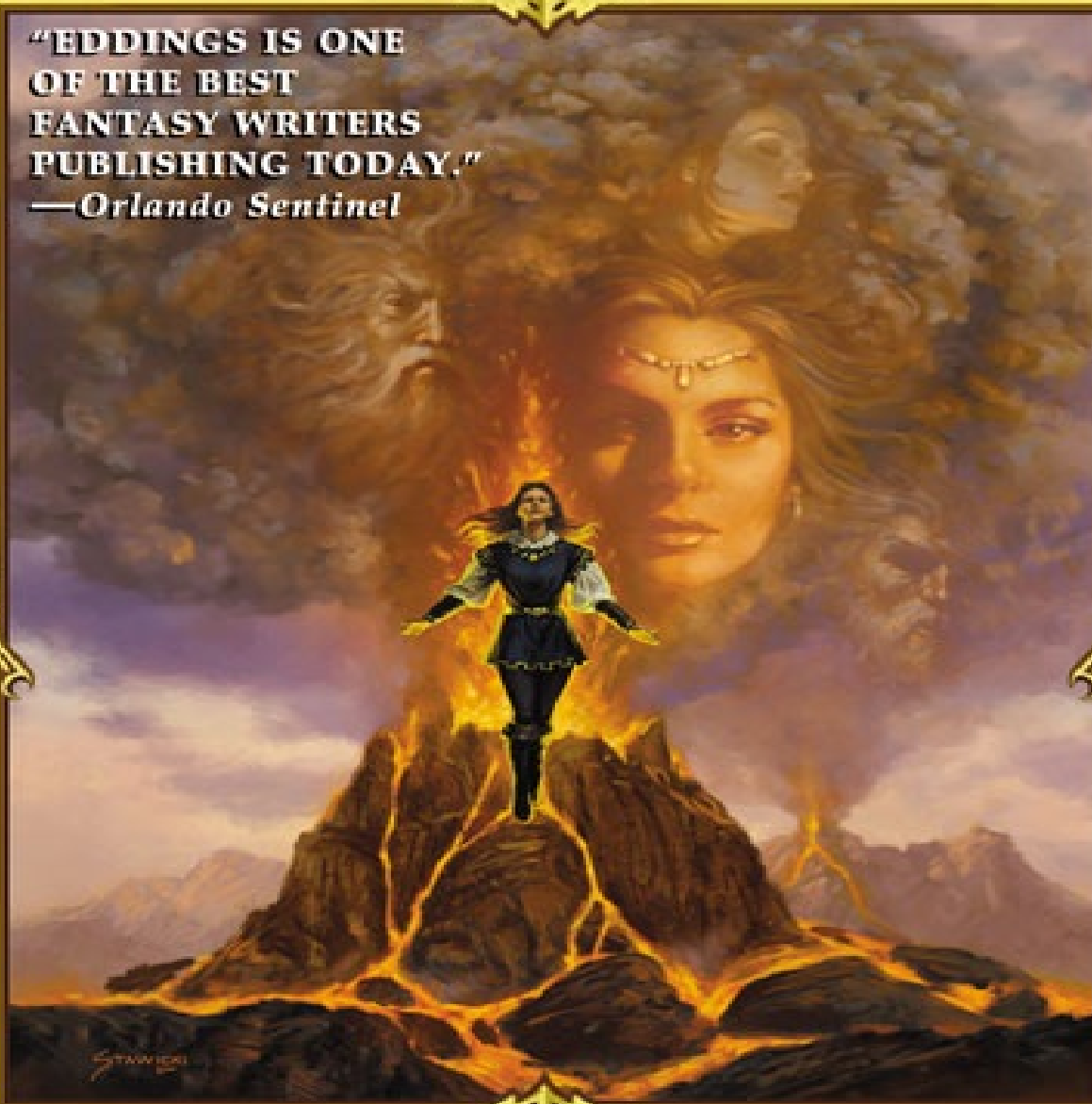


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BOOK ONE OF THE DREAMERS

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The Land of Dhrall, if we are to believe the sometimes fanciful legends of the region, has existed in its present location since the beginning of time. Father Earth is unstable, and other continents move hither and yon across the face of Mother Sea, wandering, ever wandering, in search of new places in which to abide, but the Land of Dhrall, we are told, was firmly anchored to its present location by the will of the gods of Dhrall, and it shall remain ever so until the end of the world.

Now, from whence this world came—and why—is far beyond human comprehension, but the legends of Dhrall maintain that it is the work of ancient gods, and the making of it was a task so enormous that the gods, immortal and omnipotent though they be, oftentimes wearied of their labor.

Now, there were younger gods abroad in the land at this time, and great was their pity for their exhausted elders, and they urged their kin to rest while they themselves took up the burden of creation. And grateful beyond measure were the old ones, for they had labored well-nigh unto death. And so they slept while creation continued uninterrupted in the hands of the younger gods.

So it was that the elder gods slept for twenty-five eons and then they awoke, refreshed and ready to resume their eternal task; and when they awoke, their younger counterparts were well ready to relinquish the task and go to *their* rest.

And mountains rose up from out of the earth and were worn down by weather and time. And Mother Sea brought forth life in many forms, and some of the creatures of Mother Sea came up on the dry face of Father Earth in search of a dwelling place. And time and place altered them there upon the face of Father Earth, and many were those alterations. Forms not seen before emerged, and older forms died out as the creatures blindly groped for fulfillment.

Now, the gods of the Land of Dhrall chose not to interfere in the growth and development of the creatures of their Domains, for they wisely concluded that the creatures should follow their own course in response to the world around them. For truly, the world is in a constant state of flux, and a creature suitable for one era may well not survive in another, and the gods had come to realize that change must be a response to the world rather than some divine preconception.

And constant time continued her stately march toward an end that none could know, and the cycle of labor and rest among the gods continued even as Mother Sea and Father Earth watched but said nothing.

