

BIRD WATCHER

A STORY OF THE SPIRALCHAIN

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MURROD

The little brown bird watched the sturdy man with the long blonde braids from a distance, flying high overhead when possible and hopping from tree to tree when his journey took him to denser parts of the jungle. He clearly sought to avoid attention, traveling at night as often as during the day and favoring game trails over the roads trod by men.

The bird had been following him for some time, catching up to him after an unfortunate accident had befallen the Ellir stalking him. The bird had many advantages over that four-armed creature in its hunt. It could fly, of course, but it was also beneath the note of this bearded man with his cunning eyes and spry steps.

The bird also carried no shining bits of metal. Metal had been the undoing of the Ellir.

So it was that for days, the bird followed the man who did not belong on this world. The man who had once, not long ago, threatened a power grander than he could comprehend. A man who had made a goddess look foolish. Some crimes were so great that the whole natural world bent itself toward the righting of such wrongs... and this man, this Grell as he was called by chattering humans, had performed such a crime.

The little bird kept her eyes upon him as he moved so carefully away from the places of men, to the north and west. He drew nearer the mountains and the sea, but also nearer the remaining servants of the Rot that milled about the coastal places.

This man was called to the sea as she was called to the hunt. For both, there was a certain quality of vengeance found in that calling.

The little bird's memories were muddy. It had grand thoughts, perhaps even complex motivations, but its brain was the size of a tree nut, and it was hard to fit grand thoughts and complex motivations into something so delicate and small.

Sometimes, it almost lost track of this Grell, distracted by a tasty morsel or a quivering instinct to avoid a greater predator swooping overhead. But always, she pulled herself back to the task.

She found some inexplicable comfort in watching the man's desperation. He was casting about for something, using his strange power to seek something she could almost find a word for in her crowded little brain. There was something of which he was a master, an advantage like sharp claws or fast wings, that he sought. But she knew, in the bigger part of her mind that was so hard for her to use, that he would not find any. The thing he wanted was not to be found, for men gathering it for ages had left little scattered about in the world.

Whatever he wanted, it was shiny. Like the metal bits the Ellir had carried. The ones that had caused its accident. The...

She almost made sense of what had happened, but the notion slipped free when she tried to focus upon it. She could focus upon her quarry and little else. Everything else was too big.

She was aware enough of the situation to know that this was very frustrating. But when she tried to dwell on even that thought, another impulse started to beat through her, as fast as her wings. As fast as her heart.

She had to leave. She had to travel as far away from the high place, the mountain that she could still see, southeast of here, when she pressed herself to fly above the canopy and the clouds were thin. They were traveling away from that place, that glorious mountain, but not fast enough. Not directly enough.

But luckily, her thoughts darted so often, and dwelled so little, that she could ignore that impulse. Sometimes, she thought maybe that was the point of all this.

One day, she knew they'd gone as far as they dared. She thought—no, *remembered*—that Grell might find ways to protect himself if he were allowed to go further.

He clearly thought this. His pace had quickened, and his face betrayed a kind of greedy pleasure. He spoke to himself, but the words were guttural, ugly things, not the musical song of her kind.

She knew she could understand him if she wanted to... but language was so big. Too big.

The man left the game trail and picked his way down a ravine covered in tangled roots and loose rocks, toward a depression below. Down there, she could see sparkling traces of metal, the remains of a great battle perhaps, surrounded by trickles of water and dark stains of dried blood. Battles were human things. Big things. Too big. But as Grell made his way nearer all that, the bird remembered that nothing was too big for her.

Her little feathers bristled and shifted. Her whole body trembled as shimmers of white and gold light flowed through her, bright as the suns and bursting from within her brown feathered breast.

She was no little bird.

She was Ahmur, white dragon-god of Goldvast.

And she had promised vengeance upon Grell.

He spun in a panic as her body resumed its full size and scale, explosively shattering trees along the ridge atop the incline down which he was sliding.

The look of startled concern on his face was delicious, sweetened only by the thoughts that accompanied it. Ahmur, returned to a body of useful size and no longer trying to compress her enormity into such a pitiful shape, could feel his thoughts. She could feel her power—absent the marshaled energy of the dead she'd used to her advantage for so long—greater than that of any lowly human and at the ready.

A compulsion beat within her mind to put as much distance between herself and her remaining brother as possible... but she could conclude her business with Grell before she embarked on the long journey south.

Oh yes.

Grell reached out with desperate hands, calling to the metal—and even a bit of Bindmetal—glinting at the battle site below.

But Ahmur had chosen her moment well for the dashing of hope and the breaking of his spirit. She could have eaten him in his sleep a dozen times along the way... but it was so much better to strike him down just when he thought he was safe.

Such was the price for his insult to her.

She unleashed a blast of flame that singed the hair from his head and face and lit his clothing ablaze. The Onusborn human screamed in pain, and his concentration—the key that might have called the metal below to his aid—broke.

She swallowed him while he still burned.

As she did so, she felt them. Spirits... lingering, flickering shades of those whose fury at Grell had bound them to him. Onusborn spirits, not the dead copies of Murrodite men she'd gathered for decades, but something older and more robust. There were many souls linked to this man by hatred and loss... and her innate talent for working with such things snatched up each of them at the moment when their link to the world of the living at last broke. It was meager replacement for what she'd spent in battle with the Jadouhn... but it was a start.

Ahmur began to plot how she would retake the Mount of Glory in earnest. She could not do so yet. In that instant, the biological need to flee Greendeep for the safety of Goldvast was undeniable. But she would be back. Murrod might belong to Ehbor for the moment, but he lacked the... she chuckled at the human expression that came to mind.

He lacked the stomach to do all that must be done.

As Grell began to digest in her white-scaled belly, Ahmur mused that *she* lacked the stomach for *nothing*.