

In the days that followed the attack, the quiet Big Headed Girl had always known became silence, as if the villagers were afraid to speak. Or maybe it was that there were fewer people to work, to gossip, to tease. The heart had gone out of the village. Fear and bitterness stayed behind.

Two full moons rose and waned after the attack. Before the rainy season set in, villagers cut down willows near the creek to form the structure of their domed houses. They layered tules and reeds over the branches as they had always done for shelter. The women wove baskets to replace those crushed by the soldiers. The men stripped branches for fishing and others for arrows to replace those snapped in the attack. Acorns were gathered, seeds sorted—all with new intensity. Even in a bountiful land where the Tongva lived, survival depended on accumulating food stores. When summer's bounty was gone, food they depended on would be scarce until spring.

Singing went on in the evening, even dancing, but all was done in mourning. The soldiers had killed eight men, sixteen women and fourteen children. Twelve of the strongest men had been taken by force from the village. Though some were visitors from neighboring villages or had come from the island, Girl's village lost the greatest number. Fewer men were on hand to hunt, fish and protect the village. Fewer women would be able to add new life to the village. And the children. The children. In their parents' eyes—those mothers and fathers who survived—this was the biggest loss of all.

With stores of food low, the women set off one early morning for the ocean. The sky was gray, the wind blew cold. Girl wanted to go with them.

"I am old enough to help," she argued. Mother and Grandmother stood before her. Mother looked at a place on the hill over Girl's head and said nothing. Her mind was clearly on something else, as it had been since her husband had left. By this time, Girl was accustomed to Mother's expressionless face. As usual, it was Grandmother who responded.

"No. You stay with Little Sister and help the women here. Grind some acorns. That will give you something to do."

Girl did as she was told.

All light had drained from the sky by the time Grandmother and the other women returned. Grandmother set her net on the ground and ran to Girl. As she had done the day her father left, Grandmother took Big Headed Girl aside and crouched next to her. “Your mother fell into a wave. The wave swallowed her,” Grandmother said.

Girl waited for Grandmother to say, “We left her with Nilit’s daughter to warm herself by the fire. She will be here soon.”

Grandmother went silent. After a moment, the old woman began to croon, very quietly under her breath, a mourning song.

Grandmother kept the details of Na’aro’s death to herself. The women who were there that day did the same. If Big Headed Girl asked how her mother died, she would tell her, the old woman told herself. She would say:

“The day your mother died, the sea and sky were as gray as the day you were born. We couldn’t see where horizon met ocean, but it was colder, much colder. Like that day, we women were at the seashore, collecting crabs, mussels, sea urchins. You and Little Sister and others your age stayed in the village. We women could work faster if we worked alone.”

“The salt spray bit into our skin,” Grandmother said. As she spoke, her words became a chant, long practiced in her mind, “The shore was soft and damp from the outgoing tide, good for collecting sea animals. The waves rose up like steep hills beyond our reach. I shivered as I looked at them. None of us thought about going into the water that day.

“Maybe your mother did. Who knows what she was thinking? She had lost her baby son and her husband. Her husband’s mother had been—two...three moons before—in the Mexican’s attack on our village. Your mother suffered. She was as strong as she could be. Maybe not strong enough.

“The gulls were circling overhead when we were ready to leave that day. I remember. Round and round they wheeled as we looked up at them. An arrow point of pelicans dived into

the water; one emerged with a fish struggling to free itself from the bird's pouch. The others flew on.

"We looked toward the island through fog that was making itself thicker minute by minute. I thought the birds, the waves and the island were saying good-bye. One by one we women turned our backs on the sea and hoisted nets full of sea animals over our shoulders. We began to walk back over the moist sand. Quickly. Shivering in the cold.

"A seagull shrieked. I turned around to see the bird that had made the loud noise. I saw your mother running toward the water's edge.

"The sea was already at her hips when I cried, "Na'aro, Na'aro." She didn't look at me. Instead, she stumbled on until the sea was at her chest.

"Around her neck hung strings of shells. She still wore the rabbit skin cape I had made for her wedding gift.

"My cries made the others turn around. They dropped their nets and screamed as one voice, "Na'aro, come back."

"The wave knocked her down. I saw her roll over. The weight of her shells and cape upset her balance.

"She stood up again but only for a moment. She turned in my direction and nodded to me, as if she heard me. Water dripped from her long, black hair.

"I cried, 'Na'aro' again. She collapsed into the next wave.

"I began to run toward the water. The others, too. Nilit's daughter caught my arm. She screamed above the wind. 'You can't save her. She is too far out. The waves are too high.'

"I fought her off and ran on. The cold water bit into my feet.

"'The children...without you?' Nilit's daughter shrieked at Na'aro. Wind swallowed her words.

"I stopped running.

"Beyond the waves, I saw a black dot. I saw it. I think I saw it.

"Then, it disappeared."

Grandmother would have told Girl if she had asked. Girl never did.