

The Mother Anger

for Ursula Le Guin

“The mother anger came into me then, and I snarled and crept forward.”

Farleer knew they were there - in her home. Nothing visible, nothing audible, just a subtle tremor in the stones, a sound not quite heard. She felt their presence. She paused from counting, letting the gold coins slip from her grasp, and listened to the gentle rhythm of her sleeping children, their breaths rising and falling in counterpoint to the crystal water trickling into the chamber's pool. Evening's last golden rays streamed through the ceiling, and tiny dust motes span in the eddying air, glittering in the dying light. Her immediate world was quiet, ordered, secure – unchanged. But still she hesitated in the darkness, sensing danger approaching from the furthest reaches of her home, and wondered if she was being overly cautious for the sake of her children.

The youngest, Alythae, stirred and whimpered. Farleer moved to the bed and comforted her until the little one drifted back into the gentler realm of dreams. She studied the soft outlines of her children in the waning light, and wondered if her own mother had watched in the night hours as she did now. Her children were beautiful, her life's gift and work, and she was proud of all three.

Kareeb, the eldest, would be the strongest. Like his father, he would grow handsome and courageous, full of love for adventure and far shores. She loved him for his strength. But she also knew she would lose him, drawn from her by his wander lust. Like his father.

Eram, curled like a comma, snuggled between his sister and brother. 'Eram the Wise' would be his title in days to come, she decided. He had his father's curiosity, his mother's

intelligence - the same attributes that drove his brother Kareeb to roam - but Eram lacked Kareeb's central essence: courage. She smiled, remembering how Eram pestered her constantly with questions – *Why, Mother? Why is it so? Why is it like this? Why, Mother?* Like his father, Kareeb would roam, never settling, but Eram would stay in this home and grow wise, and gather things about him - so long as there was no danger in the gathering.

She felt her greatest pity for the little one. Perhaps it was maternal sympathy, something she couldn't fully explain, because Alythae was the baby. Perhaps it was because she was the girl. Perhaps it was all those things. She could foresee her sons' futures, see clearly where they would fit into the scheme of things, but Alythae's future remained a mystery. *No*, she chided herself, *I'm being foolish. She's no more than a baby. Her talents will emerge. She will find her place, in time. I found mine*, she sighed wistfully. *Tekamyl's mate*.

She turned to watch the dying daylight dissolve on the grey wall, and wondered where Tekamyl was. He was always away, sometimes for days, sometimes weeks. The time before this, he was gone two full cycles of the moon, and when he returned he said very little, only ate and slept for long hours. And when he finally woke, he had that all-too-familiar faraway look that she'd come to dread because it told her he would go again, and soon. And he had, leaving her to watch over their three children again, alone, in the empty fortress home. She loved him for his majesty, for his handsome features, for his unrivalled strength, but he was no more hers to have than the breath on her lips, or the last moment of golden light before nightfall.

She shivered, but she wasn't cold because the evening's icy fingers hadn't yet crept into her chamber. She shivered because she felt their presence again - stronger, closer. She listened, but she heard nothing out of the ordinary. She cast a wistful glance over the darkened space where her children slept, before she moved quietly and cautiously towards the archway leading from her chamber. She skirted the pool where the first reflected stars glittered, and passed into the main hall where her husband stored his valuable trophies and spoils from battles and adventures – and she paused to listen again.

This time she heard them - voices - distant whispers from the side corridor, too low to be understood. Protected by the cloaking darkness, she crept to the corridor entrance and bent to peer in. At the far end, torches flickered recklessly, lighting the rough stone passageway, the flames glinting yellow-green on tarnished metal breast-plates. She saw five men - armed.

Stifling a sharp intake of breath, she edged back, afraid they'd already seen her, even at this distance. Strangers in her home - rough men with fire and swords. How had they gotten in? She always believed the side corridor from the main hall only led deeper into the reaches of Tekamyl's fortress, to lower chambers that she had never explored. Clearly she was wrong. Marauding men had found a way into her home. What could she do? *Tekamyl would know. He would fight them, and drive them away.* But her mighty husband wasn't here. She was alone.

