

The Treasured One

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During the course of my many cycles I've grown very fond of the mountains of my Domain. There's a beauty in the mountains that no other kind of country can possibly match. My sister Zelana loves the sea in much the same way, I suppose, but I don't think the sea can ever match mountain country. Mountain air is clean and pure, and the eternal snow on the peaks seems to increase that purity.

Over the endless eons I've discovered that a mountain sunrise gives me the most delicious light I've ever tasted, so whenever possible I go up to the shoulder of Mount Shrak at first light to drink in the beauty of the sunrise. No matter what happens later in the day, the taste of a mountain sunrise gives me a serenity that nothing else can provide.

It was on a day in the late spring of the year when the creatures of the Wasteland had made their futile attempt to seize sister Zelana's Domain and had been met by Eleria's flood and Yaltar's twin volcanos that I went out of my cave under Mount Shrak to greet the morning sun.

When I reached my customary feasting place, I saw that there was a cloud bank off to the east, and that always makes the sunrise even more glorious.

I looked around at the nearby mountains, and it seemed that summer was moving up into my Domain a bit more slowly than usual, and last winter's snow was still stubbornly clinging to the lower ridges. It occurred to me that this might be a sign of one of those periodic climate changes which appear much more frequently than the people who serve us seem to realize. The temperatures on the face of Father Earth are never really constant. They're subject almost entirely to the whims of Mother Sea, and if Mother's feeling chilly, Father will get a lot of snow. That can go on for centuries.

After I'd considered the possibility, though, I dismissed the notion. Zelana had tampered with the weather extensively during the past winter to delay the invasion of her Domain by the servants of the Vlagh until her hired army arrived from the land of Maag, and it might take a while for things to go back to normal.

All in all, though, things had gone rather well this past spring. The more I considered the matter, the more certain I became that my decision to rouse the younger gods from their sleep cycle prematurely and to cause them to regress to infancy in the process *bad*, in fact, fulfilled that ancient prophecy. Eleria's flood and Yaltar's twin volcanos had forever sealed off Zelana's Domain from any more incursions by the creatures of the Wasteland.

The morning sun rose in all her splendor, painting that eastern cloud-bank a glorious crimson, and I feasted on her light. I've always found early summer light to be more invigorating than the pale light of winter or the dusty light of autumn, and there was a certain spring to my step as I walked on back down the mountain to the mouth of my cave.

My little toy sun was waiting for me at the cave-mouth, and she flickered her customary question at me.

‘Just taking a look at the weather, little one,’ I lied. She always seems to get all pouty and sullen if she thinks that I prefer the light of the *real* sun to hers. Pets can be very strange sometimes. ‘Is Ashad still sleeping?’ I asked her.

She bobbed up and down slightly in answer.

‘Good,’ I said. ‘He hasn’t been sleeping too well here lately. I think he was badly frightened by what happened down in Zelana’s Domain. Maybe you should keep your light a bit subdued so that he can sleep longer. He needs the rest.’

She bobbed her agreement, and her light dimmed. She *had* been just a bit sulky when I’d first brought Ashad into our cave, but that had passed, and she was now very fond of my yellow-haired little boy. She’d never fully understood Ashad’s need for solid food rather than light alone, so she habitually hovered near him, spilling light down on him – just in case he happened to need some.

I went on down through the twisting passageway that led to my cave, ducking under the icicle-like stalactites hanging down from the ceiling. They were much thicker and longer than they’d been at the beginning of my current cycle, and they were starting to get in my way. They were the result of the mineral-rich water that came seeping down through Mount Shrak, and they grew perceptibly longer every century. I made a mental note to take a club to them some day, when I had a little more time.

Ashad, covered with his fur robe, was still sleeping when I came out of the passageway into the large open chamber that was our home, so I thought it best not to disturb him.

I was still convinced that my decision to bring our alternates into the tag-end of *our* cycle had been the right one, but it was growing increasingly obvious that they’d brought some of their previous memories with them. I sat down in my chair near the table where

Ashad ate his meals of what he called ‘real food’ to consider some things I hadn’t anticipated. I rather ruefully admitted to myself that I probably should have examined our alternates a bit more closely *before* I’d awakened them, but it was a little late now. I’d *assumed* that the children would respond to any dangers in the Domains of their *own* surrogate parents, so I’d been more than a little startled when Veltan had told me that *Yaltar’s* dream had predicted the war in Zelana’s Domain. I’d *assumed* that it’d be Eleria who’d warn us. Then when the *real* crisis arose, Yaltar had shoved prediction aside and had gone straight into action with those twin volcanos. That strongly suggested that Yaltar and Eleria had been very close during their previous cycle – a suggestion confirmed by the fact that Yaltar had occasionally referred to Eleria by her true name, ‘Balacenia’, and Eleria in like manner had spoken of ‘Vash’ – Yaltar’s true name.

