

Crystal Gorge

David & Leigh Eddings

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It was summer in the lands of the west, and the young boy with red hair woke up even before the sun had risen above the mountains to the east of the village of Lattash and decided that it might be a good day to go fishing in the small river that flowed down from the mountains. There were quite a few things that he was supposed to do that day, but the river seemed to be calling him, and it wouldn't be polite at all to ignore her – particularly when the fish were jumping.

He quietly dressed himself in his soft deerskin clothes, took up his fishing-line, and went out of his parents' lodge to greet the new summer day. Summer was the finest time of the year for the boy, for there was food in plenty and no snow piled high on the lodges and no bitterly cold wind sweeping in from the bay.

He climbed up over the berm that lay between the village and the river and then went on upstream for quite a ways. The fishing was usually better above the village anyway, and he was sure that it wouldn't be a very good idea to be right out in plain sight when his father came looking for him to remind him that he was neglecting his chores.

The fish were biting enthusiastically that morning, and the boy

had caught several dozen of them even before the sun rose up above the mountains.

It was about midmorning when his tall uncle, the eldest son of the tribal chief, came up along the graveled riverbank. Like all the members of the tribe, his uncle wore clothes made of golden deer-skin, and his soft shoes made little sound as he joined his young nephew. 'Your father wants to see you, boy,' he said in his quiet voice. 'You *did* know that he has quite a few things he wants you to do today, didn't you?'

'I woke up sort of early this morning, uncle,' the boy explained. 'I didn't think it would be polite to wake anybody, so I came on up here to see if I could catch enough fish for supper this evening.'

'Are the fish biting at all?'

'They seem to be very hungry today, uncle,' the boy replied, pointing toward the many fish he'd laid in the grass near the riverbank.

His uncle seemed quite surprised by the boy's morning catch. 'You've caught *that* many already?' he asked.

'They're biting like crazy this morning, uncle. I have to go hide behind a tree when I want to bait my bone hook to keep them from jumping up out of the water to grab the bait right out of my fingers.'

'Well, now,' his uncle said enthusiastically. 'Why don't you keep fishing, boy? I'll go tell your father that you're too busy for chores right now. A day when the fish are biting like this only comes along once or twice a year, so I think maybe our chief might want all the men of the tribe to put everything else aside and join you here on the riverbank.' He paused and squinted at his nephew. 'Just exactly what was it that made you decide to come here and try fishing this morning.'

'I'm not really sure, uncle. It just sort of seemed to me that the river was calling me.'

'Any time she calls you, go see what she wants, boy. I think that maybe she loves you, so don't ever disappoint her.'

'I wouldn't dream of it, uncle,' the boy replied, pulling in yet another fish.

And so it was that all of the men of the tribe came down to the river and joined the red-haired boy. The fishing that day was the best many of them had ever seen, and they thanked the boy again and again.

The sun was very low over the western horizon as the boy carried the many fish he'd caught that day up over the berm to the lodges of Lattash, and all of the women of the tribe came out to admire the boy's catch, and even Planter, who seldom smiled, was grinning broadly when he delivered his catch to her.

And then the boy went on down to the beach to watch the glorious sunset, and the light from the setting sun seemed almost to lay a gleaming path across the water, a path that seemed somehow to invite the boy to walk on out across the bay to the narrow channel that opened out onto the face of Mother Sea.

'Are you still sleeping, Red-Beard?' Longbow asked.

'Not any more,' Red-Beard told his friend sourly. He sat up and looked around his room in the House of Veltan. It was a nice enough room, Red-Beard conceded, but stone walls were not nearly as nice as the lodges of Lattash had been. 'I was dreaming about the old days back in the village of Lattash, and I'd just caught enough fish to feed the whole tribe. Everybody seemed to be very happy about that. Then I went on down to the beach to watch the sunset, and I was about to stroll on across the bay to say

hello to Mother Sea, but then you had to come along and wake me up.'

'Did you want to go back to sleep?' Longbow asked him.

'I guess not,' Red-Beard replied. 'If I happened to doze off now, the fish would probably start biting my toes instead of the bait I'd been using. Have you ever noticed that, Longbow? If you're having a nice dream and you wake up before it's finished, your next dream will be just awful. Is there something going on that I should know about?'

'There's a little family squabble in Veltan's map-room is about all. Aracia and Dahlane have been screaming at each other for about an hour now.'

'Maybe I *will* go back to sleep then,' Red-Beard said. 'You don't need to tell anybody I said this, but the older gods seem to be slipping more and more every day.'

'You've noticed,' Longbow said dryly.

'Do you have to do that all the time?' Red-Beard demanded, throwing off his blanket and struggling to his feet.

'Do what?'

'Try to turn everything into a joke.'

'Sorry. I didn't mean to poach in your territory. Shall we go?'

'It's fairly certain that the creatures of the Wasteland will come east now, Dahlane,' Aracia was saying as Red-Beard and Longbow entered Veltan's map-room. 'After Yaltar's volcano destroyed the ones in Zelana's Domain, they turned south to attack the nearest part of the Land of Dhrall, and east is closer to south than north. They'll attack *me* next. That should be obvious.'

