

ONEIROMANCY

A

Legends, Myths, and Prophecies™

Novelette

by

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I awoke, unrested, in the damp black of the cave. Indeed, I felt more fatigued than when I began my sleep while the sky was still bright. The candle by the far wall remained unlit.

Stretching, I rose from the soft pallet of pelts and walked to the single opening, where, under the deepening gray, I would record remembrances of my latest attempt at Dream Casting. Jopol-Opo insisted that I record such recollections immediately.

“You have not failed if you have learned,” he would say. “Each action held import, an integral strand in understanding the mental tapestry which allowed a true Dream Caster to manipulate the waking world.”

I’d heard the words so often that their meaning had faded, like the memories of dreams to most. Fortunately, the first skill mastered when undertaking to become a Dream Caster was to retain those fleeting memories.

My words and thoughts have flown afar. Let me write of my dream.

I had envisioned the candle of pale yellow tallow in its place in the cave. Crouching on the floor nearby, I rubbed one stick quickly upon another to create the char. Yet when I added the tinder, the flame would not catch. No matter how long I tried, I couldn’t light it. Finally, frustration had awoken me.

As only Dream Masters were skilled enough to track the passage of time while within a dream, I hadn’t been able to determine how long I’d been engaged until I awoke to find the low sun. I yawned, more from fatigue than from drowsiness.

The second skill mastered was to place oneself into a hypnagogic state—that condition which was neither full sleep nor full wakefulness. Despite what others may believe, it was not a restful state—indeed, quite the opposite, especially when one’s mind was so engrossed. To that

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end, the quiet and isolation of the cave was conducive to practice, for any interruption or disturbance could jar us from our dreaming state and disrupt the casting.

I began the short walk from the cave, at the base of a large mound—too small to call a hill—to Jopol-Opo's hut. I knew well the way, and, as this stretch of forest was sparsely wooded, the trail was well lit by the watchful moon. The fresh smell of green foliage, the carefree sound of chirruping insects, and the comforting breeze of early spring all combined to refresh me as I walked.

In a short time, I passed into the village, and the lingering smell of smoke and roasted meat reminded me that I hadn't eaten all day. Most huts were dark, though weak light and muted conversation spilled from some.

Built of mudbrick with a sturdy wooden door and a roof of thatch, Jopol-Opo's hut was unassuming, distinguished only by the fact that it stood slightly apart from the rest of the village. I knew Jopol-Opo would be awaiting word of my latest attempt, and, as I approached, I saw him sitting cross-legged and facing the open door of his home. His eyes were open, though he made no acknowledgement of me until I entered the hut.

“Greetings, Dream Master.”

“Greetings, Young Dreamer. I see by your expression you are displeased by your efforts.”

I opened my mouth to answer, but his raised hand denied any response.

He gestured to an earthenware bowl upon a knee-high table. “Eat. You must first replenish your strength. Although ours is primarily a mental pursuit, without maintaining strength of body your concentration and focus will surely suffer.”

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The savory smell from the bowl filled my nostrils, and I could all but taste the spiced stew. My stomach growled embarrassingly.

“Thank you, Dream Master.” I sat upon one of the soft cushions and pulled the table over my lap.

A meaty bone stuck out of the bowl, and I set to devouring it, soon tossing the remnant out of the hut for one of the dogs that roamed the village. The stew was cold, but this didn’t stop me from gorging upon it any less quickly.

Sated, I belched and released a satisfied sigh.

Through it all, Jopol-Opo sat quietly, patiently. “Now, tell me of your latest efforts.”

I glanced around his hut while I collected my thoughts. Like most, it held sitting cushions, several low tables, and a pallet. Jopol-Opo had an affinity for scrimshaw, and his hut held many of the carven figures. Pale, flickering candles lit the single room.

“You’re right. I failed to light the candle. If I can’t master such a simple task...” I shook my head in disappointment.

“In your dream, how did you go about lighting it?”

“I envisioned two sticks, but I couldn’t get a flame to start. I’m not very skilled at lighting a fire when awake—I suppose that carried over into my dream.”

“Why did you envision the sticks?”

I didn’t answer right away. There are other techniques, but I wasn’t particularly proficient in them either. I knew he was leading me somewhere, but I couldn’t see the destination. “I—that’s how one starts a fire.”

“What is the *easiest* way to start a fire?”

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Again, I considered all the various techniques, though I suspected his question wasn't meant to be so straightforward. I was becoming frustrated. Why couldn't he just tell me the solution? Why must I start at the beginning to learn what he already knew? It would save so much time if he'd just—

“From an existing fire!” The path upon which he led me cleared of all blockage, revealing its straight, clear course.

He smiled.

“If I could envision the sticks, I could just as easily have envisioned a burning torch or another lit candle.”

His smile widened. “In Dream Casting, we have an extraordinarily potent capacity, for nearly anything can be imagined while dreaming. Anything but that thing which you wish to accomplish. Were you to simply dream the candle to be lit, it would not be so. But you can dream any tool you need to effect the outcome you desire.”

All my frustration with Jopol-Opo vanished, replaced by deep respect and even awe for his seemingly boundless patience. Now that I had the answer, it was as obvious to me as it surely was to him all along. I felt foolish for not seeing the solution sooner.

“I won't forget this lesson.”

“Then you have not failed.”

I spent the next months and years learning, practicing, and—I'd like to think—mastering many other tasks of increasing difficulty through Dream Casting—mending clothes, restoring

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weapons, repairing huts. I came to understand that there was any number of ways to accomplish a particular task, though these ways were not all of equal efficiency.

When I reached adulthood, Jopol-Opo assigned me the task of raising a boulder to the top of a knoll, then replacing it in its original position. This would normally be a simple task, yet, for every day of the week, I was to move the boulder in a different manner. Jopol-Opo wished to test my ability to approach problems in multiple ways and to find the most efficient solution for a given scenario.

As Jopol-Opo explained it, “In practice, one or more solutions may be denied to you due to the realities of your situation, so the ability to find alternate solutions is essential. This is true in life as well as in Dream Casting.”

