

Snippet of Gods Old and Dark, and stuff

By Holly Lisle

Sick yesterday, ALL day, culminating in a barf-fest at about ten p.m. that left my face covered with little broken blood vessels (called *petechiae* if you're into medical terminology, which I'm not anymore, but some things are tough to forget.) Sick today too, but not **that** sick, thankfully. Nonetheless, while I let myself sleep in until seven, I still got up and did nearly two thousand words on the novel.

I wrote a Baanraak scene today, and I had fun with this, so I thought I'd post a snippet. I'll give the following set-up: Baanraak is in human form and on Earth at the moment, trying not to draw attention to himself following a disturbing incident with Molly a few days back. For those who haven't read the first book, **Memory of Fire** or the teasers for the upcoming **The Wreck of Heaven**, Baanraak is one of the *rr0n*, an evil creature from far up Earth's worldchain whose natural form is what gave rise on Earth to legends of dragons. Beyond that, this segment should stand pretty well on its own.

Hendricks, Tucker County, West Virginia

Baanraak looked north at the tiny town and inhaled, long and deep. The magic was nearby – live magic, downworld magic shifted upworld, the source of the Night Watch's discomfort and his amusement. But its source still lay southward, just a bit farther. He was close to locating the first and smallest of Lauren's siphons, but already he could tell it wasn't as small as he'd hoped. It was pumping out a lot of magic. More than he would have expected.

Molly's sister had done something strong here, something scary. He'd thought two people taking on the whole of the Night Watch had been ludicrous – but Molly was a terrifying creature, and would be even more awe-inspiring when she came into her full power. She wasn't even close yet. And the sister came from that same stock – ferocious and strong and passionate. He could feel the passion in the magic that surrounded him. He inhaled the magic, dragging it in deep, and he could taste the sister, and the taste he got shook him to his core. He tasted love, and it was love that moved even him, love so fierce and certain that it could change a world, or a worldchain. It was changing things.

Love was the spell she had cast, Baanraak realized. Love born of loss, and hope, and fear, and determination to survive. Love of life itself, love of the world and the creatures that lived on it and in it. Love of blue skies and thunderheads and the sweet smell of rain on the grass; love of bright lights and city streets and the people that walked through every day oblivious to the wonder of their own existence – and love of those who knew, and who cherished every breath.

The magic urged him to hang on, to keep fighting for good, to live with everything in him, to share love through action. To protect, to preserve, to defend.

He was a dead thing animated, a creature without love or passion or compassion ... or hope ... and the power of this plea shook him, and ripped into him with invisible talons, and dragged him weeping to his knees.

It was not the human form he had taken that was doing this. Flesh he could cast aside or remake at will – his flesh was under his control. It could not be his soul that this plea – this command – reached, for he had no soul. Millennia dead, he had been for millennia free of the pain of grief and tears. This was betrayal by silver yet again – betrayal of the Baanraak he had known for all of his existence by the

Baanraak that had hidden within him, waiting for something to bring him forth.

Sobbing, Baanraak pulled himself to his feet. He shuddered, and blocked the magic away from himself as best he could, but it had wormed its way inside him and had filled empty places with itself. Nature, which abhorred a vacuum, had never found the vacuum within him. But a few careless moments in the presence of one human's magic had done something that a millennia with Nature could not.

He only wished he could tell what that something was.

He turned his back on the little town of Hendricks and walked south on WV 72, walking on the berm, watching out for cars. There were a few, but not many. He was heading into the heart of the magic.

He would not taste it again, he promised himself. He did not dare. But this would be, he thought, his best hope of a good hiding place. Everyone knew live magic could not feed the dark gods – that they stayed close to sources of death and destruction. So this would be the last place anyone would look for him.

He needed time to think. To re-figure. His encounter with Molly, which had ended with him dead – but not destroyed – had shaken him badly. He didn't know how she'd beaten him. He'd had her. But then she'd done something and he'd found himself in the forest, some little time later, rebuilt of humus and moss and rock, sun and water, and with some of his resurrection rings missing. The main one, the traitorous one that carried the silver channel in its vile heart, still animated him. But of the others he had found no sign. They were lesser rings, made only in supplement to his main one, or stolen from enemies he'd admired – and he'd added them to his wearable trove of immortality simply as a form of backup. He would not be lost without them, but he did not like the

fact that he had lost them. And he did not like the fact that he did not know what had become of them.

