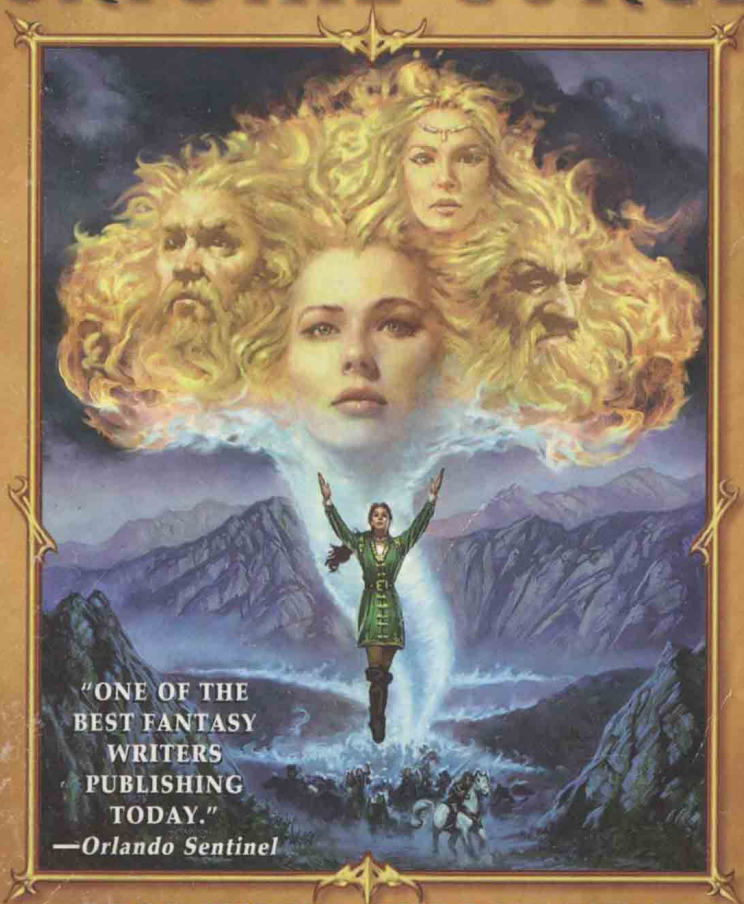


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BOOK THREE OF THE DREAMERS

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Preface



And now were we confounded, for even as had happened in the land of the sunset, our migration into the land of longer summers had met with disaster. The man-things of that region had proved to be even more cruel than those we had encountered in the land of the sunset, and our dear Vlagh shrieked in agony as we swiftly bore her away from the broad water which grew larger and larger with each passing of that which brings light to her realm.

For behold, the man-things of the land of longer summers brought forth water, even as the man-things of the land of the sunset had brought forth the hot light which had spewed up from the mountains, and the loss of the servants of our beloved Vlagh had been even greater than our loss in the land of the sunset.

And the overmind of which we are all a part shriveled because of this loss, for we were all made less.

And great was our grief by reason of this.

Now those of us which seek knowledge are much different from those whose sole task is caring for the mother which spawned us all, for we have gone forth into the lands of the man-things and have seen much that may prove useful. Those which care for mother move only by instinct, while we who seek knowledge have gone beyond instinct, and now we have reached the land of thought.

Much have we discovered in the land of thought, and we faithfully presented this to the mother which spawned us all, and the overmind shared what we told to mother.

At first the overmind which guides us all was much confused by what we had found. Horrified was the overmind to discover from what we told it that the man-things can perform tasks even when they are not under the control of any thought other than their own. More horrid still was the knowledge that those man-things which had defeated us again and again were potential breeders, rather than potential egg-layers such as *we* are. Truly, the man-things are an abomination which should no longer be permitted to exist, for, as all the world knows, breeders should have no task other than the mating with those which lay the eggs which expand the number of the servants of the she which has spawned them all.

There is yet still another peculiarity among the man-things. They make noises by which they give others of their kind information. Some of those who seek knowledge have duplicated those noises, but they soon discovered that the man-things will often make noises which are not true. And it came to us that if the man-things have no way to know which noises are true and which are not-true, we could make the not-true noises also, and thereby could we conceal truth from the man-things, and this could give us great advantage.