The first day, I dreamt of a large group of people who pushed the boulder up the slope, then back down. I next imagined a team of beasts, tied to the boulder, that drew it up and down the incline. For another attempt, I conceived of a giant who could raise the boulder through sheer strength. And for yet another, I envisioned an enormous dragon that easily lifted the boulder in its expansive claws.

Each time, Jopol-Opo congratulated me on my success but insisted I could find a yet cleverer means to move the boulder. What could have been easier than a dragon?

“Imagination—the faculty of creativeness—is one of the most important assets of a Dream Caster,” he said, again sitting across from me in his hut. “Yet it is one of the most difficult to bend to one’s will. One must learn to summon creativity rather than wait for it to come at its own pace.”

No matter how much I learned, Jopol-Opo managed, somehow, to praise my progress while simultaneously making plain how much more I had to learn.

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“Conceptually, I understand, Dream Master, but that tells me nothing about how to achieve it.”

Jopol-Opo sipped from his steaming tea, and the calming potpourri of honey, ginger, and jasmine wafted from the cup. “Have you ever seen a giant, let alone a dragon?”

“No, of course not.”

“Yet you imagined one to move the boulder.”

“I—well, I’ve heard tales of giants and dragons.”

“Tell me, from your earliest lessons, what is the fundamental tenet of Dream Casting?”

That I knew well. “That nearly anything can be imagined to accomplish our goal, short of simply willing the goal itself.”

“Well said. That statement tells you of the power of Dream Casting. A power limited only by the limitations of our imagination.”

I knew all this. No matter how frustrated or impatient I became, his tone remained calm and kind—which was all the more infuriating.

“As with the dragon,” he explained, “creativity often takes the form of asking, ‘What if what is so was not so?’”

My first inclination was to balk, though I had enough sense to remain silent and think on that statement.

“In Dream Casting,” he continued, “we are not limited by the way things are. We may, no matter how strangely, remake and reshape our dream world to suit our needs. Question even the most fundamental workings of the world.”

I thought long on Jopol-Opo’s comment about the “fundamental workings of the world,” and, once freed of the constraints of reality, I found an endless variety of solutions. In my next

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attempt, I dreamed that the boulder weighed no more than a pebble, and my dream-self carried it up and down the slope. Another time, I dreamed that the natural law which caused a boulder to roll downhill had reversed, causing it to roll uphill. Then, to return it to its original place, I restored the normal working of natural law. For my last attempt, I dreamed that the land itself rolled and moved, pushing the boulder atop the knoll, then back down to the ground.

Jopol-Opo beamed at my solutions, and he named me a Dream Adept, a Learner no longer.

During my second year as an Adept, I awoke in the practice cave to find Jopol-Opo sitting patiently and sipping his aromatic tea. He never visited me during my practice, and the unusualness of his presence had me sitting bolt upright on the pallet. A single taper gave just enough light to see the concern lining his face. The smell of its smoke was noticeably acrid against the cool, damp earthiness of the cave and the steaming, calming redolence of the tea.

Whatever the issue was, I was comforted by the fact that it wasn't dire enough to interrupt my casting—something that was never done except in the most drastic of circumstances. Even without Jopol-Opo's sobering presence, as an Adept, I was proficient in transitioning from hypnagogy to full wakefulness and awareness without the grogginess and disorientation that was often attendant upon waking.

“Greetings...Dream Master.”

Despite the urgency that surely brought him, his voice and demeanor were as calm and relaxed as if we were sitting for tea in his hut. “Young Adept.”

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I sighed inwardly. No matter how old I was, I was always *young* to him.

He took a final sip of his tea and set the cup down. The clank of the earthenware vessel upon the stone resounded in the echoing silence of the cave.

“This very morning, a scout brought word of an incursion into the territory of the tribes. We are nearest, and so the responsibility to investigate is ours.”

“An...incursion?”

“Yes. Time to time, foreigners find their way here, whether intentionally or inadvertently. The former are more problematic and often require incentive to leave. As you will, one day, bear this responsibility yourself, I would have you accompany me, if you are not too fatigued.”

As Dream Master, Jopol-Opo was responsible for countering such foreign threats. His word carried great weight with the headman of our tribe, and rarely would the leader oppose the Dream Master’s suggestion or fail to heed his advice in defense of our people.

“Of course, Dream Master.” Any fatigue I felt dissipated in anticipation of this adventure.

Not long after, Jopol-Opo and I, escorted by five warriors, set off eastward under the descending sun. One of the warriors was the selfsame scout who had brought word of the foreigners. The cooling air and the air of excitement about our band seemed to breathe life into our steps.

Against the backdrop of distant hoots, howls, and chirrups, we followed game trails for most of our passage through the forest, which began to thin as we approached the craggy foothills of the mountains. The sun had set, and we decided to camp beneath the sheltering canopy.

Early the next morning, we were on our way, across the foothills then ascending the forested side of the mountain. The warriors knew the lesser paths upon the slope, and so we

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avoided the main defile on the chance the interlopers already walked its bed. From a rocky vantage, we observed a camp of perhaps a hundred men at the base of the far side of the mountain.

The camp sat under the eaves of another lush, green expanse of forest, beyond which lay the dazzling blue expanse of endless water. Though I couldn't see them, one warrior claimed he could make out the large vessels such men used to cross the water. He said they bore the design of a fish of some sort leaping from the water.

"They're half the number of our village," I observed with some trepidation.

"That is likely not all of them," Jopol-Opo replied. "I cannot guess their total number, though they surely left some contingent behind to guard their vessels, and some smaller bands would have been dispatched as scouts."

One of the warriors returned, hard of breath, with a report. "They've begun sending parties into the pass."

I was infected by the urgency in the warrior's voice, yet Jopol-Opo ever maintained his poise and equanimity.

"Now that we know the distribution of their main force, we can begin our counter efforts. Without knowing exactly where they are positioned, we could not properly influence them. Our goal is to encourage them to depart by convincing them that their efforts would be better spent elsewhere."

