

When the Wave Comes

Note

This was the very first piece I ever wrote, for a competition years ago. When it didn't win and catapult me to fame and fortune, I was devastated. Reading it back later showed me how seriously flawed and badly written it was. I have since reworked it and doubled its size. I'm so much happier with it now.



“Mother, I’m scared,” Rik announced.

“Why?” she asked.

“When the wave comes, I’m scared that I’ll run, and then I’ll be Keldav and I won’t have a family or a future and I will have to be a slave all my life.” The words came out in a rush.

His mother put her arm around him, he was small for his age, and it was true that he was not physically imposing, like his father or brothers, even the younger ones. But he was her favourite for his quiet intelligence and willingness to help.

“Now then,” she told him, “it’s natural to be scared, every boy is, they might not admit it but they are. The wave will prove that you’re an adult and then you won’t be Keldav.”

“But Dror says that I will run, or that I won’t even dare to turn up at the Ancestors’ Wall.” Dror was of an age with Rik but large, loud and outwardly confident, everything that Rik was not. Naturally, he was looking forward to the wave, to prove his manhood, no-one thought that Dror would run. Or that he would not survive the wave.

“After the wave you will be able to choose a second name,” said his mother. “Everyone will know that you faced the wave and did not run, I will be even more proud of you, and your father will take you into the craftsmen’s guild. Take no notice of Dror, his only brother is Keldav and it upsets him because your brothers are not. And he has no father to teach him. Of course, his family do not talk of it. Just be strong in yourself.”

Rik left his dwelling and walked through the city streets, unconsciously heading towards the Wall of the Ancestors that lay at the eastern edge of the island city of Keth. The fields were full of ripening crops and there were Keldav toiling over them, watched by men.

There were three moons in the sky, Rik knew that once a full cycle; when all four moons were in alignment with the sun, a larger than usual tide was generated, running around the

planet and sweeping all the island cities with a huge wave. All those males approaching adulthood stood outside the wall, on the sandy beach and let the wave wash over them. Those who remained after its passage were acclaimed as Men and could marry and take second names. Those who would not stand, or who ran were Keldav. Cowards, and fit only for servitude and ridicule.

They were dead men walking, thought Rik, bound by law to do whatever they were told by anyone, even women and children. The ones who vanished were better thought of; at least they had shown courage. They were mourned and revered, their spirits watching over the city.

There were three days to the wave, already the wall was thronged with people, scraps of parchment had been pushed into the cracks in its brickwork, prayers for those who would take the wave, and some for those who had vanished in previous years. Rik stood at the edge and looked out to the east, the sun-dappled water was still and waves gently lapped at the wide beach a hundred feet below him. He knew that the wave would break just below where he stood; he had seen it last year when his brother Eran had emerged triumphant in its wake. Eran; who was now married and soon to be a father. Rik wanted what Eran had more than anything.

Dror pushed his way through the crowds until he stood beside Rik, taller and heavily built. He jabbed Rik in the ribs. "Hello, small one." He grinned. "You're early, there are three days to go yet, or are you just working out which way you will run?" Rik felt himself colour at the insult.

"I'm not frightened of the wave or of you," he replied. "I'm not like your brother, I won't run." But his expression gave away his real thoughts.

Dror grabbed Rik's arm and twisted it up behind his back. "Don't you talk of my brother," he hissed. "I have no brother."

Rik winced; it was almost worth the pain to see Dror's confidence crumble. "I have brothers," he continued. "They oversee Keldav." The implication was clear and Rik stood on his tiptoes as Dror increased the pressure on his arm. Suddenly he let go, Rik wondered why. Then he saw that Larris, the daughter of his neighbour had joined them.

"Hello Rik," she said. "Are you excited yet?" She ignored Dror and looked at Rik with more than interest, they had grown up together and it was expected by their families that if Rik survived they would eventually marry. She was the same height as Rik, with hair like a black curtain and the first signs of womanhood. Rik felt his heart lurch, Larris turned heads and

she was interested in him, no wonder Dror was upset, he had designs on her too. That would be why he had let go, Larris had remarked about his bullying before.

“Hello Larris,” said Dror quickly, pushing Rik away. “You won’t be quite so interested in him when he runs, you would be better off with me than that Keldav.”

Larris sprung to Rik’s defence. “Well I think that he will stand, and when he does, it will prove him worthy, when you both survive you will have to stop trying to belittle him.”

Dror’s gaze narrowed. “You don’t think that he would be man enough for you do you?” he sneered. “You would be far better off with me, he will never stand.” There was contempt in his voice.

Rik felt tears welling up in his eyes; he was stung by the tone of Dror’s voice and frightened that he was right. He had to go. Before Larris could see them he turned and walked away. He could hear Dror’s jeers ringing in his ears. “Look at him it’s not even here and he’s off.”

