


The Skaar Invasion (The Fall of Shannara)

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLER  Following *The Black Elfstone*, *The Skaar Invasion* is the second book of the epic four-part conclusion to the Shannara series from one of the acknowledged masters of the fantasy genre.

The Four Lands are under siege. Wielding a magical ability virtually impossible to combat, mysterious invaders defeat the most fearsome Troll armies, then focus their savagery on the Druid order—and all hope seems lost.

Eventually the invaders reveal a more human face, but understanding their motives in no way mitigates the brutality of their actions. Dar Leah, once the High Druid's Blade, has crossed paths—and swords—with their ruthless leader before. So he knows that if any hope exists, it rests in the hands of the Druid Drisker Arc, now trapped inside vanished Paranor.

As Drisker races to find the ancient knowledge that could free him, Dar goes in search of Tarsha Kaynin, the young woman blessed with the powerful gift of the wishsong, whose magic could draw Drisker back into the world of the living. But little do they know that what appeared to be a formidable invading force may only be the forerunner of a much larger army—one intent on nothing less than total conquest.

Praise for *The Skaar Invasion*

"Like *The Black Elfstone* before it, and perhaps even more so, *The Skaar Invasion* is one of [Terry] Brooks's most aggressively political novels. It engages with familiar conflicts and themes, digging deep into the challenges facing humanity and asking—begging—for us to do better. . . . *The Skaar Invasion* is an exhilarating, intricate portrait of a world at war with itself."—Tordotcom

"Brooks continues the mastery of the world, as may be expected when working in one as developed as Shannara."—RT Book Reviews

Terry Brooks has thrilled readers for decades with his powers of imagination and storytelling. He is the author of more than thirty books, most of which have been New York Times bestsellers. He lives with his wife, Judine, in the Pacific Northwest. ONE

"Darcon Leah," Ajin said, calm and composed, ignoring the sword at her throat.

A look of surprise flickered across Dar's lean features. Ajin sensed he was having trouble comprehending who she was. Or more likely, what she was. She was certain that whomever he had expected to find beneath her war helmet once it was removed, it wasn't a woman.

But she was used to such looks. When dressed in full armor with her dazzling white cloak draped across her shoulders, she presented an unlikely picture. Even now, ragged as she was from the night's battles, she was imposing. She was a woman who fought alongside men as an equal, a woman who led them in battle. In her Skaar homeland, she was regarded with awe and reverence.

Yet she was also a princess, the only daughter of her nation's ruling family, the firstborn of a king and a queen. A prime birthing, although her mother's replacement-the pretender, as Ajin insisted on calling her, though never to her face-had been quick enough to give him a pair of boy children once the former queen was banished. The pretender would have loved to banish the daughter, too-preferably to a burial plot-but Ajin was hard to kill. Just ask Dar Leah.

She waited patiently for him to say something, but he seemed unable to find the words. He simply stood there staring with the point of his blade at her throat and his expression unreadable.

"Not what you expected?" she asked. She gave him an encouraging smile, enjoying the moment.

"Who are you?" he managed finally.

Her smile broadened. She was tall and strong and beautiful, blond in the manner of most Skaar, her hair curled about her face in tight ringlets, framing startling blue eyes and fair skin. Seeing nothing more, you might still have thought her well bred and educated, but you would have missed much by looking no further. Only twenty-two years of age, she was a warrior skilled in combat arts and battlefield tactics. She had been born to it, her talents obvious even at an early age. Realizing the precariousness of her situation, with her mother gone and the pretender sitting on the throne with her father, Ajin had quickly decided to reinvent herself.

So she had joined the Skaar army. She had asked to be called only by her given name and not be accorded any special treatment. She was given none. She was harassed and abused, but she never complained. She was athletic to begin with, and she had refined her natural ability as she trained. Her willingness to place herself at risk and to suffer whatever hardships were required had endeared her to the soldiers who supervised her training or trained with her-all of whom were quick to tell others of her commitment. Her father, watching from afar, was one of those who paid attention. Ajin's perseverance-even in the face of her mother's banishment and the animosity of the pretender-only deepened his feelings for her. He was impressed by her determination and skill. She had excelled at everything asked of her and had evidenced an extraordinary understanding and appreciation of the lessons she was being taught. She advanced quickly through the army's ranks, becoming a battalion commander at eighteen. For her first assignment, she was tasked with leading a small number of Skaar soldiers into an outback country in Eurodia that had risen in revolt. She led from the front-she never asked anything of her soldiers that she would not do herself-and crushed the uprising in three days.