Hearing the calm and confidence from Jopol-Opo settled my own fears and eased my worry. "Won't you kill them all?"

"Absolutely not." The rebuke in his tone was unmistakable—one of the few instances I ever heard or provoked such a reaction from him. In a calmer voice, he continued, "At least, not

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yet. We will kill only enough to persuade the others their best course is to depart and never return. If none were to survive, others from their homeland would surely come looking for them and bring even larger numbers. Better to have some return and report that our land is not worth the trouble to explore.”

I stood tall. “We would defeat any others just the same.”

“Perhaps, but why invite conflict? And some wield the power of dreams, yet while awake. One day, we may encounter those who are not so easily defeated. We do not know all that lies beyond the great water. Acquiring and exercising power are in themselves no great feat; more difficult—and the mark of wisdom—is knowing when to exercise power and to what degree.”

Admittedly, the invaders hadn’t indeed threatened us yet, though, viscerally, I wanted to strike out and destroy them. Still, I couldn’t dispute Jopol-Opo’s argument. “Of course, Dream Master. What you say holds truth and wisdom.” My tone was suitably contrite.

His features softened, and he nodded before moving to sit cross-legged against a thick-boled tree. His eyes closed, and his breathing slowed into a steady rhythm. It wasn’t long before clouds so dark that they appeared black formed above the camp and unleashed such a torrential downpour that I thought the interlopers would be swept away in a flood. Lightning struck with such frequency and ferocity that, even atop the mountain, our hair stood at end. Yet we remained untroubled beneath a clear sky.

Then the warriors and I were knocked from our feet as the ground shook, creating such a crash as though the mountain itself would crumble underfoot. Indeed, a portion of it did fall to block the defile, and a mass of boulders tumbled toward the camp in a roar that drowned out even the thunder of the lightning strikes.

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The warriors mumbled in awe of the power displayed by Jopol-Opo. I, of course, understood the principles behind how he wrought such effects, though I'd never attempted anything so destructive.

Below, the rockslide had crushed many of the intruders, and more lay dead from the lightning. Their meager tents and shelters had been blown away by winds that just as easily tossed men about like the figures in Jopol-Opo's hut. The survivors ran about in chaos and panic, most seeking shelter beneath the forest.

Then the lightning ceased, the rain stopped, and the clouds dissipated. The mountain and forest below were preternaturally quiet in the aftermath of that devastation. I could see no one alive below.

I looked to Jopol-Opo, whose eyes were only half open from fatigue, and his breathing was heavy. Despite his ostensibly restful state, the mental exertion of Dream Casting could be exhausting, and more so the longer one engaged in casting.

I knelt beside Jopol-Opo and put a hand on his shoulder.

One warrior peered down the mountain, then reported, "I'd guess a quarter to half their number lay dead, and the rest have retreated into the forest."

"I do not doubt they will require further discouragement," Jopol-Opo said between strained breaths. "But we shall wait until morning to see what they do."

I clenched my fists. "Dream Master, allow me to pursue them."

"It is near dark, and they are halted for the moment," Jopol-Opo replied. "We will investigate tomorrow."

"This is the time to press our advantage," I argued, and the warriors nodded their agreement. "Don't worry, I'll observe the survivors before deciding what to do."

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“I advise against this course, Young Adept. Strongly.”

In my pride and rush for battle, I heard in his words only a lack of confidence in me, and it made me all the more determined to prove him wrong.

Once true sleep claimed Jopol-Opo, I, escorted by four warriors, descended the mountain. Mindful of loose stones and of rocks that hadn't fully settled, we picked our way along a ridge overlooking the debris that now blocked the pass. I was impatient, though the warrior advised caution, so our progress was slow, and night was upon us as we reached the base of the mountain.

We were in need of sleep, yet I wanted to press the attack against the invaders while they were still disorganized from their losses. As we passed into the forest, we heard voices drawing near us. I didn't understand the words, but their tone didn't sound aggressive nor indicate that they were aware of our presence.

Three warriors moved to intercept the voices, while one stayed by my side. Soon, I heard the shouts and screams of battle. After what seemed a too-long wait, the warriors returned and reported that one of the intruders had escaped.

He would alert others, and I was left with no choice. I would finish this this night.

The warriors had little trouble following the trail left by the survivor. The trail led to a clearing that held a camp, which was already in an uproar, with parties beginning to organize.

Moving a short distance away, I sat against a tree and closed my eyes, concentrating on the vision of the camp until I crossed the boundary of wakefulness. In my anger—which, I now understand, was directed as much at my own failure in being discovered as at the interlopers themselves—I was sorely tempted to set fire to the forest surrounding them and burn away all traces of them. Yet, what I did was, in the view of Jopol-Opo, nearly as bad: I unleashed a swarm

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of biting insects that carried the blood plague. Soon, their blood would turn to poison, and they would all die in burning, feverish agony.

Then I set fire to their vessels until the cinders were washed away by the waves of the great water.

The warriors and I returned to the mountain and ascended the slope, reaching our camp as morning began to make itself known. Already, Jopol-Opo stood staring toward the endless water. The deep sadness in his eyes told me that he knew what I'd done.

He neither scolded nor condemned me, only looked at my triumphant expression, dropped his head, then ordered the same four warriors who'd accompanied me to remain and search for and eliminate any survivors. He, the fifth warrior, and I returned to the village.

After the incident, my lessons continued, and, though Jopol-Opo never broached the topic of my actions, I could sense the lingering, underlying sadness, perhaps even regret at having begun my training. Yet I was the only other one of the Forest Tribe who held any aptitude for Dream Casting. I myself started to hope for a confrontation between us—how could that be any worse than the unspoken, pervasive tension? Perhaps that was his intention: to force me to punish myself by his silence.

Yet I did not raise the subject. I felt guilt over disappointing Jopol-Opo, but not over my actions themselves. I believed at the time, and continued to believe, that they were necessary.