That night, Rik lay in his bed listening to his parents talking. “I worry for him,” said his father. “For I don’t think he will be strong enough to stand, he is too small, look at his brothers, they were bigger and yet they could not survive.”

“Be still,” said his mother, “and have faith. There is strength in him, it’s just that he doesn’t realise it yet.”

“I agree that he is stronger than he realises, I don’t think for one moment he will run,” continued his father. “It’s just that he is not physically strong enough to resist the force of the water, try as he will.”

Rik felt strangely comforted by the words. Surely, he reasoned, he would not need as much strength if he was smaller. Eventually he slept, his dreams filled with waves and taunts.

Rik kept away from Dror and Larris for the next two days. It wasn’t fair, he thought, Dror had everything and made him feel small by his presence. He knew that Dror thought that he was just not up to the challenge of the wave. He resolved to prove him wrong.

On the day before the wave, his father took him into the forest to pick his staff.

“It must be of green wood,” he explained, “that will be strong and supple. The length is twice your height, one end is pushed deep into the sand of the beach and you hold the other.”

Rik nodded, his father was wise, everyone thought so, Rik valued every scarce second that he spent with him. Between them, they scoured the coppiced trees for a good staff. Rik chose several but his father dismissed them all, pointing out flaws in the grain. The day was passing,

they must find one soon. There were others searching as well, lost in thought there was little conversation between the searchers. Dror was not among them, he must be looking elsewhere for his staff. Of course, he had no father to help him, the shame of Keldav had been too much and he had simply vanished one morning. Dror was convinced that his father would return to see him stand. Everyone else thought he had taken the chance to slip away and sail to another island, there to start again.

“You must not rush your choice; you need a straight and true staff,” his father said. “Like this one.” Rik saw a branch that was as thick as his arm, straight and solid. His father cut it from the trunk and handed to Rik. It felt alive in his hand, not too heavy to hold and as he flexed it he could feel the power in the grain, forcing it straight against his muscles.

“You will know if it is yours,” said his father, watching his son with the branch. “It will feel part of you.”

“This is the one then,” said Rik.

“Come, we will fix leather straps on it, so that you will not lose it.” His father led him home in the gathering dark. “And I will tell you how best to prepare yourself for what is coming.”

It started in the ocean deeps, halfway around the world from Keth, the moons’ alignment pulled the oceans up and the spin of the planet sent a great wave racing around the world.

The first inhabitants of the island cities knew of the waves coming was the lowering of the tide, instead of its usual ebb, the water level sank lower than it had been for a full cycle, and in each of them the Ancients signalled the arrival of the wave, the chance for all those brave enough to prove their manhood. The great bell on Keth tolled at sunrise.

Rik was awoken from sleep by the sound of the bell and his father’s call. “Come now, son. It’s time to go to the wall.” To his father this day was familiar and tinged with pride and sadness, as well as standing himself, he had had seven sons, four had already stood for the wave, only two had returned.

Rik roused himself and prepared for his ordeal, he dressed simply, nothing was allowed that would help him stand, except the staff of green wood that he had cut and trimmed. As was the custom, if he survived it would form part of his proof that he had stood. His father’s staff hung over the stone fireplace in their home; it had been dried by years of fire smoke and twisted into a curve. Rik had always longed to have his own to display proudly. If he returned, today would be his day.

As he made his way to the wall the crowds thronged around him, he hadn't realised that there were so many people in the city. People he didn't know slapped him on the back and wished him good luck.

The City Elder started the ceremony as the new tide welled, standing on top of the wall, he called down the spirits of the Ancients to bless the passing of boys into men, and led prayers for those who would not return.

Next, a list of all those who were of age to stand was read out. Rik and Dror answered their names but there were several who were not present. At the end of the calling the Elder declared "All those who have not answered are now Keldav, they will be so marked. I declare them slaves to those who stand and return."

He gestured to the horizon; a faint dark line was visible on top of the sea. "Take your places as boys, return as Men," he chanted, and the crowd began to repeat the call, their voices swelling in the morning light. "Go as Boys, Return as Men."

The boys were led down to the beach and formed into a line, facing the east. Rik and Dror were close together, in the middle of a long line of boys. At a command from the Elder their green wood staffs were dug into the soft golden sand; angled toward the horizon whilst the crowd continued chanting at their backs, "Go as Boys, Return as Men," "Go as Boys, Return as Men." Rik wound the leather straps around his wrists and set his feet apart, digging them into the sand and pebbles, just as his father had shown him.