Now, the gods of the land of Dhrall have divided the land, and each, younger or elder, holds dominion over a certain portion of the land. There remains, however, a vast Wasteland in the center that is not part of any of the four Domains, be they East or West, North or South, for the Wasteland of Dhrall is barren and without beauty. There is life there, however, but the life-forms of the Wasteland are unlike those of the rest of the Land of Dhrall. The legends of Dhrall maintain that the life-forms of the Wasteland are the creations of That-Called-the-Vlagh.

The legends of Dhrall are uncertain as to the origins of the Vlagh. Some maintain that it is no more than a nightmare, which one of the early gods experienced during their first long sleep. Other legends contend that the Vlagh is vastly older than the gods, whose forms resemble those of humans,

and that it was the lord of stinging insects and venomous reptiles, which have long since vanished from the faces of Mother Sea and Father Earth. All legends of Dhrall agree on one point, however. That-Called-the-Vlagh was too impatient to give the creatures which served it sufficient time to follow the slow, natural process of development and alteration favored by the true gods of Dhrall, but rather it chose to manipulate their development so that they might better serve it.

And it came to the Vlagh that its servants might be of greater value if they were not all the same, for a creature designed for one task and one only would be far more efficient than a more generalized creature.

To achieve that end, the Vlagh periodically enveloped itself in a woven cocoon in its dark nest in the center of the Wasteland, and when it emerged from its cocoon, it was a creature of an entirely different aspect than it had been before. Then it tested the capabilities of its new form to determine its ability to perform its specific task, noting its strengths and weaknesses. And then once again it enclosed itself in the cocoon, and when it emerged once more, the weaknesses were no longer there and the strengths had been enhanced.

Thus, by experimentation, That-Called-the-Vlagh altered and modified its own form to develop a highly specific creature, and once it was satisfied, it reproduced that creature by the thousands so that it would have servants enough to achieve its ultimate goal.

Then That-Called-the-Vlagh returned to its nest and began again, creating yet another form with yet another specific task.

And so it is that all of the varied creatures which emerge from the cocoon of the Vlagh are not the creatures of the Domains of the true gods of Dhrall, but rather are strange combinations, part insect, part reptile, part warm-blooded animal, and each of these variations has specific tasks in its service to the Vlagh.

The one and only characteristic the creatures of the Wasteland share is an obsessive need to expand the Domain of the Vlagh until the entirety of the Land of Dhrall lies in its grasp.

And the Vlagh sent forth many of its creatures to intrude themselves into the domains of the true gods of Dhrall, and carried those intruders back to the Vlagh everything which they had observed. And the Vlagh considered each tiny nibble of truth which its servants brought to it, and after eons uncounted, it perceived a flaw which it could exploit during the transfer of power and authority from one generation of gods unto the next.

For truly, the elder gods grew weary and forgetful as they longed for sleep; and the younger gods were yet only half awake.

And the spirit of the Vlagh was filled with anticipation at this revelation. And laid it then its plan and marshaled its servants in preparation for a war whereby it could surely destroy the true gods of Dhrall. And there in the Wasteland it dreamed of the day when its nest could expand into the more fertile regions of the Land of Dhrall, where there would be much to eat and where its need to spawn would no longer be restrained by the lack of food. And then the Vlagh dreamed further, yearning for the day when the entirety of the world englobed would be its nest, and its children would grow to numbers beyond counting, and all other living things would be their food.

Then and only then would the Vlagh be content.

Now, Mother Sea and Father Earth paid scant heed to the antics of any gods of any lands, and neither did they rest, for to them fell the task of maintaining the life of the creatures of earth and sea, and was to him, human or divine, who threatens the perpetuation of life. For gentle though they may appear,

Mother Sea and Father Earth have disasters beyond imagining at their disposal, should they appear necessary for the continuation of life.

Now, it came to pass long ago in the Domain of the North that a half-mad hermit had a vision of that which would one day become reality, and in that vision he saw sleeping children whose dreams could thwart the designs of That-Called-the-Vlagh, for the dreams could command, and Mother Sea and Father Earth could not disobey the commands of the Dreamers.

And most men of the Land of Dhrall scoffed at the vision of the hermit, for his madness was clearly evident. But the gods of East and West, North and South, scoffed not, for the hermit's vision resounded deep within their souls, and they knew it to be true. And troubled were the true gods of the Land of Dhrall, for they knew in their hearts that the arrival of the Dreamers would change all the world, and nothing thereafter would ever be the same again.

And the eons, as eons must, plodded on toward an uncertain future, and the younger gods grew older, and the cycle of their ascendancy neared its conclusion.

And it is here that our story begins.

THE ISLE OF THURN

Zelana of the West had grown weary of the brutish man-creatures of her Domain. She found them repulsive, and their endless complaints and demands irritated her beyond measure. They seemed to believe that she lived only to serve them, and that offended her.

And so it was that she turned her back on them and sojourned for several eons on the Isle of Thurn, which lies off the coast of her Domain. And there she communed with Mother Sea and entertained herself by composing music and creating poetry.

Now, the waters around the Isle of Thurn are the home of a rare breed of pink dolphins, and Zelana found them to be playful and intelligent, and in time she came to look upon them not as pets but rather as dear companions. She soon learned to understand—and to speak—their language, and they gave her much information about Mother Sea and the many creatures that lived in Mother’s depths and along her shores. Then by way of recompense, she played music for them on her flute or sang for them. The dolphins came to enjoy Zelana’s impromptu concerts, and they invited her to swim with them.

They were much perplexed by a few of Zelana’s peculiarities after she joined them. So far as they could determine, she never slept, and she could remain under the surface of Mother Sea almost indefinitely. It also seemed odd to them that she showed no interest in the schools of fish which swam in the waters around the Isle. Zelana tried to explain to her friends that sleep and air and food were not necessary for her. Her periods of sleep and wakefulness were much longer than theirs, and she could extract the essential element of air from the water itself, and she fed on light rather than fish or grass, but the dolphins could not quite grasp her explanation.