As the weeks turned to months, then passed to years, the events of that day grew more distant and less distinct. No others came seeking the invaders, and the relationship between

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Jopol-Opo and me settled back into easy comfort and familiarity. Yet I couldn't help but feel that our relationship had been forever changed, as if some vital aspect had been lost, and I wondered if he held back in my training as a result.

Finally, the time of my test to pass from Adept to Master came. I was to grow an oaknut into a tree of exactly two hundred years to the day in a single night through the manipulation of time. The task could have been accomplished by other means, though the objective was to master the ability to exactly alter the passage of time—by far one of the most difficult aspects to control while dreaming. However, for Dream Masters like Jopol-Opo, such mastery allowed them to live far beyond a normal lifespan.

For weeks, my attempts achieved trees that were far too young or old. Then, one evening, as I again struggled, I suddenly found myself standing within a forest of pines. It was night, yet enough moonlight and starlight filtered to the understory that I could make out my immediate surroundings.

Startled and disoriented at the sudden change in setting, I turned around and looked for any familiar sign. The forest wasn't near my village, as ours were not so filled with needle-bearing trees. I fought the inclination to give into panic and tried to consider my dilemma as Jopol-Opo would.

I'd heard tales of Dream Senders—Dream Masters who had the power to transport themselves to unknown locations through their dreams. Perhaps I'd unwittingly awoken such a power in myself. The most direct method to learn the truth would be simply to will myself awake; if I found myself in the pine forest, I was indeed a Dream Sender. However, first, I wanted to explore this mysterious setting.

I imagined a burning torch to better light my way, and a brand appeared in my hand.

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Suddenly, an echoing cry for help filled the night. Craning my neck in every direction, I searched for the source of the shout, but I could see nothing through the trees.

Then, I recalled that I'd heard such a cry the instant before I appeared in the forest.

The cry came again, higher pitched and more desperate. I willed myself to float above the canopy, though the darkness made it difficult to see any distance. I tried to turn night to day but found that I could not, nor was I able to make the forest disappear.

As an experiment, I envisioned myself holding a knife, and then I was. It seemed that I could affect only myself but not my environment.

A huge form suddenly rose—grew—from the forest some distance away. I couldn't see its face, though I could discern that it was a man. He wore his hair in a queue and trained an enormous bow and arrow at some unseen—at least by me—enemy.

The very sky opened as an enormous maw appeared above the giant man. He screamed and loosed the arrow, which disappeared into the cavernous mouth. The maw closed about him. As soon as his form disappeared, I found myself back in my own dream before an immature oak.

Willing myself awake, I sat up and breathed heavily, alone in the dark of the cave. I was not a Dream Sender.

What had I just experienced? My first inclination was to tell Jopol-Opo, yet I hesitated. How would I describe what happened? We'd finally returned to a state of harmony and trust after the incident with the invaders. Would he think me foolish, suffering from dream madness, in which one cannot discern dreaming from waking? For the moment, I decided to say nothing.

My next several attempts at growing the oak did not even meet my earlier progress, as I was so distracted by what I'd seen and kept expecting it to occur again.

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I visited Jopol-Opo one evening after these disappointing sessions and found him uncharacteristically distracted.

After recounting my recent failures to him for the third time, I asked, “What troubles you, Dream Master?”

His eyes regained focus, and he seemed to finally look upon me. “I apologize, my student. I have come by some disturbing news.”

He paused, though I didn’t press him. He would tell me when he was ready.

“I fear that war may soon be upon us.”

I rocked back on my cushion. “Do more invaders come?”

“War among the tribes.”

I was frozen in surprise and shaken by the weight and import of that statement.

War between the tribes? Such a thing hadn’t occurred since long before I was born—perhaps before Jopol-Opo walked the earth. Each village had, by custom, a Dream Caster and an apprentice: Between these two, all a village’s needs could be met. There was nothing to be gained through war that we couldn’t obtain more easily through Dream Casting.

From the stories of ancient wars, such conflicts were invariably short, over nearly as soon as they began. Whichever Dream Caster struck first would kill the opposing casters, and the remainder of the tribe would be left helpless, to be either destroyed or left weakened and undefended. The sole retaliation for the defeated tribe was to kill the enemy’s Dream Casters through mundane means—when awake, we are subject to the same frailties as all others, and, while casting, our physical bodies are defenseless unless protected by another. However, against the power of Dream Casters, such attempts rarely succeeded.

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This line of thought brought me back to the present with sudden dread. If war was coming, Jopol-Opo and I were the foremost targets. Yet, this realization brought with it another: If war *was* coming, wouldn't it have already come? Wouldn't we have already been struck down by the enemy Dream Caster?

All this flashed through my thoughts in mere moments, yet all my mouth could manage was, "Why?"

"Karam-Ara, Dream Caster of the River Tribe, was struck down while casting and while surrounded by others who witnessed his end. It was no mundane weapon that brought him low."

I remained quiet for some time while I considered that news. "His apprentice?"

"Yet lives."

It was unusual that the attacker would eliminate Karam-Ara and not his apprentice. "The apprentice hasn't retaliated?"

"He cannot, not until he learns who is responsible. An attack against an unproven perpetrator will unite the other tribes against the River Tribe. The Dream Casters of all the tribes will assemble upon the second moonless night from now to resolve the matter."

I spent the time until the corroboree, as such gatherings of Dream Casters were called, in further effort to attain the rank of Master, though my results continued to fall short, as I was now additionally distracted by the persistent fear of being struck down from afar. Days before the gathering, we received word that another Dream Caster, this one an Adept of the Sky Tribe, was found dead. Her death was not witnessed, and no injuries caused by weapons were found on her body, and so she was presumed to have also been killed by another Dream Caster.

Finally, Jopol-Opo and I, accompanied by ten warriors, departed for the corroboree, which would be held on neutral ground: the Standing Glade, a hallowed clearing believed to be

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the site where the First Dream Caster, all those uncounted generations before, first realized and developed his power. It was so named for the thirteen menhirs—one for each tribe—situated about its perimeter, forming a cromlech.