'You're overlooking something, Aracia,' Dahlane disagreed. 'The

servants of the Vlagh are cramming thousands – or even millions – of years of development into very short periods of time. If we assume that they’re still thinking at the most primitive level, I think we’ll start getting some very nasty surprises. I’m almost positive that their “overmind” has come to realize that the attack here in the south turned into a disaster, and that would make “closer” very unattractive. I’m quite certain that their next attack will be as far from here as possible.’

‘Aren’t we wandering just a bit?’ Zelana suggested. ‘We won’t know which way the bugs will move until one of the Dreamers gives us that information. I’d say let’s wait. In the light of what happened in my Domain and Veltan’s, we just don’t have enough information to lock *anything* in stone yet.’

‘Zelana’s right, you know,’ Veltan agreed. ‘We can’t be sure of anything until one of the children has one of “those” dreams.’

‘May I make a suggestion?’ the silver-haired Trogite Narasan asked.

‘I’ll listen to anything right now,’ Dahlaine replied.

‘I’m unfamiliar with the lands of the north and the east, but wouldn’t it make sense to alert the local population to the possibility of an incipient invasion? If the people of *both* regions know that there’s a distinct possibility that the bug-men will attack, they’ll be able to make some preparations.’

‘That makes sense, Aracia,’ Dahlaine conceded. ‘If what happened here and off to the west are any indication of what’s likely to happen in your Domain or mine, the local population will probably play a large part in giving us another victory.’

Aracia glared at her older brother, but she didn’t respond.

Longbow tapped Red-Beard’s shoulder. ‘Why don’t we go get a breath of fresh air,’ he quietly suggested.

'It is just a bit stuffy in here,' Red-Beard agreed. 'Lead on, friend Longbow.'

They went on out of the map-room and then some distance along the dimly lighted hallway.

'Is it just my imagination or is Zelana's older sister behaving a bit childish?' Longbow asked.

'I don't really know her all that well,' Red-Beard said, 'and I think I'd like to keep it that way. It seems to me that she's got an attitude problem.'

'Or maybe even something worse. Remember what happened back in the ravine? Suddenly, for no reason at all, Zelana jumped up, grabbed Eleria, and flew on back to her grotto on the Isle of Thurn.'

'Oh, yes,' Red-Beard said. 'Sorgan almost had a fit when she ran off like that without giving him all that gold she'd promised him. If I remember right, it finally took a bit of bullying by Eleria to bring her back to her senses.'

'I don't know very much about Aracia,' Longbow admitted, 'but I'm starting to catch a strong odor of irrationality in her vicinity. Her mind doesn't seem to work any more.'

'I wouldn't be too sure about that, Longbow,' Red-Beard disagreed. 'It might just be working very well. From what I've heard, anybody in her Domain who doesn't want to do honest work joins the priesthood and spends all his time adoring her.'

'That's what I've heard too.'

'Soldiering is one kind of honest work, isn't it?'

'Not as hard as farming is, maybe, but it's still harder than adoring somebody.'

'If that's the way things are in her Domain, doesn't that sort of suggest that she doesn't have anything at all like an army over

there? Wouldn't that explain why she wants *all* the soldiers Zelana and Veltan hired to come on over to her territory to protect her if the bug-people decide to come her way?'

'Very good, Red-Beard,' Longbow said. 'Maybe she's not quite as irrational as it might seem. If her Domain is totally undefended, she'll need just about everybody with a sword or a bow to come there to protect her. It's very selfish, of course, but I don't think that would bother her. She seems to believe that she's the most important thing in the whole world, so from her way of looking at things, we're all obliged to rush to her defense.'

'There's not much that we can do about it right now, friend Longbow – except possibly to suggest to Zelana that she'd better keep a close eye on her big sister.'

'I'm sure that Zelana already knows about her sister's peculiarities, but we might want to caution Sorgan and Narasan about this.'

'You're probably right. Should we go on back and listen to the screaming? or would you rather go fishing?'

The squabbling of Dahlane and Aracia continued for another half hour or so, and then Ara, Omago's beautiful wife, joined them on the balcony of the map-room. 'Supper's ready,' she announced.

'That's just about the best news I've heard all day,' Sorgan Hook-Beak declared. 'Let's go eat before everything gets cold.'

They all trooped on down the hallway to Veltan's impromptu dining-room. That was one of the characteristics of the elder gods that Red-Beard had never fully understood. There was a certain practicality involved in their lack of a need for sleep. If some kind of emergency came up, a sleeping god might not be able to deal with it, but Red-Beard couldn't for the life of him see why they

didn't eat. They didn't need nourishment, of course, but there was more to eating food than just satisfying the grumbling in the belly. Dinners in particular were generally something along the lines of a social event that brought people closer together and smoothed over various disagreements. Red-Beard was almost positive that the elaborate dining-room in Veltan's house hadn't even been there before the outlanders had arrived, and he was fairly sure that the dining-room Veltan had added to his house had originally been Ara's idea. Omago's wife was quite probably the best cook in the entire world, but she was wise enough to know that getting people together and establishing friendships was even more important than eating. There were several peculiarities about Ara that Red-Beard didn't fully understand – yet.