As we have learned, much to the sorrow of the overmind, the man-things have many sticks with teeth with which they can cause hurt—and even death—to the servants of the Vlagh, but these sticks with teeth are *not* parts of their own bodies, but are separate and may easily be carried away by those of us which serve our dear Vlagh, and the overmind in its wisdom advised us to gather up those sticks with teeth which had been carried by man-things which had died during our struggles with them.

But then it came to the overmind that we still lacked the most powerful of the things which kill us, and that is the thing which flickers and lays clouds close to the ground or far up into the sky. And as the overmind came to understand the thing which flickers and puts out light and clouds which lie near the ground or rise up into the sky, we all came to know of it as well, and we knew full well that the thing which flickers and puts out light might be the best of the things which kill, for if we could have *that* thing which kills, we could kill the man-things from far off, and thus it would be that the sticks with teeth of the man-things could not reach us.

But though we sought far and wide, we found none of that which flickers and puts out light, and so we were confounded.

But then it came to the overmind that we should search not for the flickers or the light, but rather for the clouds which lie close to the ground or rise up into the sky, for these clouds are a sure sign that the thing which flickers and puts out light must lie at the source of those clouds.

And many were the clouds we sought rising from the nesting places of the man-things, but we dared not to enter those nesting places, for the man-things which live in those nesting places have many of the sticks with teeth and should

they see us near their nesting places, they will surely take up their sticks with teeth and kill us one and all.

But then it came to those of us which had sought knowledge of the man-things in the land of longer summers that the man-things had often used a certain kind of low-tree to drive us away from their things-to-eat, for the low-to-the-ground clouds which come from that particular low-tree make it hard for us to breathe, and over the passage of many periods of light and darkness, many of our kind have died when they could no longer breathe.

And so it was that many of the seekers of knowledge circled around the new body of water which had brought death to many of the servants of our Vlagh to seek out a low-tree which was still putting forth the clouds which make it difficult to breathe. And after much searching, they saw a thin, dark cloud rising from a single low-tree. Then they carefully burrowed through the ground around that low-tree to loosen the limbs it had put down into the ground to hold it in place, and when the low-tree could no longer cling to the ground, they brought it back from the land of longer summers. And now we had that which flickers and puts out light—but only one of them.

Then it came to the overmind that we should have many of the flickers which put out light. And so we closely examined that single low-tree and returned once more to the land of longer summers to gather more of those low-trees, and we carried them back to the place where our single low-tree was flickering and putting out light and a thick cloud as dark as that part of the day when the light in the sky has gone away. And then we laid many of the low-trees we had found upon the single low-tree that flickered and put out light, and behold! Where before we had had only one, we now had many.

And then there came a time of confusion for the overmind. The land of the sunset and the land of longer summers were now beyond our reach by reason of the red liquid spouting from the mountains in the land of the sunset and the water rushing down the slope in the land of longer summers. There still remained two lands where we might go—the land of the sunrise and the land of shorter summers. Now the land of the sunrise was much closer for us, but it was also closer for the man-things that had killed so many of the servants of our dear Vlagh. The land of shorter summers was far away from where we were now, but it would also be far away for the man-things.

Many of the seekers of knowledge said “sunrise!” and many others said “shorter summers!” And the overmind could not decide between them.

And then it was that the seekers of knowledge took up the sticks with teeth for the first time, and the seekers who said “sunrise” killed those who said “shorter summers” while the ones who said “shorter summers” killed those who said “sunrise.” And so it was that the servants of the Vlagh grew even fewer, and our dear Vlagh cried out in agony as her children killed each other, for this had never happened before.

We will never know what it was that moved our dear Vlagh to make the decision, but she pointed in the direction of the land of shorter summers and said, “Go there!”

And then the killing stopped and we took up our cause-hurt things and we all turned and went on toward the land of shorter summers, carrying our many low-trees that flickered and put forth light, and left many dark clouds lying behind us as we went.

**THE
RELUCTANT
CHIEFTAIN**

1



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 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 deerskin, 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 river-bank." 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 anymore," 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 Lat-tash, 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 Dahlaine 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, Dahlaine," 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," Dahlaine 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 is any indication of what's likely to happen in your Domain or mine, the local popula-

tion 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 lit hallway.

“Is it just my imagination or is Zelana's older sister behaving a bit childishly?” 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 anymore.”

“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?”