‘I think there might just be a few holes in this “grand plan” of mine,’ I ruefully admitted.

The more I thought about it, the more it seemed that the core of our problem lay in the fact that the Vlagh had been *consciously* modifying its servants over the past hundred or so eons. The modification of various life forms goes on all the time, usually in response to changes in the environment. Sometimes these modifications work, and sometimes they don’t. The species that makes the right choice survives, but the wrong choice leads to extinction. In most cases, survival depends on sheer luck.

Before the arrival of the hairy predecessors of the creatures we now call men, vast numbers of creatures had arisen in the Land of Dhrall, but at some point *most* of them had made a wrong turn and had died out.

The Vlagh, unfortunately, had been among the survivors.

Originally, the Vlagh had been little more than a somewhat exotic insect which had nested near the shore of that inland sea which in the far distant past had covered what is now the Wasteland. A gradual climate change had evaporated that sea, and the Vlagh, driven by necessity, had begun to modify its servants. The change of climate had made avoiding the broiling sunlight a matter of absolute necessity, but as closely as I've been able to determine, the Vlagh had *not* simply groped around in search of a solution, but had relied on observation instead. I'm almost positive that it had been at this point that 'the overmind' had appeared. The ability to share information had given the servants of the Vlagh an enormous advantage over their neighbors. What any single one of them had seen, they *all* had seen. The Vlagh's species at that time had lived above the ground – most probably up in the trees. Several other species, however, had lived beneath the surface of the ground, and 'the seekers of knowledge' – spies, if you wish – had observed those neighbors and had provided very accurate descriptions of the appendages the neighbors used to burrow below the surface. Then 'the overmind' had filched the design, the Vlagh had duplicated it, and the next hatch had all been burrowers.

The extensive tunnels had kept the servants of the Vlagh out of the blazing sunlight, but that had only been the first problem they had been forced to solve. As the centuries had passed, the changed climate had gradually killed all the vegetation in that previously lush region, so there was no longer sufficient food to support a growing population.

The Vlagh had continued to lay eggs, of course, but each hatch had produced fewer and fewer offspring, and the Vlagh had come face to face with the distinct possibility of the extinction of its species.

When the burrowing insects had reached the mountains, they'd encountered solid stone, and their progress had stopped at that point. Not long after that, however, they'd discovered the caves lying beneath those mountains, and the species which *should* have gone extinct lived on.

I'm of two minds about caves. I *love* mine, but I *hate* theirs.

Anyway, the servants of the Vlagh had encountered other creatures in the caves and mountains, and evidently the overmind had realized that some of those creatures had characteristics which might prove to be very useful, and it had begun to experiment – or tamper – producing peculiar and highly unnatural variations.

I rather ruefully conceded that the experiment which had produced what Sorgan Hook-Beak of the Land of Maag colorfully called 'the snake-men' had been extremely successful, though I can't for the life of me understand exactly *how* the Vlagh had produced a creature that was part bug, part reptile, and part warm-blooded mammal that closely resembled a human being.

Biological impossibilities irritate me to no end.

I will admit, though, that had it not been for the near genius of the Shaman One-Who-Heals, the creatures of the Wasteland would probably have won the war in my sister's Domain.

Ashad made a peculiar little sound, and I got up from my chair and crossed in the dim light of our cavern to the stone bench that served as his bed to make sure that he was all right. He was nestled down under his fur robe with his eyes closed, though, so I was sure that he wasn't having any problems. Our discovery that our Dreamer-children weren't able to live on light alone had made us all a little jumpy. It wasn't the sort of thing we wanted to gamble

with. Then we came face to face with the question of breathing. Veltan's ten eons on the face of the moon had been a clear demonstration of the fact that we didn't really *need* to breathe. Many of our pet people were fishermen, though, and drowning happens quite often. Even though our Dreamer-children were actually gods, their present condition strongly suggested that they needed air to breathe and food to eat, and none of us was in the mood to take any chances.