Zelana decided that it might be best to just let it lie.

The man-creatures of the Land of Dhrall knew full well just who—and what—Zelana was. She held dominion over the West, but there were others in her family as well. Her elder brother Dahlainne held sway over the North, and he was grim and bleak. Her younger and sometimes frivolous brother Veltan controlled the South—when he was not exploring the moon or contemplating the color blue—and her prim and proper elder sister Aracia ruled the East as both queen and goddess.

The ages continued their stately march, but Zelana paid them no heed, for time meant nothing to her. Then on a clear day her dearest friend, a matronly pink dolphin named Meeleamee, surfaced near the place where Zelana sat cross-legged on the face of Mother Sea playing her newest musical composition on her flute. “I’ve found something you might want to see, Beloved,” Meeleamee announced in her piping voice.

“Oh?” Zelana said, setting her flute aside in the emptiness just over her shoulder where she kept all her possessions.

“It’s really very pretty, Beloved,” Meeleamee piped, “and it’s exactly the right color.”

“Why don’t we go have a look then, dear one?” Zelana replied.

And so together they swam toward the stark cliffs on the southern margin of the Isle, and as they neared the coast, Meeleamee sounded, swimming down and down into the depths of Mother Sea. Zelana arched over and followed, and soon they came to the narrow mouth of an underwater cavern, and Meeleamee swam on into that cavern with Zelana close behind.

Now, reason and experience told Zelana that this cave should grow darker as the two of them were

deeper and deeper into its twisting passage, but it grew lighter instead, and the water ahead glowed pink and warm and friendly, and Meeleamee rose toward the light with Zelana close behind.

And when they surfaced in the shallow pool at the end of the passage, Zelana beheld a wonder, for Meeleamee had led her into a grotto unlike any other Zelana had ever seen. There was a rational explanation, of course, but mundane rationality could not tarnish the pure beauty of the hidden grotto. A broad vein of rose-colored quartz crossed the ceiling of the grotto, filling that hidden cave with a glowing pink light, and almost in spite of herself, Zelana feasted on that light and found it delicious beyond the taste of any other light she had savored in the past ten eons. And she shuddered and glowed with pure delight as she feasted.

Beyond that shallow pool at the entrance was a floor covered with fine white sand touched with the luminous pink of the prevailing light, and there was also a musically tinkling trickle of fresh water in a little niche at the rear, and all manner of interesting nooks and crannies along the curved walls.

“Well?” Meeleamee squeaked. “What do you think, Beloved?”

“It’s lovely, lovely,” Zelana replied. “It’s the most beautiful place on all the Isle.”

“I’m glad you like it,” Meeleamee said modestly. “I thought you might like to visit here now and then.”

“No, dear one,” Zelana replied. “I won’t need to visit. I’m going to live here. It’s perfect, and I deserve a little perfection now and then.”

“You won’t stay here *all* the time, will you, Beloved?” Meeleamee squeaked in consternation.

“Of course not, dear one,” Zelana replied. “I’ll still come out to play with you and my other friends, but this beautiful place will be my home.”

“What is ‘home’?” Meeleamee asked curiously.

It was on a day much like any other when Dahlaine of the North came up out of the passageway that led to Zelana’s pink grotto to advise his sister that there was trouble in the wind in the Land of Dhrall.

“I don’t really see how that’s any concern of mine, dear brother,” Zelana told him. “The mountains protect the lands of the West on one side, and Mother Sea protects them on the other. How can the creatures of the Wasteland ever reach me?”

“The Land of Dhrall is all one piece, dear sister,” Dahlaine reminded her, “and no natural barrier is completely insurmountable. The creatures of your lands of the West stand in as great a danger as all the others. I think it’s about time for you to come out of your little hideaway here and start paying attention to the world around you. How long has it been since you last surveyed your Domain?”

Zelana shrugged. “A few eons is all—certainly no more than a dozen. Have I missed anything significant?”

“The man-creatures have made a bit of progress. They’re making tools now, and they’ve learned how to build fires. You really ought to look in on them once in a while.”

“What in the world for? They’re stupid and vicious, and they stink. My dolphins are cleaner and wiser, and their hearts are large and filled with love. If the creatures of the Wasteland are hungry, let them eat the man-creatures. I won’t really miss them.”

“The people of the West are *your* responsibility, Zelana,” Dahlaine reminded her.

“So are the flies and ants and roaches, and *they* seem to be getting along well enough.”

“You can’t just ignore the world, Zelana,” Dahlaine told her. “There are changes taking place all around you. The creatures of the Wasteland are growing restless, and it won’t be too long before the Dreamers arrive. We need to be ready.”

“It’s not nearly the age of the Dreamers yet, is it, Dahlaine?” Zelana asked incredulously.

“The signs are all there, Zelana,” Dahlaine said. “The servants of the Vlagh have begun to intrude into our Domains, which is a fair indication that the Vlagh is about to make its move, and we’re not ready to face it yet. In a peculiar sort of way, this confrontation is the work of Mother Sea and Father Earth. Evidently, they know more than we do, and they’re unleashing the Vlagh *now*—quite probably to force it to come against us before it’s really ready. If we give it more time to modify its offspring, they’ll swarm us under.”

“We should have destroyed that hideous creature as soon as we realized just exactly where its instincts would send it.”

“We can talk about all this some other time, dear sister,” Dahlaine smoothly changed the subject. “What I *really* came here for was to give you something I thought you might like.”

“A gift—for me?” Zelana’s irritated humor seemed to vanish. “What is it?” she demanded eagerly.

Dahlaine smiled. Somehow the magic word “gift” always seemed to bring his brother and his sisters around to his way of thinking. Zelana in particular always responded in exactly the way he wanted her to. A gift wasn’t really a form of coercion, but it served the same purpose, and it was a nicer approach. “Oh,” he said in an offhand manner, “it’s not really very much, sister dear. It’s just a little something I thought you might enjoy. How would you like a new pet? It occurred to me that you might be getting a little tired of your dolphins after all these eons, since they can’t really come out of the water to play with you here in your lovely grotto, so I brought you a pet that should be able to share your home.”