The Standing Glade was a day-and-a-half's travel west from our village and centrally located between us—the Forest Tribe—the Sky Tribe, the River Tribe, and the Swamp Tribe. Other tribes would journey from more distant locations.

Our trip was uneventful except for a hard rain that dampened my spirits as much as it did the sodden ground. When we arrived, seven other tribes were present, and we were forced to wait for two days after the appointed night for the most distant tribes to arrive.

Finally, under a sliver of the moon, twenty-four Dream Casters—two each from eleven tribes, one master-less apprentice, and one apprentice-less master—sat before our respective menhirs. A low fire burned at the center of the glade, and the warriors stood in the narrow verge between the cromlech and the trees.

As the aggrieved and the one who called for the gathering, Karam-Ara's apprentice spoke first, recounting the events of his master's death.

“A child had taken ill, and her family brought her to Master Karam-Ara to heal her affliction. Normally, such a minor task would have been entrusted to me, but Karam-Ara didn't want to interrupt my other duties. Thus, I didn't witness Master Karam-Ara's death myself. I call the child's parents to bear witness to the events.”

A man and woman stepped into the clearing from among the ring of warriors and began their tale. However, my attention was focused on the on the hair of the men of the River Tribe. In the same way that the males of the Forest Tribe shaved our heads, the men of each tribe wore

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their hair in a particular manner. Those of the River Tribe had their hair braided into a queue, drawing my thoughts to the strange incident I'd experienced during Dream Casting.

My attention returned to the man as he spoke. "...her fever broke, but her recovery was interrupted before she returned to full health. I glanced at Karam-Ara, and his faced twitched as if in an unpleasant dream..."

That was unusual: Dream Casters rarely showed any outward sign while engaged in casting.

"...did not rouse even when I shook him. Then he gave a strangled shout and fell dead."

Confused conversations arose around the glade. I looked to Jopol-Opo, who sat in intense, thoughtful silence. I didn't want to interrupt him, but, more so, I feared that I'd again disappoint him when he learned that I'd withheld word of the incident from him. At the time I'd made the decision to keep my silence, I had thought it the right course. Now, it seemed foolish and childish, and the import of events outweighed any apprehension or embarrassment I felt.

I leaned toward Jopol-Opo. "Dream Master."

He turned slowly to face me.

"Some...ah...days before hearing of Karam-Ara's death, as I practiced, I had a most unusual experience. I didn't know what to make of it before, but something now has made me think it was more than a passing oddity."

I stopped to take a breath, feeling as if I was babbling, though Jopol-Opo's patient eyes never wavered.

"In my Dream Casting, I was attempting to grow the mature oak, then suddenly I found myself in an unknown forest. But I was yet in a dream, though now I think it was not my own."

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His body stiffened, and eager expectancy replaced patience in his eyes. “What did you see?”

“I saw another—his hair worn in a queue as the men of the River Tribe. He was swallowed by a maw that appeared in the sky.”

As soon as I finished, Jopol-Opo stood, taking not even a moment to respond to my tale.

He addressed the corroboree. “I am Jopol-Opo, Dream Master of the Forest Tribe.” He paused to allow attention to turn to him. “My apprentice is a Dream Shaper, and he has vital information which bears upon these incidents.” He looked to me. “Tell them.”

Dream Shaper. The unknown title distracted me, and I was a moment before rising to speak. I looked slowly and uncertainly around the circle of Dream Casters, then cleared my throat before reciting the tale again.

The reaction from the corroboree was immediate and excited as twenty-two voices spoke at once. I glanced about, surprised by the vehemence of the response. When I looked to Jopol-Opo, his face was set in grim determination, though when he turned toward me I saw hints of sadness in his eyes.

At the time, I misunderstood the reason for that sadness—thinking it was because of my failure to mention the incident sooner—and I began to feel the defensive warmth of anger.

One voice, tinged with disbelief, rose above the cacophony. “How can we be sure? Such a creature hasn’t been known in generations.” I couldn’t discern who the speaker was.

Another voice, leaden with fear, added, “How can we hope to defeat it?”

Another: “This threatens not only us, but the whole of our tribes if we cannot Dream Cast.”

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Jopol-Opo stepped forward. As his confident calm began to infuse the others, the din of voices subsided, leaving only the crackle of the fire and the incessant chirps of unseen insects.

When he spoke, his own voice held the sure wisdom to which I was accustomed.

“We will defeat the creature, together, through our Dream Shaper.”

In the wake of the uproar, the Dream Master of the Sky Tribe recounted the death of her apprentice, but there was little to tell.

The corroboree agreed to reconvene, upon the next moonless night, to do battle with the creature.

As we prepared to leave, Jopol-Opo offered parting advice to the gathering. “We should refrain from significant Dream Casting until the creature is dealt with.”

No one argued the point.

I walked beside Jopol-Opo upon the return journey to our village.

“I’m sorry, Dream Master. If I’d said something sooner...” I dropped my head.

“We would be in much the same position as we now find ourselves. One other may yet live—or not. We cannot know. *You* could not have known. However, now, you are the key to our survival.”

I nearly laughed at the notion, though Jopol-Opo was not given to jests, and I’d never known him to speak idly.

He added, “You will also face the greatest danger.” Before I could ask him what he meant, he continued, “We have much to do to prepare you for what is to come.”

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“Because I’m a Dream Shaper?” The term had piqued my curiosity.

He nodded. “Yes.” Then he answered my unspoken question as well. “There are those among the Dream Casters who possess powers beyond those common to us all. The possession of such powers follows no pattern but appears to be a chance of birth, though they manifest only when one achieves a certain level of mastery of Dream Casting.

“Dream Senders are able to transport themselves to places they have never seen. Dream Shifters can transform themselves into other beings and creatures. Dream Shapers have the power to enter the dreams of others and observe or even influence those dreams.”

“But I could influence only myself.”

“That was because the creature you encountered was a Dream Shaper, of a sort, and was far too powerful for you to overcome alone.”