Ashad was still breathing in and out, though, so I went on back to my chair. I let my mind drift back to Ashad's first few hours here in my cave. If anybody with a cruel mind would like to see a god in a state of pure panic, I think he missed his chance. Panic had run rampant in my family that day. As soon as Ashad started screaming at me, I went all to pieces. Eventually, though, I remembered a peculiarity of the bears which share my Domain with deer, people and wild cows. She-bears give birth to their cubs during their yearly hibernation cycle, and their cubs attend to the business of nursing all on their own. Then I remembered that a she-bear called Broken-Tooth customarily hibernated in a cave that was no more than a mile away.

Still caught up in sheer panic, I grabbed up my howling Dreamer and ran to Mama Broken-Tooth's cave. She'd already given birth to the cub Long-Claw, and he was contentedly nursing when I entered the cave. Fortunately, I didn't have to argue with him. He was nice enough to move aside just a bit, and I introduced Ashad to bear's milk.

His crying stopped immediately.

Peculiarly – or maybe *not* – Ashad and Long-Claw were absolutely positive that they were brothers, and after they'd both nursed their fill of Mama Broken-Tooth's milk, they began to play with each other.

I remained in the cave until Mama Broken-Tooth awakened. She sniffed briefly at her two cubs – totally ignoring the fact that *one* of them didn't look at all like a bear – and then she gently nestled them against her bearish bosom as if there was nothing at all peculiar taking place. Of course, bears don't really see very well, so they rely instead on their sense of smell and after two weeks of rolling around on the dirt floor of the cave, Ashad had most *definitely* had a bearish fragrance about him.

Ashad slept until almost noon, but my flaxen-haired little boy still seemed exhausted when he rose, pulled on his tan leather smock and joined me at our table. 'Good morning, uncle,' he greeted me as he sank wearily into his chair. Almost absently, he pulled the large bowl full of red berries he'd brought home the previous evening in front of him and began to eat them one at a time. His appetite didn't seem quite normal, for some reason.

'Is something bothering you, Ashad?' I asked him.

'I had a nightmare last night, uncle,' the boy replied, absently fondling a shiny black stone that was about twice the size of an eagle's egg. 'It seemed that I was standing on nothing but air, and I was way up in the sky looking down at the Domain of Vash. The country down there in the South doesn't look at all like our country up here, does it?'

There it was again. Ashad obviously knew Yaltar's true name, even as Eleria did. 'The people of the South are farmers, Ashad,' I explained. 'They grow much of their food in the ground instead of concentrating on hunting the way our people do. They had to cut down the trees to give themselves open ground for planting, so the land down there doesn't look at all like the land up here. What else happened in your dream?'

Ashad pushed his yellow hair out of his eyes. ‘Well,’ he continued, ‘it seemed that there were a whole lot of those nasty things coming into the Domain of Wash – sort of like the things that crawled down into Balacenia’s Domain a little while ago.’ The boy put the shiny black stone down on the table and ate more of the red berries.

There it was again. It was obvious now that the Dreamers were, perhaps unconsciously, stepping over the barrier I’d so carefully set up between them and their past.

‘Anyway,’ Ashad continued, ‘there were outlanders there, and they were fighting the nasty things just like they did in Balacenia’s Domain, but then things got very confusing. A whole lot of *other* outlanders came up across Mother Sea from the South, but it didn’t seem like they were interested in the war very much, because they spent all their time talking to the farmers about somebody called Amar. The ones who were doing all the talking were wearing black robes, but there were some others who wore red clothes, and they were pushing the farmers around and making them listen while the ones in black talked. That went on for quite a while, and then the outlanders in the South got all excited, and they started to run north toward a great big waterfall, and the other outlanders – the ones who got there first – sort of got out of their way for while, and then when everybody got to that waterfall, it looked to me like everybody was trying to kill everybody else, and no matter how much I tried, I couldn’t understand exactly what was going on.’

‘I’ve heard that dreams are like that, Ashad. I don’t need to sleep, so I don’t really know what dreams are all about.’ I hesitated. ‘Where did you find that shiny black rock?’ I asked, more to change the subject than out of any real curiosity.