'What is it, Mother?' Alythae asked, as she pressed against Farleer's side.

The mother clutched her child protectively and whispered, 'Hush child, Go back to your bed,' but Alythae was restless and demanding.

'Why are you whispering?' she asked plaintively.

Farleer stifled the child's voice and warned her, 'There are men in our home, little one,' as she steered her back across the main hall and into her chamber.

'Why?' Alythae persisted. 'Why are they here?'

Farleer heard the other children stir. 'They come to take our possessions. That's all these men ever seek. They are greedy.'

'Who's greedy?' Kareeb sleepily asked, as he shuffled to his mother's side. 'What are you whispering about?'

'Mother says there are men in our house,' Alythae blurted. 'She says they want to take our things.'

Farleer felt her eldest son's back stiffen and his eyes sparkled in the darkness. 'I won't let them take anything!' he hissed. 'I'll fight them and kill them like father would!'

She pushed him firmly aside, saying, 'You'll stay behind me and you'll stay very still,' in a measured voice warning Kareeb that he would be unwise to cross her now.

‘Will they hurt us?’ Eram whispered from the warmth of the bed where he still lay curled.

‘No, child,’ Farleer replied softly. ‘I won’t let them. Now hush.’

They huddled in the gloom, listening to the voices drifting closer, and the infrequent scrape of metal on stone, as the strangers crept into their home. Farleer pressed against the chamber entry and gazed into the main hall for what seemed an intolerably long time, until torchlight from the long corridor splashed yellow-gold light across the grey stone floor. A figure appeared, framed by the light. He seemed tentative, uncertain.

She studied him as he peered into her husband’s inner sanctum. He wore the heavy chain scales that she’d seen on other men - long ago when she was a maiden and Tekamyl had courted her in the Ashkri Mountains. He was heavily-bearded, with a dark bushy growth that hid every facial feature, except his sharp aquiline nose and glittering eyes, and his unkempt mat of black hair refused to be confined beneath his metal helmet. As far as men went, he had the look of strength about him, but it was heavy strength, gained from labour and drinking, not the athletic power that she so admired in her husband’s body. The intruder warily entered the main hall, with his four companions in tow. Because their encroaching torchlight threatened to spill into the chamber, Farleer retreated, ushering her children deeper into the recesses, warning them with a firm touch to remain silent. Alythae and Eram willingly complied, but she felt Kareeb’s instinctive anger bristling. *So much of the father in him*, she sighed.

She hadn’t anticipated an outburst of delight from the men. The main hall suddenly reverberated with cackling laughter and ecstatic whoops, as the torch light danced insanely, throwing distorted shadows across the walls. Her husband’s prized trophies clattered against the floor, and smashed, and she tightened her hold on her trembling children as the intruders looted the hall in a wild orgy of greed. ‘I’ll kill them!’ Kareeb suddenly cried, but Farleer held him from rushing forward, quieted him at once, and listened.

The uproar ceased. The torchlight steadied. Kareeb’s outcry had carried too far. For a moment, she could only hear her rapid breathing and thudding heart. Then furtive whispers echoed in the hall, coupled with a rattle of metal and leather, and armour clinking on stone.

The men's shadows darkened the archway to her chamber and lengthened along the floor. The burning torchlight spread wider, deeper, touching the shining surface of the drinking pool, obliterating the stars. The strangers were coming - they were coming, coming to get her and take her children. She pushed her children back, and drew a long, deep breath. *If Tekamyl was here*, she thought – but he wasn't, and she was. That was the scheme of things.

Five men crept into the chamber, swathed in a halo of torchlight, swords and dented armour reflected in the pool's mirror surface, their pockets and sacks bulging with spoils ransacked from Tekamyl's treasure. For an instant, all five froze at the edge of the pool. Their faces suddenly ashen, jaws slack in abject horror, they stared up into the golden green eyes and gaping maw of Farleer, the mother dragon, her great red wings spreading to protect her brood, her golden underbelly shining like a thousand torches in the light they cast.

And then, she breathed.

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