“A puppy, maybe?” Zelana asked eagerly. “I’ve never owned a puppy, but I’ve heard that they’re very affectionate.”

“Not exactly a puppy, no.”

“Oh . . .” Zelana sounded disappointed. “A kitten, then?” she said, her eyes brightening once more. “I’ve heard that the purring sound kittens make is very relaxing.”

“Well, not quite a kitten either.”

“What is it, Dahlaine?” Zelana demanded impatiently. “Show me.”

“Of course,” Dahlaine replied, concealing his sly smile. He reached both hands into the unseen emptiness he always carried along behind him and took a fur-wrapped bundle out of the air. “With my compliments, my beloved sister,” he said extravagantly, handing her the bundle.

Zelana eagerly took the bundle and turned back the edge of the fur robe to see what her brother had given her. She gaped in obvious disbelief at the newborn pet drowsing in the warm fur robe.

“What am I supposed to do with this thing?” she demanded in a shrill voice.

He shrugged. “Take care of it, Zelana. It shouldn’t be much more difficult to care for than a young dolphin.”

“But it’s one of those man-creatures!” she protested.

“Why, so it is,” Dahlaine replied in mock astonishment. “How strange that I didn’t notice that myself. You’re very perceptive, Zelana.” He paused. “It’s not an ordinary man-creature, dear sister,” he added gravely. “It’s very special. There are only a few of them, but they’ll change the world. Care for it and protect it, Zelana. I think you’ll have to feed it, because I don’t think it can live on light alone as we do. You might have to experiment a bit to find something it can digest, but I’m sure that you’re clever enough to solve that problem. You’ll need to keep it clean as well. Infant man-creatures tend to be messy. Then, after a few years, you might want to teach it to talk. There are things it’s going to need to tell us, and if it can’t talk, it won’t be able to pass them on to us.”

“What could one of these creatures tell us that we don’t already know?”

~~“Dreams, Zelana, dreams. We don’t sleep, so we don’t dream. That baby in your arms is a Dreamer. That’s why I brought her to you.”~~

“It’s a girl, then?” Zelana’s voice softened.

“Naturally. I didn’t think you’d get along very well with a boy. Care for her, Zelana, and I’ll come by in a few years to see how she’s coming along.”

The baby in Zelana’s arms made a cooing sound and reached out one tiny hand to touch Zelana’s face.

“Oh,” Zelana said in a trembling, almost stricken voice, clasping the infant more closely to her.

Dahlaine smiled. It had turned out rather well, he congratulated himself. All it had taken to totally enslave his brother and both of his sisters had been a few peeps and coos and one soft touch from an infant hand. He might have gloated a bit more, but his own baby Dreamer was home alone, and it was almost feeding time, so he really should get on back.

He swam out of Zelana’s grotto and remounted his well-trained lightning bolt. Lightning bolts are noisy steeds—there’s no question about that—but they can cover vast distances in the blink of an eye.

Zelana’s first problem with her newfound charge was finding something to feed it. She rather hoped that Dahlaine had been mistaken. If the infant could live on light alone, as Zelana herself did, feeding it would be no problem. The vein of pink quartz in the ceiling of the grotto concentrated the sunlight into a glowing pink pool, which was presently centered on the bed of moss where Zelana occasionally rested. Hopefully she laid the fur-robed bundle on that moss bed and turned the robe back to allow the sunlight to touch the child.

The infant began to fuss a bit. Maybe the little creature didn’t like the color. Zelana had discovered that a steady diet of pink light took a bit of getting used to. Pink, it appeared, was an acquired taste.

Zelana snapped her fingers, and the quartz obediently turned blue. The baby didn’t stop fussing, though, and her discontent was growing louder.

Zelana tried green, but that didn’t work either. Then she tried plain white. It was a little bland, but perhaps the baby wasn’t ready for advanced colors yet.

The sounds the infant was making grew louder and more insistent.

Zelana quickly gathered the squalling infant in her arms and hurried down to the edge of the shallow pool at the mouth of the grotto. “Meeleamee!” she called in the piping language of the dolphins, “I need your help! Right now! Please!”

Now, Meeleamee had mothered many, many young, so she had great wisdom and much experience in such matters. “Milk,” she advised.

“What is milk?” Zelana asked, “and where can I find some?”

Meeleamee explained in some detail, and for the very first time in her endless life, Zelana blushed. “What a strange sort of thing,” she said, blushing even harder. She looked down at herself. “Do you think I might be able to . . .” She left it hanging.

“Probably not,” Meeleamee replied. “There are some things involved that are just a little complicated. Can the young one swim?”

“I don’t really know,” Zelana admitted.

“Unwrap her and put her down in the shallow water here. I should be able to nurse her without too much trouble.”

It was a bit awkward at first, but they found that if Meeleamee laid on her side and Zelana held the infant, things went quite well. Zelana felt a real sense of accomplishment—which lasted for nearly four hours.

Then they had to feed the child again. It seemed that there was a great deal of inconvenience involved in caring for infants.

The seasons turned, as seasons always do, and summer drifted on into autumn, and winter followed shortly after. Zelana had never really paid much attention to the seasons. Heat or cold had little meaning for her, and she could create light whenever she grew hungry.

The female dolphins were taking turns feeding the infant, and Zelana noticed that the child seemed to be very affectionate. The dolphins were a bit startled by kisses at first, but after a while they even enjoyed being kissed by the grateful child, and sometimes there were even arguments about whose turn it was to nurse. The arguments broke off abruptly when the child sprouted teeth and began chewing on whatever was handy, though. Her diet changed at that point, and the dolphins offered her fish instead of milk. She still kissed them by way of thanks, so everything seemed all right again.

