silver. Thick hoops of twisted gold hung down from his naked ears and glinted brightly in the sun.

He peered between slitted eyelids, his slanted eyes engulfed in a sea of tight wrinkles. Years of fighting the sun’s glare had trained them to open just wide enough to see. Twin scars traced their way across each cheek, both serving as graphic reminders of just how dangerous this rat was. The first was the result of a cutlass slash, the other the product of a mis-thrown dagger.

In the case of the cutlass, the captain had been unarmed and attacked by two assassins while still asleep in his bed. As his attackers learned to their regret, the captain always slept with one eye open, and the slashing stroke meant to separate his head from his shoulders only managed to rip a gash across his left cheek. Whirling his bedsheet around his left arm while snatching up his dagger with his right, the captain had leapt across the bed and slit the throat of the first rat and then, catching the other rat's cutlass on the rolled bedsheet, had plunged his dagger deep into his opponent's heart.

"Atel Two." The soft voice of the captain floated across the dragonship, which now lay partly on the sand, its journey complete. The rat so addressed jumped to attention and saw his captain give a quick flick of his paw towards a gull wheeling overhead, the same one that had first noticed the ship as a far off dot on the horizon.

Needing no further command, Atel Two pulled a short bow from underneath a pile of skins and quickly fitted a razor-tipped arrow to it. "Fish," he grunted at another rat standing close by. This rat, clearly expecting the command, jerked a piece of fish from a wooden bucket stowed hard against the ship's rail and tossed it high into the air.

The gull, thrilled to see her food jump up to her in such an obliging fashion, darted over and deftly grabbed it from the air. At the same time Atel Two let fly with his arrow. His aim proved true and the gull tumbled from the sky, pierced clean through by the barbed shaft. She fell heavily onto the deck, a mass of snowy white feathers stained red.

The captain nodded once at Atel Two and then turned away to take a seat near the vessel's rear. "At least her final thoughts proved pleasant," Atel Two remarked as he moved toward the dead bird. "Four and Seven, come give me your help." The two rats he'd addressed walked over to the gull with him and together they lifted it up and carried it over to a low table in the very center of the ship. "I thank you, my brothers. From here on it is my task."

Atel Two grabbed a handful of feathers and began to yank them from the still warm body, letting them settle into a wicker basket sitting at the side of the table.

Soon after, the sea-rats stood around a low wooden table, clad in short leather jerkins and colorful kilts. Thick black belts encircled their waists, hung with a short cutlass, a stabbing knife, or both. Most of the rats wore golden rings and necklaces, spoils from past raids. Like their captain, several sported gleaming circlets of gold looped from their ears.

All that remained of the unfortunate gull was a mound of raw meat placed on a warrior's shield in the middle of the table, along with a string of flight feathers bound together on a long cord.

"Begin." As always, the captain's voice was quietly compelling.

Atel Two started the benediction in a sing-song voice, reciting the words to the ceremony by heart, exactly as he had done so many times in the past.

"Brothers, we come to land safely, delivered by the mercy of Sureet, Goddess of the wide and spreading Sea," he solemnly intoned. "This belt of feathers I give to our honored captain, the first among the many. We call him Atel One, for he is first among us in wisdom, first in strength." He held out the feathered belt with both paws and bowed his head as he offered it up. The captain took the belt and cinched it tight around his waist, the feathers forming a fan around his blue-green kilt.

"By these feathers shall Atel One lead us swift and sure to victory," Atel Two continued, looking up again. "The spirit of the gull has passed to us. Her strength is now ours. Her speed belongs to us. As these white feathers allowed her to take flight, so shall we fly through our opponents as if they were but wisps of breeze. She was a creature of land, sea and air – of all and of each. We come from the sea, driven by the air against our sail, and make war against the land. The spirit of the gull shall give us strength. As we eat of the gull, so shall we eat of this land." With this, Atel Two stretched forth his paw as a gesture of invitation, pointing towards the mound of raw flesh on the upended shield.

The captain, taking the first portion as was his due, grabbed a goblet of flesh from the pile and bit off a fat chunk of meat with his sharp yellow teeth. "Eat, my comrades, and be strong!" he declared, his voice ringing out loudly for the first time. At his command, the others gathered round and snatched up handfuls of the raw meat, tearing and chewing hungrily with wild abandon.

"As we eat of the gull, so shall we eat of this land!" the captain cried, holding aloft the remains of his portion as he reiterated Atel Two's words. "Eat and be strong!"

"The boat lies secure?" Atel One asked, directing his words at his second in command. The entire group of berserkers stood in a compact group about a hundred yards from the breaking surf, awaiting their captain's orders.

"Aye sir," answered Atel Two. "It has been drawn up along the sands, well beyond the tide's reach, and draped with camouflaging sheets of cloth. Atel Five and Nine stay behind to guard it. The battle skiffs have been unloaded and we await your command." The battle skiffs Atel Two spoke of were marvels of design. Hardly more than a waterproofed canvas stretched tightly over springy lengths of cunningly shaped belloris wood, they were maneuverable and fast. Four berserkers, along with their gear, would normally occupy a single skiff, although in a pinch they could hold up to six.

"It is well done," Atel One replied, nodding to his chief lieutenant. "Let us be off. I wish to be far upriver before we make camp. You have the sacred powders?"

"Aye; I carry them with me." Atel Two opened a green pouch tied to his belt and withdrew several glass vials. Holding them out for Atel One's inspection, he continued speaking. "I have both the sacred powders, that of mind and that of body. I shall keep both until you command the enlightening."

“Do so,” Atel One replied evenly. “You have served me with distinction and will surely command as the One after me.” Atel One smiled slightly and went on. “But do not expect this to be soon. I have not yet foreseen my death.”

“Nor have I, and nor would I,” Atel Two replied with obvious sincerity. “May you live long and bring us many more victories, here and beyond.” Atel Two had served under Atel One for several seasons and valued the knowledge his captain possessed. He felt in no rush to take up the reins of command. That time would come when it would, and of its own accord. For now, he was content to follow and learn.

“I shall do my best.” Atel One clapped his first lieutenant on the shoulder and then turned towards the battle skiffs, anxious to be under way.