By then she had gained sufficient support from her father and the Skaar military that she was safe from the pretender's malevolent scheming. It was a bitter pill for the pretender to swallow, and that made Ajin all the happier.

One day, she might reveal all this to Dar Leah, should circumstances change. But lives were

complicated and personal histories were not to be shared too hastily, so this day she would keep her story to herself. It was not the time or place for anything quite so intimate yet.

"My name is Ajin d'Amphere," she said. "I am a princess of the Skaar people."

Her words hung in the cool silence of the predawn darkness, joining shadows that rippled and shivered with changes of light as clouds passed across the moon. Even with the sword point at her throat, Ajin felt no fear or panic. Although Dar Leah did not yet fully understand it, she sensed there was a bond between them. He would not hurt her, nor would she hurt him. They had crossed paths three times now, and once she had held his life in her hands as he now held her life in his. To her way of thinking, they were warriors of equal stature, and she could not believe he would kill her while she was helpless and fully aware of how recently she had spared him.

"I heard your name inside the Keep," he said. "I heard them call out, 'Ajin, Ajin.' A victory cry, I'm guessing. But it was really a massacre, wasn't it? A slaughter." He shook his head in disgust. "How do you know my name?"

"From my Penetrator, Kol'Dre. You know him as Kassen."

"I know him-and if I find him alive, I will remedy the situation immediately. All the Druids of Paranor are dead because of him!"

She shrugged. "And all my brave Skaar soldiers are dead, too."

"Is that supposed to balance out? I suppose you think so. Should I mention the Druids and the Troll guards and crew your airship destroyed?"

"Or I the two Skaar airships you destroyed first?"

For a minute neither spoke.

Then she gave him a questioning look. "The woman, the female Druid. She was special to you, wasn't she?"

He hesitated before nodding. "Once."

He looked as if he might say something more, but then he went still again.

"And are you responsible for what happened in the Keep?" she pressed. "Was that your doing? Was it you who freed that thing inside the walls-that monster and its poisonous mist-so it could feed on my soldiers?"

He shook his head, a dark look shading his expression. "That was another's choice. But what was the point of any of it? You killed all of us; we killed all of you. Now everyone's dead-and all for nothing."

"Not from where I'm standing. Paranor was our greatest threat, so we had to destroy it and the Druids. Now Paranor is gone, and I will not mourn it or its residents."

"No, I don't suppose you will." He gave her a none-too-gentle push. "Move back into the trees so we aren't standing out in the open, in case someone else from your little band of cutthroats survived. And don't even think about trying to run."

She walked into the forest, back where the darkness was so complete she could see almost nothing, the sword point prodding her along, removing her from any hope of finding help. The trees closed about her, Paranor's moonlit rise disappeared, and she was alone with the Blade.

"What do you intend to do with me?" she asked, once he had found a place he liked and brought them to a halt.

"I'm not sure, Princess. Maybe ransom you. Maybe use you as bait to draw out that traitor who gave up the Keep. Maybe I'll just let you wonder for a bit."

"Could you at least give me some space to breathe? Take your sword away from my throat. I promise not to run."

"Oh, please. You think I should trust you after what you've done? How foolish would that be?"

She could hear the disgust in his voice. It made her smile. "Would you at least stop calling me Princess? My given name is Ajin. Call me that."

"Fine. I'll call you Ajin. But I still don't trust you."

"You know the Skaar won't ransom me, don't you? Even my father, were he here, wouldn't ransom me. In spite of who I am, it isn't the way we do things."

"Then maybe I should just kill you, since you're so useless otherwise."

"Don't be ridiculous. You would never do that. Why don't you try telling me what I can do to put things right? Maybe we can reach an accord."

She heard his soft laugh. "An accord? Oh, well, that's different. I didn't realize you could bring the dead back to life. Or return the Keep from wherever it's been sent." The Blade shoved her up against a tree trunk. His sword shifted so that the edge was pressed against her throat. "Where are you from and why are you here?"

In the deep stillness of their forest concealment, she told him the details of the story behind the Skaar invasion—how their own land grew barren with an increase in severe cold and the coming of an endless winter, how their crops died and food and water grew scarce, how

everything changed so quickly, how life became intolerable.