‘It was in the back of the cave where Mama Broken-Tooth sleeps

in the winter,' Ashad replied. 'She had three cubs while she was sleeping this past winter, and while you were busy helping your sister Zelana, I went to her cave to see them. They're sort of the brothers of me and Long-Claw, aren't they? I mean, Mama Broken-Tooth nursed me and Long-Claw when *we* were just cubs, and now she's nursing the three new ones. That sort of makes us relatives of some kind, doesn't it?'

'I suppose so, yes.'

'Anyway, the three new cubs were making those funny little sounds bear-cubs always make when they're nursing, and Mama Broken-Tooth was cuddling them like she used to cuddle Long-Claw and me when we were just cubs.' He picked up the shiny stone. 'This is an agate, isn't it?' he asked, holding it out to me.

I took the stone, but almost dropped it when I sensed the enormous power emanating from it. 'I think you're right, Ashad. Black agates are very rare, though.'

'It's pretty, and I really liked it when I first saw it. I asked Mama Broken-Tooth if I could have it, and she told me to go ahead and take it. I used to carry it with me wherever I went, but then I mislaid it, I guess, but when I woke up this morning, there it was right in my bed with me. Isn't that odd?'

I laughed. 'I think this might just be the year of "odd", Ashad,' I said. 'It seems like every time I turn around there are piles and piles of "odd" staring me in the face. How did the rest of your bears come through this past winter?'

'Just fine, uncle,' Ashad replied. 'There are lots and lots of new cubs.' He suddenly grinned broadly, shaking off his gloomy expression. 'Baby bears are *so* much fun. They do all sorts of funny things that make their mothers terribly grouchy. Just last week Mama Broken-Tooth was scooping fish out of a stream – you know,

throwing them up on the riverbank the way bears always do – but her three cubs thought she was playing, so they were swatting the fish back into the stream. When she saw what they were doing, she came running out of the water, gave them a few swats, and then chased them up a tree and made them stay up there for the rest of the day. I laughed, but she growled at me. She didn't seem to think it was funny at all.'

'Will you be all right here by yourself for a few days, Ashad? I need to go talk with my brother and my sisters. There are some things they need to know about.'

'I'll be fine, uncle. I was over in the village of Asmie the other day, and Tlingar promised to teach me how to use a spear-thrower – that long, limber stick the man-things around here use to whip their spears out there a long, long way. Tlingar's just about the best there is with the spear-thrower, isn't he?'

'He keeps the people of Asmie eating regularly, that much is certain,' I agreed. 'I shouldn't be too long, Ashad. If you get tired of throwing spears, you might want to go play with Mama Broken-Tooth's three cubs. If they're as frisky as you suggested, poor Mama Broken-Tooth's probably exhausted by now. Give her a little time to rest up. Like they always say, "Be nice to the neighbors, and they'll be nice to you." I'd better get started. I'd like to talk with Aracia *before* her priests get her involved in all those silly ceremonies.'

'Say hello to Enalla for me, uncle.'

There it was again. Ashad had just used Aracia's Dreamer Lillabeth's real name. Despite all my careful manipulation, the Dreamers kept pulling bits and pieces of reality up through the barriers I'd put between them and the past. I shuddered to think of what might happen if the Dreamers stumbled across some things far more significant than just their names.

I told my tiny, glowing sun to stay behind, and then I went to the long, twisting passageway that led out to the open air.

The morning light of early summer was golden as I came up out of my cave under Mount Shrak. I summoned my thunderbolt and rode on down toward the south-east to the Domain of my elder sister Aracia.

Aracia's Domain is much like the Domain of our baby brother Veltan, with vast wheat fields stretching from horizon to horizon like some enormous green carpet in the early summer sun. I hate to admit it, but the introduction of wheat farming and bread has brought much more stability to the Domains of Aracia and Veltan than the sometimes catch-as-catch-can quality of life in my Domain and Zelana's, where the land is primarily devoted to hunting and fishing. There *has* to be more to life than just munching on a piece of half-moldy bread, though. I'm fairly sure that Aracia and Veltan view me as some sort of primitive antique, but I know better. The people of their Domains are little more than cattle. They move around in herds, and I wouldn't be the least bit surprised to discover that 'moo' crops up in their dialect quite frequently.

The people of my Domain – and of Zelana's – are fiercely independent. *Nobody* – not even me or Zelana – tells them what they *must* do. To my way of looking at things, those farmers more closely resemble the mindless servants of the Vlagh than they do *real* people.

You don't necessarily need to tell Aracia or Veltan that I just said that.

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