He was still working on it, though.

Oddly, Veltan and Zelana were accompanying them to the dining-room. Since they didn't need – or want – food, they obviously had something else on their minds.

The conversation at the dinner table was fairly general, but after they'd all eaten – more than they really needed, of course – Zelana and Veltan took Sorgan and Commander Narasan aside and spoke with them at some length.

Red-Beard nudged his friend Longbow after supper. 'I could be wrong about this, I suppose, but I think Zelana and Veltan might have come up with a way to make peace in their family, and it's probably going to involve Sorgan and Narasan.'

'What a peculiar sort of idea,' Longbow murmured.

'You saw it too, didn't you?'

'It *was* just a bit obvious, friend Red-Beard. I think it might disappoint Holy Aracia a little, though.'

'What a shame,' Red-Beard said with a broad grin.

‘That’s a nasty sort of thing to say.’

‘So beat me.’

When they returned to the map-room, Sorgan Hook-Beak cleared his throat as a sort of indication that he was about to make a speech. ‘Narasan and I talked this over, and I think we might have come up with a way to deal with the problem that’s been nagging at us here lately,’ he announced. ‘Since we can’t be certain sure exactly where the bug-people will strike next, we’ll have to cover both possibilities. Since Lord Dahlaine’s territory is farther away than his sister’s is, Narasan and I pretty much agreed that *I* should cover that part of the Land of Dhrall – not because my men are better warriors, but because our ships move faster than Narasan’s can. Of course, that’s why we built them that way. Chasing down Trogite ships and robbing them is the main business in the Land of Maag, but we can talk about that some other time. Since my people will cover the north, Narasan’s will cover the east.’ He gestured down toward Veltan’s “lumpy map”. ‘If that map’s anywhere at all close to being accurate, it’ll only take Narasan’s fleet a few days to reach Lady Aracia’s territory, and he can protect *that* region. That means that we’ll have people in place to hold the bug-people back in either the east or the north, and our employers can zip from here to there in no time at all. If the attack strikes the east, I’ll sail on down around the south end and join up with Narasan in just a couple of weeks. But, if the bug-people come north, my people will be able to hold them back until Narasan arrives to help *me*. When we add the horse soldiers in the north and the women warriors in the east, we’ll have enough people to bring any bug invasion to a stop. Then, when the rest of our friends arrive, we’ll be able to stomp all over the invaders and win the third war here in the Land of Dhrall.’

‘It’ll be something on the order of the way we handled things before the war in Lady Zelana’s Domain,’ Narasan added. ‘There’ll be enough of our people in either region to hold off the invasion until our friends can join us. Then we’ll move directly on to stomp-stomp.’

‘What a clever way to put it, Narasan,’ Sorgan observed.

‘I’ve always had this way with words,’ Narasan replied modestly.

‘I don’t want to intrude here,’ the scar-faced Ekial said, ‘but how are we going to get *my* people – and their horses – up to Lord Dahlaine’s territory? Horses can run fast, but probably not quite fast enough to gallop across the top of the sea.’

‘I think I know how we can do that,’ Narasan said. ‘Gunda’s got that little fishing yawl that *almost* knows how to fly. He can take you on down to Castano and hire ships. Then the two of you can sail on over to Malavi and pick up your men and horses. Then you’ll go north to Lord Dahlaine’s territory.’

‘I think that maybe I should go with them, Commander,’ Veltan added. ‘When you hire Trogite ships, you need gold, and I know of a few ways to keep that much gold from sinking Gunda’s yawl.’

‘I think we’ve pretty much solved all the problems now,’ Narasan said, looking around at the others. ‘When do you think we should start?’

‘Have you got anything on the fire for tomorrow?’ Sorgan asked him.

‘Not that I can think of,’ Narasan replied.

‘Tomorrow it is, then,’ Sorgan announced.

Red-Beard had been watching Zelana’s sister rather closely as Sorgan and Narasan smoothly cut the ground out from under her. It was quite clear that she wanted to protest, but the two clever outlanders hadn’t left her much to complain about. She obviously

still wanted *all* of the outlanders to go east to protect her Domain, but Sorgan and Narasan – at Zelana’s and Veltan’s suggestion, evidently – had dismissed any protest she could raise.

‘I don’t know if you’ve been watching, friend Red-Beard,’ Longbow said quietly, ‘but doesn’t it seem to you that the warrior queen called Trenicia is staying very close to Commander Narasan, and she appears to be *very* impressed by him.’

‘Do you think it’s possible that she’s having *those* kind of thoughts about dear old Narasan?’ Red-Beard asked.

‘I couldn’t say for sure,’ Longbow replied, ‘but that would be a *very* interesting sort of thing to crop up along about now, wouldn’t you say?’

‘Not as long as my head was on straight, I wouldn’t.’