“What was it?” I felt a shiver at the memory.

“We call it a dream stalker. We know not its origin, but it attacks only through dreams and is attracted to the magic of our casting. The more powerful the casting, the stronger the attraction. Fortunately, they are rare, though the last time we encountered one, we lost half the Dream Casters of the tribes, including my own mentor. A dream stalker enters and assumes control of a caster’s dreamscape, preventing him from escaping his own dream. There, it devours the caster’s dream-self, which kills the physical body as well.

“Although I am no Dream Shaper, my mentor was, so I have some small knowledge of such things. I will help you, as I can, master this power. Through you, all the Dream Casters of the tribes will join together to battle the creature.”

I swallowed; my mouth was dry. I’d yet to complete my test to become a master, and the survival of the tribes now fell in to me.

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We arrived at the village the next day, shortly after the time of mid-meal. After a hastily eaten plate of nuts and vegetables—which I hardly tasted in my distraction—Jopol-Opo set to my training in earnest.

“When you entered the dream of Karam-Ara—I can only surmise that, in his desperation, he sent out a call for aid, which you unknowingly answered. Now, we must hone your power until you can form such a link at will. Let us both enter our dreaming states. I will call to you, and you to me, and we shall see if our calls can be heard.”

In the quiet of the training cave, we sat facing one another, closed our eyes, and measured our breathing until our conscious minds passed into near-sleep. However, fear and anxiety found a hold in my mind and prevented me from properly concentrating. Soon, I opened my eyes and sat breathing heavily.

When Jopol-Opo roused, I expected anger or annoyance in his reaction, though I found understanding—and perhaps pity. He took a nearby candle and blew out its flame.

“Light the candle,” he instructed. When I just stared blankly at him, he added, “Your mind is unsettled. To settle it—just as when pushing one’s body to new extents—begin with simple tasks with which you are well acquainted.”

Despite my misgivings, I fell from wakefulness and lit the candle without difficulty. He then gave me a succession of practice tasks to increasingly focus my concentration. As I completed each task, my mind indeed found focus, and I confidence.

As I completed the tasks, my mind indeed found focus, and I confidence.

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“Now, let us again attempt to find one another in our dreams,” Jopol-Opo suggested.

“Concentrate upon us, here, in this cave.”

We both passed from waking. In my dream, I saw myself in the grotto, though I didn't see the Dream Master. I called to him, and thought I could hear his voice, yet I couldn't place its source. My dream-self left the cave and wandered the forest while continuing to call his name, though the farther I moved from the cave the fainter was his voice.

Upon our waking, I said, “I could hear you calling, Dream Master.”

“And I could hear you, yet somehow we could not join in our dreams.”

“If I can't do this, Dream Master, what will become of us?” My heart raced. “The dream stalker will destroy us, one by one, until none of our kind remain?”

“I cannot say. If the creature devoured us all, it would destroy its own means of survival. Or perhaps others with our power exist elsewhere, and it would seek them out. Whatever the truth, it holds no sway over what we must do. Do not become distracted by an unknown and unknowable future. You may use an expected or hoped for outcome to guide your current actions, but the ultimate responsibility for your actions falls to the present.

“Rest now. We will continue at first light.”

“Yes, Dream Master.” Yet true, restful sleep did not come.

In the morning, Jopol-Opo and I shared a hearty first meal and few moments of quiet relaxation before continuing our exercise.

“Let us see if a night's rest and a nourishing meal affect the outcome,” he said.

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We passed into our casting, again imagining ourselves in the cave, and, again, I could hear his voice—and he mine—but we could not merge our dreams. For days, then a week and more, we struggled to find one another in our dreaming states, but without success.

“The most skilled Dream Senders can view the world through a dreamscape,” Jopol-Opo said one day, after another unsuccessful session. “Once they select a distant site to which to travel, they anchor their consciousness to that site, allowing the transport of their physical form. I suspect Dream Shapers do much same, though viewing and anchoring their consciousness to the dreams of others, without the transport of their body. I fear there is something, some needed act, which only you can perform. Yet, I do not know how to help you find it.”

It was the first time I’d known Jopol-Opo to be at a loss, and that frightened me more than the dream stalker.

“Tell me more of the time you were drawn into Karam-Ara’s dream.”

“I don’t know. There’s not much more than what I already told. I was concentrating on the manipulation of time, then found myself in the strange setting.”

Jopol-Opo was quiet, and remained so for some time, as he thought. He lit a fire by hand, seeped his favored tea in boiling water, and sat back with a steaming cup, all without saying a word other than to offer me some tea. I declined.

Finally, he asked, “Think hard, Dream Shaper. Did you hear or feel anything in your dream before the transition?”

“Let me retrieve my notes from the time. They may help me remember.” I left for my hut and returned with my journal.

I inhaled deeply of the calming aroma of Jopol-Opo’s tea and reread my account from that day. “I *had* heard a call before leaving my dream and entering Karam-Ara’s.”

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“What was the call?”

I hadn't understood or recorded the exact words. “It was a cry for help. But I didn't so much *hear* the words as sense them or know them.”

“And what were your thoughts at that moment?”

I settled back and closed my eyes in concentration, thinking back to that day. I'd been frustrated by my unsuccessful attempts to manipulate time. I feared I might never succeed and would remain an Adept. “Frustration. Anger. Fear.”

Jopol-Opo was thoughtful. “You felt the same emotion at the very same moment Karam-Ara knew great fear. And perhaps the dream stalker's having already pierced the barrier to Karam-Ara's dream allowed you to answer that cry.” He sighed. “I truly do not know. If we had months or years, I have no doubt we could hone your power, but we do not. The tribes cannot afford a delay, or the creature will devour us individually. We must recreate the conditions under which you found Karam-Ara's dream.”

“Dream Master, no! What if I cannot? What if it...it...”

“You must. We must. I will partake of a powerful casting to attract the creature. Once it arrives, I will call out to you. I may not be able to escape the dream myself and will need you to draw me out.”

“Dream Master, I...you...”