"The damage to our people is unimaginable. We are dying, our numbers reduced from millions to thousands. Our most vulnerable-our children, our old and sick, those weakened already from thirst or hunger-die every day. I have watched people I have known all my life perish. I watched my nurse and my favorite childhood playmates die. My dogs. My soldiers . . ."

Her words were bitter, her voice harsh. "It is the same everywhere-all throughout Eurodia, and in all of the other countries on the continent. Picture, if you will, whole populations who hunker down against the bitter winter and wait only to die. Without food and water, without warmth against the cold, what else is there to do? The weather changes are irreversible. The cold is deepening; even the southernmost lands of Eurodia are beginning to feel its bite."

She paused. "I had a younger sister. She's gone now, too. I tried to save her. I did everything I could think to do. When I wasn't in the field, I was sitting right beside her. I bathed and fed her and saw her through what I thought was the worst of it. But she had always been fragile. The sickness returned quickly enough. She developed a pox that covered her face and hands. She pleaded with me, begging for relief. When I saw there was no hope and she was gasping for each breath and straining against the pain, I placed a pillow over her face and let her slip away."

She paused, her eyes fixing on him. "When there is nowhere left to go and nowhere to stay, what do you do? I went to my father and begged him to send ships to search out distant lands in which we could make a new home. He did so, and our scouts found yours. We stole your airships and used their designs to build our own. Aquaswifts, we call them. Waters drawn from the oceans of our homeland and treated with chemicals power them. Aquaswifts are bigger and faster than your vessels. Our spies studied you for two entire years, here in your midst, and you never knew. Kol'Dre did most of the work. He is my Penetrator-my personal advance scout. He compiled information and sent it back for my father and his councilors. We knew everything about you before my father ordered me to come here with our advance force to prepare the way for the larger invasion. We knew you could be conquered. We know all your weaknesses."

"Or you think you do, anyway." Her captor's response was laced with scorn.

She shrugged. "We know enough to take advantage-as you have just seen. You are a nation of many different Races and peoples and governments, and you lack a central ruling power. You are fragmented, and thus you are vulnerable. All you really have is your magic, and most of that was concentrated in the Druids. Without them, you cannot vanish at will, as we can. You cannot create images to fool your enemies into attacking empty air."

"So you decided to eliminate them. You found a way into the Keep."

"With the aid of one of your own. A Druid betrayed you."

She saw recognition in his eyes. "Clizia Porse?" he asked quickly.

"Does it matter now?"

"It might, because she is still alive. I saw her afterward, when the Guardian was set loose. She was the one who sent Paranor into limbo. She's dangerous, Ajin. You might live to regret leaving her alive."

Ajin shrugged. "The end result is what matters. The demise of the Druids allows us to stop worrying about anyone using magic to oppose us. Now you must rely on your Federation's rudimentary sciences and inefficient weapons to resist us. And we will destroy you."

To her surprise, he smiled. "It sounds like you think this might be easy. Just walk right over us, cast us aside, settle in, and claim your new home. How long do you think it will take? A week or two?"

"I don't fool myself into believing it will be that easy. I am a seasoned commander, and I have fought and won many battles. I know what it takes to subdue a population. I know the time required and the costs that must be paid. I am prepared for all of it."

He gave a tired sigh. "You seem awfully young for someone so bloodthirsty."

Her chin came up, and her gaze found his and held it. "I have not been young since I was twelve years old and watched my father banish my mother, and her replacement begin to plot against me. Do not make the mistake of underestimating me."

"I would never do that," he replied. "Though I am sorry for your past."

"Do not be. I need no one's pity. I have made my own way in the world for this long, and I will continue to do so. You should worry for yourself. Why not talk to me about an agreement that will allow you to stay alive?"

"I'm not the one with a sword at my throat."

"But you were once, weren't you? And not so long ago?"

He stared at her, his face a mix of emotions. She had touched a nerve, reminding him of how she had held him pinned on a cliffside and then let him live. She might have been better off killing him, although she didn't think so. It had not felt right to kill one so brave and so loyal to his friends. It had not felt right to kill him when he was so helpless.

She saw that he remembered. Could she use it against him now?

"I think you must let me go, Dar Leah," she said abruptly. "You must do for me what I did for you. You must set me free."

He shook his head. "That would be a very bad idea, Princess."

Other Books

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