Since the child had always been fed in the shallow pool at the grotto's mouth, she was swimming even before she began to grow teeth, but she started walking—and running—not long after her diet changed, and she was soon toddling about the grotto, squeaking dolphin words as she went. She returned to the water whenever she grew hungry, however. The dolphins were careful to keep her more or less confined to the water at the mouth of the grotto, but they took to chasing fish in from the deeper waters of Mother Sea to give the child some experience in the business of catching her own food.

When the summer of the child's third year arrived, she ventured out of the grotto to join the younger dolphins in their forays along the coast of the Isle of Thurn. She spent her days now frolicking with the young dolphins and eating the bounty of Mother Sea.

Zelana approved of that. The child's independence freed her mistress at last so that she could return to poetry and music.

The young dolphins called the child "Beeweeabee," but Zelana didn't really think that was appropriate, since it approximately translated into "Short-Fin-With-No-Tail." Despite her habits and her companions, the little girl was still a land animal, so Zelana unleashed her poetic talents and ultimately arrived at "Eleria." It had a nice musical sound to it, and it rhymed with several very pleasant words.

The little girl didn't really seem to care for the name, but after a while she *would* answer to it when Zelana called her, so the name more or less did what it was supposed to.

The seasons continued to turn, but Zelana had long since realized that they could do that on their own so she didn't have to prompt them.

Then, in the autumn of Eleria's fifth year, Dahlaine came by again. "How are things progressing with your child, dear sister?" he asked Zelana.

"It's a bit hard to say," Zelana replied. "I haven't had any contact with the man-creatures for more than ten eons, and I'm sure they've changed in that many years. I can't really be sure what's normal for them at Eleria's age. She spends most of her time in the water, though, so she doesn't stink the way most of her kind did when I turned my back on them."

“Where is she?” Dahlaine asked, looking around the grotto.

“Probably out playing with her friends,” Zelana said, “most likely somewhere along the coast of the Isle.”

“She has friends?” Dahlaine seemed a bit surprised. “I didn’t know there were any people here on the Isle.”

“There aren’t, and even if there were, I wouldn’t permit her to associate with them.”

“You’re going to have to get over that, sister. Eventually she *will* be required to have dealings with her own kind.”

“What for?”

“She’ll have to tell them what they’re supposed to do, Zelana. If her playmates aren’t people, what exactly are they?”

“Dolphins, of course. She and the young dolphins get along very well.”

“I didn’t know that dolphins can move around on dry land.”

“They can’t. Eleria swims with them.”

“Are you mad?” Dahlaine almost screamed. “She’s only five years old! You can’t just turn her loose in Mother Sea like that!”

“Stop worrying so much, Dahlaine. She swims almost as well as her playmates do, and she finds most of her food out there in deep water. It saves me all sorts of time. She feeds herself, so I don’t have to bother. She *does* seem to like berries—when they’re in season—but most of the time she eats fish.”

“How does she cook them if she’s out there in the water?”

“What is ‘cook’?” Zelana asked curiously.

“Just a custom, really,” Dahlaine replied evasively. “You ought to try to keep her out of deep water, though.”

“Why? She swims mostly along the surface, so what difference does it make how much water’s down below her?”

Dahlaine gave up. There was just no talking with Zelana.

Though Zelana would not have admitted it even to herself, her life was much more pleasant now than she had Eleria to love and to care for. Since Eleria was able to find her own food and she had playmates enough to keep her occupied, her presence in the grotto in the evenings was hardly any inconvenience at all. Zelana was still able to create poetry and compose music, and Eleria served as a ready-made audience. She loved to have Zelana sing to her, and she seemed to enjoy listening to the recitation of Zelana's poems—even though she didn't understand a single word. She was now well into her sixth year, but she continued to speak exclusively in the squeaky, piping language of the dolphins.

Zelana considered that. It wasn't really all that much of a problem, since she herself was also fluent in that language. She decided, though, that perhaps one of these days she might teach the young one the rudiments of the language she spoke and shared with her sister and her brothers. It shouldn't be too difficult. Zelana had discovered that Eleria was very quick.

As it turned out, however, Eleria was about two jumps ahead of her. Zelana had been reciting poetry to the child since Eleria's infancy, and one day in the early autumn of Eleria's sixth year Zelana happened to overhear the child reciting one of the poems to her playmates, translating each line into their own language as she went along. Zelana's poetry took on whole new dimensions when delivered in the squeaks and burbles of the dolphin language. Zelana was fairly sure that the young dolphins weren't really all that interested in poetry, but Eleria's habit of rewarding their attention with kisses and embraces kept them obediently in place. Zelana was very fond of dolphins herself, but the notion of kissing them had never occurred to her. Eleria, however, seemed to have discovered early in her life that dolphins would do almost *anything* for kisses.

Zelana decided at that point that it might not be a bad idea to start paying closer attention to the progress of the young child. Lately it seemed that every time she turned around, Eleria had a new surprise for her.

"Eleria," she said a bit later, when the two of them were alone in the grotto.

Eleria responded with a squeaky little dolphin sound.

"Speak in words, child," Zelana commanded.

Eleria stared at her in astonishment. "It is not proper that I should, Beloved," she replied quite formally. "*Thy* speech is not to be used for mundane purposes or ordinary times. It is reserved for stately utterances. I would not for all this world profane it by reducing its stature to the commonplace."

Zelana immediately realized where she had blundered. In a peculiar sort of way she'd treated Eleria in much the same way the child was now treating her dolphin playmates. Eleria had been something on the order of a captive audience—but not quite completely captive. The child had drawn her own conclusions. There was a certain logic behind Eleria's conviction that Zelana's language was reserved for poetry alone, since the only times when Zelana had spoken that language to her had been during those recitations. Ordinary conversations between them had been in the language of the dolphins.

"Come here, child," Zelana said. "I think it's time for us to get to know each other a bit better."

Eleria seemed apprehensive. “Have I done something wrong, Beloved?” she asked. “Are you angry with me because I told your poems to the finned ones? You didn’t want me to do that, did you? Your poems were love, and they were for me alone. Now I have spoiled them.” Eleria’s eyes filled with tears. “Please don’t make me go away, Beloved!” she wailed. “I promise that I won’t do it again!”