“My life is in your hands, Dream Shaper.” With that, his eyes closed, and he passed into casting.

The pressure I felt was very much real as I too entered my casting state and arrived in a dreamscape that was identical to my waking surroundings, save that I was alone in the grotto. As I still hadn't mastered time in my dreams, I couldn't say how long I'd waited, but it seemed quite

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a while indeed. I began to worry that I'd missed Jopol-Opo's call and that, when I awoke, I would find him dead. I nearly left my dreaming state to check on him, though, fearing that if I did I might yet miss his call, I did not.

As I wrestled with the decision whether to awaken or not, I thought I heard a faint echo. I pushed all other thoughts from my mind and concentrated on that hint of a whisper.

I heard it again, only a breath louder. It was my name.

I concentrated on that sound, on Jopol-Opo, on us together in the cave.

A heartbeat later, I was still in the grotto, but Jopol-Opo seemed to have blinked into existence before me. The roof of the cave had been replaced by an enormous, gaping maw, circular and filled with rows upon rows of dagger-like teeth.

Jopol-Opo was directly beneath the maw and shouting my name. The toothy opening advanced toward the Dream Master. A wall of stone appeared between the two, though it shattered moments later. The walls of the cave vanished, and I could see a thin, tapering tail extend from behind the maw, yet no torso or body was visible.

I leapt toward Jopol-Opo and wrapped my arms around him. In a blink, we found ourselves again in the quiet calm of the cave, but yet within my dreaming. A moment later, we both awoke to find ourselves still sitting upon the stone of the grotto.

"Dream Master?"

"I am well." Despite his words, his breath was heavy and his face wan. Sweat beaded his brow. "My thanks."

It was both infuriating and comforting how he always maintained such composure. "I nearly didn't hear your call."

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He smiled wearily. “I held faith in you.” His smile disappeared. “That creature was strong. I could not have long held out against it. It breached each of my defenses in moments.”

“How can we ever hope to kill it?”

“The maw of the creature cannot be harmed directly. Only its tail is vulnerable. We will lose many, but it can be done. Just as Dream Casting allows any tool to be imagined within the dreamscape to effect changes in the physical world—when battling within the dreamscape, the same is true, but without any corresponding effects in the physical world.”

I suspected the answer, yet I asked, “Is the same true for the creature?”

“Yes,” he affirmed. “Our time grows short until the next corroboree. I do not wish to risk Dream Casting again until we are assembled and prepared to battle the creature.” At my uncertain, semi-dread-filled expression, he added, “I am certain you will find the strength when it is needed.”

I wished I shared his confidence.

Under a moonless sky, the corroboree assembled again at the Standing Glade. We received word that the Dream Masters of the Mountain Tribe and the Steppe Tribe had been killed, and their apprentices would not be attending. Already we lost four from our side.

We took our places about the cromlech, and Jopol-Opo explained our strategy. “Each of us will enter our dreaming states, centered upon this glade and focused upon my apprentice.”

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Jopol-Opo must have recognized the doubt and unease in my expression, for he smiled and said, “Just as the shared, extreme emotion had allowed you to find me and Karam-Ara, I believe the combined focus of so many will serve as a beacon for you.”

I thought, *If not, one or more of those gathered here would encounter the dream stalker alone and perish. And I would be blamed.* How I wished Jopol-Opo were the one with the power of Dream Shaping, and not I.

The Dream Casters all closed their eyes and passed from wakefulness. I sweat and felt ill, as if two feral animals fought in my belly, as I measured my breathing and entered the dreamscape myself.

I was alone within the glade, the unattended menhirs standing ominously around me. Yet the glade was not silent, for I heard many voices calling to me. The calls were not loud, barely more than whispers, but clear nonetheless.

I thought first of Jopol-Opo, concentrated on his voice among the chorus. Fortunately, in my dreaming state, I couldn't feel the dryness of mouth, shortness of breath, or other physical sensations of panic. Still, my mind filled with a tumult of unreason and irrationality that severed my concentration and silenced the voices. Yet, despite the turmoil, one thought remained and became a nearly tangible thing: What if I failed?

As one drowning, I seized on that single thought, used it as a focus to calm the storm of doubts. I found strength in the knowledge that I'd before succeeded with Jopol-Opo, and I assured myself that he wouldn't have put his trust in me—Dream Shaper or not—if I were not equal to the task.

I was again able to hear the voices, and my fear had been replaced by a sense of raging urgency. Focusing again on Jopol-Opo's voice, I called to him. Through his voice, I sensed a

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connection not to him but to his dreamscape, as if I were joined to it by some thin thread. No light or other visible representation marked this connection; rather, it manifested as a vaguely perceived trace or suggestion, like a puff of air when passing a thin crack in a wall.

I followed that invisible thread, passing beyond the confines of my dream, and found Jopol-Opo alone in the glade, save for a hungry, tooth-filled maw. He sent great flame after flame at the creature, though each was extinguished before causing any harm. All the while, the maw drew nearer to him. I grabbed Jopol-Opo's arm and, retracing the figurative thread, allowed myself to fall back into my own imagined glade.

"My thanks, again," he said once we were away from the dream stalker. "It seems the creature took offense at my previous escape and has focused its attention on me. You must bring the others."

I nodded and began seeking connections to the dreamscapes of the others. With each found thread, my confidence grew and the next was easier discovered. I'd assembled nearly all the Dream Casters when I felt an assault against the indistinct, ethereal boundary of my dreamscape.

It was a new, unique sensation, as if my mind were a bubble and something were attempting to pierce its border. The strength of the assault was staggering. Even within my dream, I was driven to my knees as if struck physically. The other Dream Casters within the glade even sensed the breaching force and turned about, looking for its source.

I couldn't have held out against the might of the dream stalker if I'd wanted to. Instead, I dropped any resistance or defense, and the creature blinked into existence above the center of the glade and seemed momentarily disoriented, as if pushing against a door that suddenly opened.

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Jopol-Opo shouted orders. “Half, attack the creature! All others defend the Dream Shaper! If he falls, we are undone.”

