

Fiery Gift

He lay on his belly, his eyes searching the ground for easy prey. He wrapped his tail around his left leg, to keep it from twitching with excitement once he spotted his quarry. He was covered by a brown cloak, which was in turn covered in leaves. He hooked the cowl of his cloak on the horns protruding from his forehead to prevent it from obscuring his vision.

Movement to his left caught his attention. He looked to see a furry tree climber burying some food, a nut or fruit of some kind. It looked to be a fairly plump creature. He was glad the creatures of the wood had begun to recover from the famine of a couple of years back, when the sun seemed to shrink for a time. Hunting was beginning to return to normal.

He patiently watched the creature at its' work, biding his time for the proper moment. The animal finished digging its' hole, and as it placed its' treasure inside, he sprang into action.

The creature saw the incoming hunter and darted toward the nearest tree. The hunter landed where the animal had been, and quickly pursued it, moving along the ground on all fours like a dog.

The creature had almost climbed up the tree out of his reach by the time he reached the base of the tree. Almost. He reached up and clawed at the creature, the fingernail of his right forefinger piercing the creature's thigh and driving into the tree bark. He felt the warmth of its' blood drip down his arm and listened to its' pained cry.

As he was reaching up with his left hand to take hold of his prize, the darkness of the forest night was banished by a blazing light. Looking toward the source of the light, he saw a bright ball of fire descending toward the nearby river.

When the fireball struck the river, a cloud of boiling steam billowed up and outward. The gust struck him harder than anything he had ever felt, knocking him away from the tree and his injured prey.

Trying to protect himself from the burning heat surrounding him, he wrapped his cloak tightly around himself. He was staggering away from the river when he heard it. It was a cry of pain and agony, yet it did not please him. It brought a wave of sadness from someplace deep within him that he did not know existed. It drew him back to the river, despite the burning steam.

Making his way to the water's edge was difficult. He could only open his eyes for a few seconds at a time, and when he did, he was rewarded with great pain. Yet something about the cry kept pulling him onward.

At the edge he saw that the water was boiling. Then he saw the wriggling black form floating in the water. Ignoring the scalding of his flesh, he charged through the water toward the form.

Reaching the form, he saw it was a baby, who's skin was burned to a blackened crisp. Yet it lived. Its' lungs belted out the compelling cry that he could not resist. And the eyes stared unblinkingly at him.

He reached for the child, it was even hotter that the boiling water surrounding him. He pulled off his cloak and wrapped it around the baby. With the child in his arms, he made his way as quickly as he could to the shore.

When he reached the shore, he felt a cool breeze on his scalded skin at last. He opened his eyes to see a group of his peers watching him and the bundle he carried. He fell to his knees, holding the bundle out in front of him. Then he fell on his face and breathed his last.

The elder of the group stepped forward toward the dead man and his squirming bundle. It still radiated warmth. As he looked into the babe's eyes, he was gripped by emotions he had never felt before; awe, reverence, love. The emotions drove him to his knees. Looking around, he saw that the others were similarly affected.

He reached out with a trembling hand and ran his hand over the child's forehead. He did not feel any bumps that indicated the future formation of horns. Lifting it from the cloak, he saw that, although it was clearly a newborn, it was almost half his size. It also seemed to be a boy. Turning the baby so he could get a look at the backside, he saw no evidence of a tail. He placed the boy back in the cloak, stood, and turned to his people.

"He is not one of us." He pronounced.

"Of course not," his wife said, getting up off her knees. She pulled her robe tight around herself as she crossed to the crying child. She picked him up and cradled him in her arms. As she rocked him back and forth, his crying subsided. "Only a godchild could arrive in such a fashion."

"But what kind of god would arrive like this?" said one of the younger men.

"A discarded god," said the elder, scanning the faces of his fellows as they all rose and slowly came closer to get a better look at the child. "He has been discarded by the other gods, just as they have discarded us."

They all heard the crunch of approach footsteps. The elder quickly threw the cloak over the child.

One of the monsters approaching. It towered over them, at least twice as tall as the tallest of the group. It shook its' hornless head all cover with hair at them.

"What is all this noise?" said the tall, pale skinned, tailless beast. "What are you all doing out at this time of night? What was that fire I saw a little while ago? What is that smell? What is that?" He pointed to the cloaked bundle the elder's wife held.

"It is our supper," the elder replied.

"Why is it moving?" the monster said, leaning forward to get a better look.

"It's not dead yet," said the elder.

The beast stepped back, offended, as the elder knew he would be.

"Whatever. Don't be up too late. I have a lot of work for you to do tomorrow."

As the towering behemoth turned and strode away from them, they heard it say under its' breath, "Filthy trogkin. Don't know why we don't just put the lot of them down."

Watching the retreating back, the elder bit the inside of his mouth to draw blood, swirled the blood around his mouth for a moment, then spit it out saying "Human."

"We need to hide him," his wife said. "If the humans find him, they will take him from us."

"I will die before I let them take our God away!" exclaimed one of the younger men of the clan.

"I know a place." Said the elder, excited by the unexpected insight he was about to share. "Our last master built a private and secluded shrine to one of the gods deep in the woods. Our current master and his family know nothing about it"

"Is it wise to shelter our God in a shrine dedicated to another god?" ask one of the young girls.

"Don't worry about that," replied the trogkin elder. "I burned and desecrated it myself during the last invasion. Come, let me show you."

"But Elder," came the voice of a middle aged trogkin as the group began to follow the elder out of the clearing, "what about him?" The trogkin was standing over the burnt remains of the trogkin that had pulled the child from the river. The dark of the night and the blacken condition of the corpses already dark blue skin made it difficult to see it.

"After we have secured our God, we will come back and bury him," the elder said, solemnly.

"Does anyone know who he is?" asked the wife, still cradling the holy bundle.

The elder counted 16 heads. The house staff numbered 17, so it was probably one of the clan and not some drifter. Now who was missing?

"Has anyone seen my brother Eart?" said Birt. No one came forward with the whereabouts of Eart. As the elder recalled, Eart did have a habit of late-night snacking. Brit came to the body and turned it over.

"Could it be Eart?" the elder asked, standing by Brit.

"Could be." Brit said. "Think it is. Poor, dumb Eart."

"No!" exclaimed the elder. "Whenever our people speak of this night in the ages to come, they will recall Eart Godfinder."

The elder's wife came up to them. "Look upon the face of our newfound God," she said, pulling the cloak from the child, "and know that your brother did a thing greater than anything done by any of our people in all of history."

As he looked into the unblinking eyes of his God, Birt began to weep.

Turning to the rest of the clan, the elders' wife said, "Some of you young man stay and help Birt bury his honored brother. We don't need the whole clan to get His Holiness settled into His new home."

As several of the young men knelt with Birt beside the body and began to dig a grave with their bare hands, the rest of the clan followed the elder and his wife into the woods.