A wave of emotion swept over Zelana, and she felt her own eyes clouding over. She held out her arms to the child. “Come to me,” she said.

Eleria rushed to her, and they clung to each other. Both of them were weeping now, yet they were filled with a kind of joy.

Zelana and Eleria spent all of their time together in the grotto after that. The dolphins brought fish for Eleria to eat, and the trickling spring provided water, so there was no real need for the child to go out into Mother Sea. Her playmates were a bit sulky at first, but that soon passed.

Zelana spent many happy hours teaching Eleria how to create poetry and how to sing. Zelana’s poetry was stately and formal, and her songs were complex. Eleria’s poetry was still of a more ancient form, but much more passionate, and her songs were simple and pure. Zelana was painfully aware that the child’s voice, clear and reaching upward without effort, was more beautiful than her own.

Eleria eventually came to realize that the language she had come to know as the language of poetry had a more colloquial form which they could use for everyday communication. She still insisted on calling Zelana “Beloved,” however.

It was in the autumn of Eleria’s seventh year when the child went out to play with her pink friends again. Zelana had suggested that Eleria had been neglecting them of late, and it was not really polite to do that.

Late that day Eleria returned to the grotto with a strange glowing object.

“What *is* that pretty thing, child?” Zelana asked.

“It’s called a ‘pearl,’ Beloved,” Eleria replied, “and a very old friend of the dolphins gave it to me—well, she didn’t exactly give it to me. She showed me where it was, though.”

“I didn’t know that pearls could grow so large,” Zelana marveled. “It must have been an enormous oyster.”

“It was huge, Beloved.”

“Who is this friend of the dolphins?”

“A whale,” Eleria replied. “She’s very old, and she lives near that islet off the south coast. She joined us this morning and told me that she wanted to show me something. Then she led me to the islet and took me down to where this enormous oyster was attached to a reef. The oyster’s shell was almost as wide across as I am tall.”

“How did you pry it open if it was that big?”

“I didn’t have to, Beloved. The old whale touched the shell with her fin, and the oyster opened itself for us.”

“How very peculiar,” Zelana said.

“The old whale told me that the oyster wanted me to have the pearl, so I took it. I *did* thank the oyster, but I’m not sure it could understand me. It was a little hard to swim and hold my pearl at the same time, but the old whale offered to carry me back home.”

“Carry?”

“Well, not exactly. I rode on her back. That is so much fun.” Eleria held the pearl up. “See how it glows pink, Beloved? It’s even prettier than the ceiling of our grotto.” She nestled her pearl, which

was about the size of an apple, against her cheek. “I love it!” she declared.

“Did you eat today?” Zelana asked.

“I had plenty earlier today, Beloved. My friends and I found a school of herring and ate our fill.”

“Did the whale have a name, by any chance?”

“The dolphins just called her ‘mother.’ She isn’t really their mother, of course. I think it’s more like a way to let her know that they love her.”

“She speaks the same language as the dolphins?”

“Sort of. Her voice isn’t as squeaky, though.” Eleria crossed to her bed of moss. “I’m very tired, Beloved,” she said, sinking down onto her bed. “It was a long swim out to the islet, and mother whale swims faster than I do, so even though she slowed down, I had trouble keeping up with her.”

“Why don’t you go to sleep, then, Eleria? I’m sure you’ll feel much better in the morning.”

“That sounds like a terribly good idea, Beloved,” Eleria said. “I’m really having trouble keeping my eyes open.” She lay back on her bed of moss with the glowing pink pearl cradled to her heart.

Zelana was puzzled, and just a trifle concerned. It wasn’t really natural for whales and dolphins to associate with each other in the way Eleria had just described, and Zelana was almost positive that they wouldn’t be able to speak to each other and be understood. Something very peculiar had happened today.

Eleria appeared to be sound asleep now, and her limbs had relaxed. Then, to Zelana’s astonishment, the glowing pink pearl rose up into the air above the sleeping child. Its pink glow grew steadily stronger, and the glow seemed to enclose Eleria.

“Don’t interfere, Zelana,” a very familiar voice echoed in Zelana’s mind. “This is necessary, and don’t need any help from you.”

Eleria awoke somewhat later than usual the following morning, and she had a somewhat puzzled look on her face as she sat cross-legged on her bed of moss with her pearl in her hand. “Why do we sleep, Beloved?” she asked.

“I don’t,” Zelana replied, “and I’m not sure exactly why other creatures seem to need to sleep every so often.”

“I thought you and I were of the same kind,” Eleria said. “We *look* very much alike—except that your hair is dark and glossy and mine is sort of yellow.”

“I’ve wondered about that myself. Maybe I’ve just outgrown the need for sleep. I *am* quite a bit older than you are, after all.” It was a simplified answer, but Zelana was quite certain that Eleria wasn’t quite ready for the real one just yet.

“Since you don’t sleep, you wouldn’t know about the strange things I seem to see happening while I’m asleep, would you?”

“They’re called ‘dreams,’ Eleria,” Zelana told her, “and I don’t think any other creature has the same kind of dreams you do. My brother Dahlane told me that your dreams would be very special, and much more important than the dreams of the ordinaries. Did you have a dream last night that frightened you?”

“It didn’t particularly frighten me, Beloved. It just seemed very strange, for some reason.”

“Why don’t you tell me about it?” Zelana suggested.

“Well, I seemed to be floating—except that I wasn’t floating in Mother Sea the way I do sometimes when I want to rest and catch my breath. I was floating way up in the air instead, and all sorts of strange things were happening far below. Father Earth seemed to be all on fire, and his

mountains were rising and falling, the way Mother Sea's waves do. Rocks were melting and running down the sides of some of Father Earth's mountains into Mother Sea, and some of his other mountains were spouting liquid fire way up into the sky. Could something like that really happen?"