Over the chant a soft hum could be heard, growing louder as the wave neared, the water level was rising fast now, it lapped around the feet of the group of boys, now around their ankles. As a group they lent forward. Suddenly the water drained away, leaving them exposed; a line of feeble bodies in the face of the onrushing wall of green water, backlit by the rising sun.

There was a shout, and then a growl from the crowd above them on the wall. Rik took his eyes off the wave and looked left, the boy between him and Dror and three others further down the beach had turned and run from the wave, dropping their staffs they fled up the beach and into the safety of the city behind the wall. The crowds chant changed. "Keldav, Keldav," they cried, the chant of the coward. These were as bad as the ones that had not arrived; they had failed to become Men. The deserters' futures would be joined to the others in slavery. They would all be labourers with the red mark of Keldav on their heads.

Dror turned to Rik, shouting over the noise of the rushing water. "You're leaving it late," he sneered, "about time you ran isn't it?" His voice was faint over the roar of the wave, it was slowing now in the shallows, but it was rising, now it towered above them, and started to break, a line of white foam visible on its crest.

“I’m not going anywhere,” replied Rik. He took a deep breath and braced himself as the wave fell on the group.

It felt to Rik as if all the air was knocked out of his body, he was pushed backward. His staff was almost torn from his grip. The water was cold and numbed him. The ground under his feet shifted and he felt himself tumbling head over heels, staff flailing. As he was carried along by the swirling water he felt another body bump into him. It clutched at his waist and legs, hampering his efforts as he tried to anchor his staff back into the sand. He was aware of the presence of the wall and thought he would soon be dashed into it. Desperation made him stronger than he thought he could be. The grip of the other boy slackened but an arm was caught under his belt and the body hung like a weight.

The water was filled with sand and pebbles, blinding him, but as he was carried up the beach and into shallower water he could make out the surface and could feel the force of the wave weakening. His lungs were bursting as he managed to push his staff into the sand, holding the two bodies against the last of the wave’s energy.

His head broke the surface and he sucked in a deep breath, the wave had passed and he was alive, he had stood. He had been pushed back nearly to the foot of the wall but had not struck it. He could hear cheering and crying from the top of the wall as the water level dropped, until he was standing on dry sand. Looking around him, he made out a small group of Men, not boys now, but very few of them. He realised that the other body was still attached to his belt and looked down; he saw that it was Dror. He was unconscious; his staff had split; only a short piece of wood was still attached to his wrist by the leather straps. He untangled Dror’s arm and shook him. “Come on, Dror, wake up!” he shouted but the boy didn’t move.

Larris came running down the beach towards him on long legs, damp sand flying up with each step. She was at the head of a group of relatives and friends who went to the survivors and held them. “Rik!” she called, flinging her arms around his neck. “I’m so proud of you. Dror was lost but you held him. He is only a Man because of you.” Rik was both pleased and dismayed. He had stood but Dror had emerged from the wave, would he still live to taunt him?

Dror’s mother had arrived on the sands; she knelt and shook her son. Dror jerked, coughed and spluttered and moaned weakly. He vomited a large amount of water; it dribbled down the front of his robe. Kneeling, the three of them helped him to sit up. His hair and face were covered with sand, but his eyes focused on them as he regained his senses. “Have I stood?” he asked weakly.

Rik nodded. “Yes, we are still here, listen.”

Above them, the bell sounded and the Elder called down. "You who remain are Men because you stood, come and take your place among the Men of Keth."

Rik saw that his parents were at the head of the throng hurrying down the beach. They were together with Larris's. Hopefully I will be wed to Larris soon, thought Rik; now that I'm a man, we can build a dwelling and I can hang my staff over the fire.

"You never ran then?" said Dror, ending his thoughts of marriage.

"No," he answered proudly. "I never considered it, despite what you thought."

"And it's a good job he didn't," answered Larris. "He held you firm and true, we all saw it from the wall."

"What do you mean?" asked Rik. There was something in her tone.

Dror's mother answered, "When the wave started to break, my son was washed off his feet, as he passed you held him tight. Although you were uprooted you never let him go."

Rik thought that things had happened in a different way to that. He looked at Larris, she shook her head. Wisely he kept silent; perhaps in all the confusion he had been mistaken.

"You held him and saved him, of that I'm sure," Dror's mother continued. "How can I thank you?"

An understanding passed between them. Dror's mother had already lost a son as Keldav, and a husband to the shame. Today she had nearly lost another son, the last of her family. Nothing more would be said. But things would change between them.

"Thank you, Rik," Dror whispered as he too understood. "I will never mock you again, I thought I was gone but you saved me."

"And I will remind you if you forget," confirmed Larris.

Notes

Initiation ceremonies are important in many cultures. This rather extreme one may well be based on a need to restrict populations in places with scarce resources. And provide a ready source of expendable labour. Or not. You decide.