He walked for a mile, and then another, and then off to his right he saw a trail sign. He turned onto it, feeling the magic becoming stronger with every step.

Here, the magic had had plenty of time to start soaking into the ground, the trees, and the water. Before long, uncanny things would start happening in the wilderness near Hendricks. Hikers on the Otter Creek trail would have some fairy sightings, though they probably would not report them – people had gotten wary of reporting things like fairies. But before long they would be all over the area. Fairies were like mosquitoes that way; give them running water, appropriate terrain, and live magic, and not even DDT would get rid of them.

He glanced up at the canopy of green over his head – summer leaves on their last legs before autumn came. It was a beautiful place. And it felt alive now. Any world's natives were by nature almost blind to their own world's magic, but the stuff Molly's sister had brought in here had an unmistakable flavor. People would notice, even if they didn't know what they were noticing. This area would get a reputation with the New Agers, and even though the area had bears along with its deer and its pheasants and its pretty rhododendrons, they'd start coming in search of the magic. And here they would actually find it.

Hikers walking along this path would be imbued with that same ferocious love, and they would become – heroic. Self-sacrificing. Men and women who had never before thought of anyone but themselves would start taking chances to protect others. This was going to be a dangerous stretch of woods for the unwary – it was going to change people's lives.

The surviving flora and fauna of Earth's magical ecology

would find their way here, too. Baanraak wondered how many of the wee folk had managed to hang on this long on this planet with things so bad. The pookas, the black dogs, the werewolves and whisperers – in spite of all their strength, they were delicate creatures. When the magic started going, most of them had died off. If any survived, this place would be a little bit of heaven to them – if they could just get here. And their being here would add to the magic, make the place stronger.

Eventually, the trees would wake up, he thought, and start guarding the place themselves. Wouldn't the tree-huggers be surprised when the trees hugged back. And wouldn't let good. These were all second-growth trees – they'd never known rich magic and wouldn't know how to handle themselves. They'd be wild or stupid unless someone trained them. Still, that would be a long time from now.

And then, hiking deeper into the forest, Baanraak caught one of the trees watching him. His skin twitched and inwardly he swore. There was already an old god here, then, using this magic, accelerating the area's recovery. In no other way could the trees have woken up so fast. And these were canny – they had given no sign to him of what they were as he'd walked forward. So they had been trained already. If he had not been thinking about trees, he would not have noticed them watching him. If he had not stopped and stared when he caught the tree watching, he would have been fine, perhaps. But now his cover was blown. He would have to leave – trees were not taken in by form. They could see him for what he really was, and they would tell the old god. Killing the old god wouldn't help his situation, either. He wanted to keep a low profile, not draw attention to his presence. If Molly and her sister had enlisted old gods in the effort to restore this world, they would be watching out for each other. If the trees had been quick about it – and he could hear their leaves rustling and their branches rattling even as he stood there – the odds

were that the old gods, and perhaps even Molly, already knew he was here.

And the only thing he wanted – the only thing – was to stay out of sight for a while in a place where no one would think to look for him.

He turned and started out of the forest, back toward Hendricks. He could rent a room there, find a mirror, make a gate. Go someplace else. He'd thought Molly would not look for him on Earth, but now he needed someplace even more unlikely than Earth.

He was careful not to think until he was well clear of the forest, well free from the watching trees. He was careful not to think until he'd found a public restroom with a big mirror at a gas station. He would have to make himself smaller to fit through it. He had to have a place to go.

And he thought of Kerras, upworld, dead and dark and burned and frozen. He could hide there while he thought. While he reassessed and planned and figured. He'd make a bubble for himself, a bit of air, a bit of warmth. He'd be fine. And no one would look for him on Kerras – the gods both old and dark had abandoned that world.

And that's it. As always, this is un-spell-checked, un-edited first draft, so it'll be prone to major typing and spelling errors. Fresh fruit, complete with the occasional worm.

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