"Yes, child," Zelana said in a troubled voice, "and it happened in exactly the way you just described it. I was there watching while it happened. It was at the very beginning of the world. What happened next?"

"Well, the fires kept burning for a long, long time, and then the land below me started to break apart, and the pieces floated off in different directions. Then trees began to sprout on the face of Father Earth, and Mother Sea started having children. It was along about then that I seemed to know that I wasn't alone. Others were having the same dream—only maybe for them it wasn't really a dream."

Zelana smiled. "No, dear, it wasn't. I was one of those others, and I certainly wasn't dreaming, and neither were my brothers or my sister."

"Then it was your family that was sort of hiding around the edges of my dream?" Eleria asked. "I thought you only had two brothers and one sister. There seemed to be two more brothers and a sister watching with me."

"They're another branch of the family, Eleria," Zelana told her. "We don't get together very often. We can talk about them some other time. Why don't you tell me what happened next in your dream? Dreams fade, I understand, and I'd like to hear your whole dream before you forget."

"Well, most of Mother Sea's children were fish, but some of them weren't. Those were the ones who crawled up onto the face of Father Earth. They sort of looked like snakes at first, but then they sprouted legs and they grew up to be very big. Some of them ate trees, but some of the others ate the ones who were eating trees. Then a great big rock that was on fire fell down out of the sky, and when it hit Father Earth it made an awful splash, except that it was rock that splashed instead of water, and everything got dark for a long time. It finally started to get light again, but the snakes with legs weren't there anymore."

"Did my relatives go away, too?"

"Some of them went to sleep, but they woke up after a while, and the ones who'd stayed awake went to sleep. There was one that never slept, though. That one's very ugly, isn't it?"

"Indeed it is, child," Zelana replied with a shudder. "It's an outcast, and we don't even like to think about it. What happened next?"

"There were a lot of things with fur wandering around, and there were birds and bugs too, but the some things who walked on their hind legs came along. They didn't look at all the way we do, though. Their skin was scaly, like the skin of large fish—or maybe snakes—and their eyes were huge and stuck way out in front of their faces. That went on for quite a long time, and then everything was all covered with white, and it got very cold. Mother Sea seemed to shrink, and she ran away from her shore. Then the white went away, and Mother Sea came back. That's when the man-things who look like me arrived. They didn't look exactly like me, though. They wrapped themselves up in animal skins for some reason, and you and I don't do that, do we?"

"It isn't necessary for us, Eleria. The skins help the man-things stay warm, and they're ashamed of their bodies."

"How peculiar," Eleria said, frowning slightly. "That was about all there was, Beloved, except the awful-looking watcher was still way off at the edge of my dream, and I don't think it likes me very much. I get the feeling that it's afraid of me for some reason."

"If it has anything like good sense, it is," Zelana said. "Do you think you'll be able to manage he

by yourself for a few days? There are some things I need to attend to. I won't really be gone for long.

“Can't I go with you?”

“I'm afraid not, Eleria. I have to go by myself this time. Maybe you can come along next time. We'll see.”

Zelana swam out of her hidden grotto and onto a nearby gravel beach, where the waves rolled in and then receded with a mournful sound that seemed filled with regret. Then she raised her face to the sky to search for one of those winds that rushed far overhead in perpetuity, streaming eternally above the clouds and weather. She encountered several, but they were not moving in the proper direction, so she continued her search. Then at last she felt a wind that streamed northward toward the Domain of her elder brother, and she rose up and up through the buffeting of those winds which had not suited her until she reached that wind which rushed northward along the outer edge of the sky, and she bestrode that wind, and it obediently carried her toward the bleak Domain of her brother Dahlaine.

Now, Dahlaine dwelt in a cave deep in the bowels of the earth beneath the crags and eternal snow of Mount Shrak, which the people of the North believe is the tallest peak in all the world, and Zelana descended from the dark outer edge of the sky to the forbidding mountain that seemed almost to scowl down at her brother's Domain with a bleak expression of superiority. The mouth of Dahlaine's cave was a deep indentation in the north side of the mount, and Zelana entered there and followed the twisting passage that led down and down through glittering black rock to the vast chamber far beneath the mountain that was Dahlaine's home.

Zelana paused at the mouth of the passage. Her burly, grey-bearded brother, stripped to the waist, was standing over a ruddy fire, beating on something that glowed and made a sort of ringing sound. A small, glowing orb hovered just over him, bathing him with light.

"What in the world are you doing, Dahlaine?" Zelana asked.

Dahlaine turned sharply to look at his sister. "Why, Zelana!" he exclaimed. "You startled me. Is something wrong?"

"Perhaps—or perhaps not. Are you taking up music now? If you are, you're a little off-key."

"Just experimenting, dear sister," he replied. "Some of the people beyond Mother Sea have discovered something they call 'metal.' I wanted to see if I could duplicate it. Is something afoot?"

Zelana looked cautiously around Dahlaine's cave. "Where's your Dreamer?" she asked.

"Ashad? He's out playing with the bears."

"*Bears*? Surely you don't allow him to play with bears! They'll eat him, won't they?"

"Of course they won't, Zelana. They're his friends—in the same way the pink dolphins are Eleria's friends. Is something unusual happening?"

"Perhaps. Eleria had a dream last night, and I think it may have been significant. I thought you should know about it. There's something else that may be even more significant than the dream itself."

"Oh?"

"It appears that Mother Sea's taking a hand in this herself."

Dahlaine stared at her.

"Eleria was out playing with the young pink dolphins yesterday, and they introduced her to an old cow whale."

"I didn't know that whales and dolphins spoke the same language," Dahlaine said.

"They don't. That's what leads me to believe that it wasn't really a whale. Anyway, the old cow

led Eleria to a small islet off the south coast of Thurn and showed her an oyster shell that was about fifty times bigger than any oyster I've ever seen. Then the whale touched the shell with one of her fins and the oyster opened as if someone had just knocked on its door. There was a pearl inside—pink, and a bit larger than an apple.”

