

The Island of Whispers

A Novel by
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For all good rats everywhere.

Contents

Part One: The Threat	5
Part Two: The Plot	46
Part Three: The Revolt	80
Part Four: Inside the Giant	117
Part Five: A New Society	147
About the Author	168

Part One:

The Threat

Chapter One

It was near the end of his watch. For the last time that night, Twisted Foot sniffed the air, slowly scanned the terrain below him and listened intently. As his narrow eyes moved gradually from left to right, his sleek black body quivered and bristled in the early autumn breeze. Far out into the estuary, a faint ribbon of yellow was spreading along the horizon, creating a thin wedge between the dark night sky and the even darker waters of the River Forth.

Nothing stirred on the island. There were no sounds save for the gentle slap of water on rocks and the wind that whispered through the slitted windows of the crumbling monastery. Soon, though, the stillness would be shattered by the first northbound express as it thundered over the giant steel bridge which loomed high above.

Twisted Foot smelled a sharpness in the air. It would not be long, he thought, until the Cold Cycle began: the time when the winds grew into shrieking, biting monsters which swept over the outside world; when the waters round the world boiled and frothed, sending up huge white creatures to batter and shake the rocks; and when hard white water clung to the high ground on which he now squatted. The hunting packs would stop then, and there would be little work for the Watchers, only the occasional solitary vigil to guard over the secret world deep below.

He would spend much more time in the underworld during the Cold Cycle, content in the warmth and security of the Watchers' lair. Yes, it was a time for relaxation. There would be long mating sessions with the

lair's she-rats. Later, there would be games and frolics with the newly arrived offspring. There would also be those enthralling periods in the Common lair when Long Snout and the other elders of the Inner Circle recounted stirring and often harrowing tales from the history of their hidden world, a history which spanned many, many Cycles from the early struggle to colonise the island through to the stability and comfort of the present society.

Yet, despite his anticipation of the pleasures brought about by the coming Cold Cycle, a sense of foreboding had crept into Twisted Foot's thoughts, causing him to shiver more pronouncedly in the pre-dawn chill. As well as the mating, the games and the stories, that time, he knew, heralded the Selection, when the less robust and less purely formed young from each lair were sought out and imprisoned by the Protectors to await slaughter for the hungry mouths of the Inner Circle. It was true that many of the youngsters selected would be the weaker she-rats, who were regarded as unsuitable for future breeding, and the more deformed of the he-rats, who were not fit for training as Protectors or Hunters or even Watchers. Nevertheless, the Selection was a time of immense sadness in the lairs, a time of sacrifice for the greater good of the society – and for the continued wellbeing of the ruling Circle.

Twisted Foot recalled the trauma of the Selection during his own first Cold Cycle when, as a trembling youngster, he had observed Broken Tail, the Chief Protector, scurry through the Watchers' lair, sniffing out the weak and the handicapped, and marking each across the snout with a swipe of his sharp claws. He remembered vividly the great fear that had pervaded the lair, the squeals and shrieks of his young playmates, and the enticing tang of blood from their freshly inflicted wounds. He remembered, too, a feeling of profound relief when the deformity from which his name was derived had gone undetected by the Chief Protector.

A faint scrape from among the rocks below him brought Twisted Foot's thoughts jolting back to the present. The hunting pack was returning!

Raising his snout to the night sky, he uttered a shrill warning call. The answering call came almost immediately from out of the darkness. Moments later, silently and as if from nowhere, Torn Coat, a scarred veteran from the Hunter's lair, appeared beside him.

'Look sharp, dung-head!' snarled Torn Coat as he brushed past, his bared fangs showing traces of a recent kill.

Twisted Foot watched closely as the rest of the hunting pack moved stealthily towards him. First came the small slave-rats: there were six of them in all, but only three were fully employed. Each of the latter slaves dragged behind him one of the night's kills, jaws clamped over the limp and bleeding neck of a young gull. Moving noiselessly behind the slaves, four more Hunters slid past Twisted Foot, this time without acknowledgement. Finally, the familiar shape of Fat One, a fellow Watcher, lumbered into view.

'Another fine feast for White Muzzle and his lot,' he grumbled to Twisted Foot.

The new day's light crept tentatively up the estuary as the two Watchers followed the hunting pack in the direction of the old monastery. Unlike the quiet, efficient pace of the Hunters, their progress was clumsy and almost comical, reflecting the awkward bulk of one and the grotesquely twisted hind foot of the other.

Chapter Two

The small monastery had been abandoned more than six hundred years before, when its last occupants had slipped quietly and sadly away from the island, only a handful of survivors from the ravages of the vile pestilence that had spread through their devout community, wreaking its black, contorted death. For centuries afterwards, the rocky, whale-shaped islet was known to people on both sides of the Forth as Plague Island: a place to be avoided, a place of ghosts and demons and eerie, whispering winds.