“That’s impossible!” Dahlaine exclaimed.

“You’ll have to take that up with the oyster, Dahlaine. Then the whale told Eleria that the oyster wanted her to have the pearl, so Eleria took it, and the whale gave her a ride back to Thurn.”

“Now, *that’s* something I’d like to see,” Dahlaine said, laughing. “It might be a bit difficult to saddle a whale.”

“Did you want to hear the rest of this, or did you want to make funny remarks?” Zelana said tartly.

“Sorry, dear sister. Please go on.”

“Eleria’d had a busy day, so she was very tired. She went to sleep almost immediately, and then some very strange things started to happen. That pink pearl rose up into the air above Eleria, and it started to glow—almost like a small pink moon—and its light shone down on Eleria. Then it spoke to me and told me to mind my own business. I recognized the voice immediately, since I’ve been listening to it since the beginning of time.”

“You’re not serious!” Dahlaine exclaimed.

“Very serious, brother dear. It *was* the voice of Mother Sea, and that seems to suggest that the whale might have been something other than an ordinary whale as well, wouldn’t you say?”

“She’s never done that before,” Dahlaine said in a very troubled voice.

“You’re being obvious again, Dahlaine,” Zelana said. “I think we’d better step around her very carefully until we get a better idea of what she’s doing and why. Mother Sea’s the central force of the whole world, so let’s stay on the good side of her.”

“What happened next?” Dahlaine asked.

“Eleria had a dream, naturally. Evidently, that was the whole idea. In some peculiar way, that pearl’s the essence of Mother Sea’s awareness. Her tides still rise and fall, and her waves wash the shores of Father Earth, but she’s awake now. I’m almost positive that the pearl, which is really Mother Sea incarnate, dictated Eleria’s dream, image by image.”

“Did Eleria tell you about her dream?”

“Of course she did. Why do you think I’m here?”

“What did the dream involve?”

“The world,” Zelana replied. “Eleria saw it when it was still on fire, before the continents separated and before life began. Then she saw the continents move away from each other and watched living things crawl up out of Mother Sea. She saw the big lizards roam the world, and the falling star that killed them all. She was aware of us and of the others—the ones who are asleep now—and somehow she knew about the Vlagh. She saw the age of ice and then the more recent man-things. As closely as I can determine, she dreamt all the way from the beginning up until the day before yesterday.”

“She managed to dream all of that in one night?” Dahlaine said incredulously.

“She had help, Dahlaine. I’m sure that the pearl was guiding her step by step. I think we’d better advise our alternates what’s afoot here. Our cycle’s very nearly reached its conclusion, and our alternates will be waking soon. We’d better warn them that the crisis we’ve been expecting since the beginning’s very likely to boil to the top during their cycle.”

“That’s assuming that it doesn’t come before our cycle’s finished,” Dahlaine said. “I think that we’d all better get together and thrash this out. Why don’t you go fetch Aracia, and I’ll see if I can run

Veltan down. We need to make some decisions, and we might not have much time.”

“It shall be as thou hast commanded, my dear, dear brother,” Zelana replied with exaggerated formality.

“Do you have to do that, Zelana?” he said with a pained sort of expression.

“When you’re being obvious, yes. Go get Veltan, Dahlaine, and I’ll see if I can pry holy Aracia out of that silly temple of hers. Do we want to meet here?”

“I think we’d better. It’s more secluded than the other places—except for yours, of course. We could meet there, I suppose, but Veltan doesn’t like to swim. And let’s keep the Dreamers away from our meeting. We don’t want to contaminate their visions.”

Zelana went up out of Dahlaine’s cave and probed the northern sky until she found a wind that suited her purpose, and then she rose up through the chill northern air to join with the obliging wind, to ride it on down in a southeasterly direction toward Aracia’s Domain.

The arrival of the later variety of people had elevated Aracia’s opinion of herself quite noticeably. Until their appearance, Aracia had seemed sensible enough—a little vain, perhaps, but not unbearably so. The later people, unlike the more brutish early ones, had religious yearnings, and they longed for gods.

Aracia had thought that was very nice of them, and she’d been more than happy to oblige. She’d suggested that a fancy dwelling where she could stay while she was looking after them might be appropriate, so her people built one for her—several, actually. The first one had been a bit crude, since it had been constructed primarily of logs. It had been all right for a while, but the wind blew through the cracks, and the dirt floor grew muddy during the spring rains.

Aracia had then suggested stone blocks instead of logs, and the people who served her labored long and hard to build a dwelling for her that was *almost* as comfortable as Zelana’s grotto or Dahlaine’s cave. And now Aracia of the East dwelt in her splendid though drafty palace-temple with servants by the score to tell her how wonderful she was and how beautiful and how they could not possibly get along without her—and if it wasn’t too much trouble, could she turn that fellow who’d been so insulting the other day into a toad and maybe make it rain because the oats really needed some water along about now, but not too much rain, since that made everything all muddy.

Zelana descended through the crisp autumn air to the marble dome of her sister’s temple and adjusted her eyes to look through the polished marble at Aracia’s regal throne room. It was sheathed in palest marble, of course, and there were tall columns around its outer edge, and red drapes behind Aracia’s golden throne.

Aracia was garbed in a regal gown, and she wore a regal crown of gold and a regal sort of expression on her face.

A fat man garbed in black linen vestments and a tediously ornate miter was standing before Aracia’s throne, delivering a tiresome oration of praise.

Aracia, Zelana noticed, seemed to hang on the fat man’s every word.

Although she knew that it would be terribly impolite, Zelana simply couldn’t resist a sudden impulse.

The fat orator broke off suddenly when Zelana, clad only in filmy gauze, abruptly appeared out of nowhere before the throne of her elder sister. Several plump, overfed servants fainted dead away, and a few of the more theologically inclined began to contemplate revisions of several articles of the faith.

Aracia gasped. “Cover yourself, Zelana!” she said sharply.

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