In time, though, the notion of a haunted island receded, as did the memory of the fearful, rat-borne disease that had laid waste to the former inhabitants. Gradually, the island regained its formal name of Inchgarvie. Gradually, too, men returned to Inchgarvie: grey-haired historians to pick over relics of the deserted monastery; bearded, top-hatted engineers to supervise construction of the nearby Forth Railway Bridge; local fishermen and seal-catchers; occasional naturalists; and others attracted to the mysterious island out of plain curiosity. Their visits had been brief, lasting a few hours usually and a day or two at most. Only once more during its history was Inchgarvie occupied by humans for any period of length: they came at the outset of World War Two to build – and later to man – the anti-aircraft gun emplacement that was sited on the east-facing point of the island to help thwart Germany’s long-range bombing sorties in the area.

Now, in the last decade of the twentieth century, visitors to the island were few and irregular. Even the multiplicity of craft that plied the Forth steered clear of Inchgarvie, deterred more by swirling, unpredictable tides than by fear of lingering ghosts. After more than fifty years, the

concrete gun emplacement remained virtually intact, but centuries of neglect and exposure to the elements had exacted a more telling price from the low-built monastery which occupied the western half of the island; its roof had collapsed long ago, little remained of its internal walls and several ragged holes punctured its thicker external walls.

The returning hunting pack re-entered the dank, rubble-strewn interior of the monastery through one such narrow aperture near the base of the east wall. Their re-entry was greeted instantly with a short screech from a point among the rubble a few yards ahead of them. Uttering his own sharp call in response, Torn Coat moved swiftly towards the Watcher, whose small, pointed snout poked out cautiously from a gap below some broken masonry.

‘Pass, warrior,’ croaked Small Face.

Without further response, Torn Coat also slid under the masonry and abruptly disappeared down a deep cleft between two ancient flagstones. One by one, the others followed Torn Coat. As Fat One squeezed his unwieldy rump through the cleft, Small Face, easily the tiniest and most timid of the Watchers, called out to Twisted Foot.

‘Think of me when you’re curled up snugly in the lair,’ he wailed.

‘Never mind, comrade,’ Twisted Foot retorted, ‘we’ll keep your nest warm for your return.’

Then he, too, vanished down the tunnel that led to the underworld, leaving Small Face to maintain his lone daylight vigil.

The tunnel was long, narrow and very steep. Its roof had been rounded and smoothed by the passage of bodies over many years. By contrast, its floor was bedrock: hard and sharp, and constantly wet from seeping rainwater. Like those in front of him, Twisted Foot slithered rather than crawled down the tunnel.

Eventually, the ground levelled out and broadened, marking the entrance to the underworld. Here, as usual, crouched two surly Protectors,

who observed the return of the hunting pack menacingly, but without comment or movement. Behind the Protectors and to their left was a shallow pool of murky rainwater, where the Hunters stopped briefly to lap while Fat One and Twisted Foot guarded over the slaves. Resuming their formation, Hunters and slaves moved off at speed along the wider, higher tunnel leading to the Common lair. Their work now over, the two Watchers also drank from the pool and then proceeded leisurely in the same direction.

As always, the utter blackness of the underworld and its familiar scents and sounds brought reassurance to Twisted Foot. On the world above, he felt exposed, vulnerable. There was that continual sense of anxiety, that fear of imminent intrusion by the Two-Legs. Around the outside world, the strange creatures controlled by the Two-Legs caterwauled through the air and sea and boomed across the giant bridge, threatening and unnerving him. Here in the welcoming blackness those fears were quickly forgotten. Here there was concealment from the Two-Legs, and the promise of warmth, sustenance and companionship.

The Watchers emerged from the tunnel into the Common lair. Unlike the rest of the underworld, this place was spacious, almost cavernous, easily accommodating the normal Assembly of some three hundred he-rats from the Inner and Outer Circles. The floor of the lair was oval-shaped and level for the most part. The centre of the oval was dominated by an outcrop of rock, flattened at its top to create a broad, circular platform. The walls of the lair sloped gently inwards to form a dome-like ceiling, the pinnacle of which was located directly above the platform. Along the walls, a series of low, narrow tunnels led off to the other lairs. To the right lay the abodes of the Watchers and Hunters. To the left, a gang of Protectors kept constant guard over the entrance to the Scavengers' lair, ensuring that the bedlam and violence within did not spill out. The tunnel at the farthest end of the Common lair gave access to the home of the Protectors. From here,

another tunnel led to the sanctity of the Inner Circle's lair, a place that was also guarded continually, but for entirely different motives. A final tunnel led from the Protectors' lair to the outside world, emerging at a point not far from the western wall of the monastery. Barely known to the other members of the underworld, this tunnel provided the Inner Circle and their Protectors with an escape route in the event of flooding, insurrection or other such calamities.

As he and Fat One moved through the Common lair towards its central platform, Twisted Foot noted that most of his Outer Circle comrades had already gathered for the Assembly. The returning hunting pack had created the usual stir among them, and more than a hundred pairs of greedy, slit eyes were now fixed on the pack's kills, which had been placed enticingly in the middle of the platform. Bristling and growling, a ring of Protectors surrounded the platform, ready to pounce mercilessly on any who might dare to breach the circle.

The appearance of Long Snout at the entrance to the Protectors' lair brought the commotion to an abrupt halt. Twisted Foot and Fat One scurried through the throng to join the ranks of the Watchers. The Assembly had begun.