I don’t know whether the dream stalker understood Jopol-Opo or if it sensed my will maintaining the shared dreamscape, but it turned toward me and advanced. The interior of the mouth was not that of an ordinary animal: it had no tongue or palate, no uvula or throat, only a featureless blackness beyond its rows of teeth. Strangest of all was that it emitted no roar or growl or any sound whatsoever; it was utterly silent. Its thin tail lashed behind the dark opening.

One apprentice wasn’t swift enough to put up a defense or evade the inexorable maw and was swallowed whole. As he passed into that blackness, his form simply vanished, and I sensed my connection to his dreamscape sever. At that moment, I was relieved my dreamscape self couldn’t react to the terror that would have had my physical body shaking.

It had no eyes, yet I could sense its focus on me. Nothing in all my imaginings was as horrifying as staring into that gaping darkness and knowing that I was its target. For the first time in my life, I regretted my capacity to Dream Cast. I wished I was safe in my hut and ignorant of the knowledge that such a creature even existed.

In a pang of self-anger, I berated myself for nearly falling into despair. Then, in a flash of insight, I wondered if the creature could purposefully evoke such doubts to weaken and dishearten its prey. Whether caused by the creature or not, I would have to guard against such debilitating emotions.

The glade underfoot turned to swiftground. Most Dream Casters simply drew themselves into the air; yet one was caught unaware and became distracted. The maw closed about him, and he disappeared from my perception.

Jopol-Opo shouted at me: “This is your dreamscape. You must counter the creature.”

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While holding each of those connections, I concentrated to turn the ground solid again. It felt to be an impossible task against the will of the creature, and I was hard-pressed to transform small patches. Then, all resistance disappeared, and, in an instant, the ground was solid again. My only explanation is that the creature saw no more benefit in the change and had abandoned it, as the Dream Casters now floated easily above.

Before me stood Jopol-Opo and eight other Dream Casters; another nine moved to surround the dream stalker and strike against its whip-quick tail. Spears, arrows, flame, lightning—all were hurled against the creature, but it would defeat each attack in turn. For each assault, the dream stalker summoned a countermeasure or a greater counterattack, such that no side could gain clear advantage. Two attacking Dream Casters were devoured, and Jopol-Opo ordered two of my guardians to replace them.

It was a chaotic, unreal display, as if a hundred dreams—or nightmares—were jumbled together within the mind of a mad dreamer. And I could do nothing. I understood that my role was crucial, that I enabled the others to combine their efforts against our foe. Yet I couldn't help but feel less significant, that I sat cravenly behind their protection and did nothing to aid them.

Through sudden realization and effort of will, I stopped that line of thought. I became more convinced that the creature elicited such irresolution and frailty of conviction to draw me from relative safety, so that it might strike at me directly.

I called out. "Jopol-Opo, I believe the creature seeks to sap our courage and confidence. It's how it overcomes its opponents."

A sudden wind threw several Dream Casters toward the yawning maw, though all but one managed to pull away, and I felt the severance of yet another connection.

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Jopol-Opo nodded and began conveying the warning to the others. The revelation appeared to have some effect, for the dream stalker was driven backward in a sudden barrage of attacks. But it was no way defeated or, seemingly, even injured.

In retaliation, perhaps, the creature began to grow into enormous proportions. In a nearly immediate response, all the Dream Casters, save me, matched its growth. As powerful as the dream stalker was, I thought it clear that it wasn't accustomed to facing so many or such resistance. Nevertheless, our numbers continued to decline and, before too long, that resistance would dwindle until it became wholly ineffective. With each loss, we became weaker and the creature stronger.

A cage appeared around the creature and, in the next instant, disappeared.

The single stroke of fortune for us was that we could not be killed in the dreamscape other than by falling victim to that maw, for we existed independently of our dreaming presence; as such, attacks that would have instantly killed a physical body had little effect other than as a distraction or as a means to draw a victim into the maw. However, the dream stalker lived only within the dreamscape and so must be killed there, providing we could strike where it was vulnerable.

Jopol-Opo looked behind to me. "How do you fare?"

I almost laughed. My role in all this was, by far, the simplest, and I found it wasn't difficult to maintain those many connections. "I'm well."

But I saw on his face real worry. He knew as well that our fall was assured if events continued as they did.

"How did you defeat it before?" I asked, though afraid to distract him.

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“I was but an Adept then and played a small role, but my mentor was a powerful Dream Shaper. When our defeat seemed certain, she ejected us all from the shared dream and, apparently, destroyed it from within, slaying the creature and herself.”

He paused, a dismayed expression on his face. I heard him mumble, “Could it be? Did she not indeed destroy the creature? Could this be the selfsame one?”

I felt another connection vanish.

Jopol-Opo’s expression cleared, and he continued, “I had not mentioned it previously because I hoped beyond hope that that would not become necessary, and I doubt you possess the knowledge to do so anyway. As holder of the dreamscape, you alone can exert control over our shared setting. You must turn the very nature of the dreamscape against the creature. But the creature will attempt to stop you. It will pit its will against yours.”

I snorted dismissively. “I can’t overcome it.”

Jopol-Opo did not coat his tongue in honey. “No, you cannot. But perhaps you can distract it sufficiently. I see, now, we cannot defeat it otherwise.”

I nodded determinedly. I couldn’t do more harm than we already faced.

I assigned the maintenance of those fewer connections to a lesser area of my awareness and focused my will on the dream stalker. I felt its resistance immediately, as if I pushed against a wall of stone. Did I sense it laughing at me? Was it even capable of that? I pressed all the harder, but to no effect whatsoever.

Another connection gone.

Forcing my will against it directly was hopeless. In a flash of intuition worthy of Jopol-Opo, I determined that, if I couldn’t force my way through its will, I would undermine it another way.

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Even if I couldn't control the passage of time as precisely as I should have liked, perhaps I could control it enough to place the dream stalker at a disadvantage. I willed time to slow for the creature while hastening for the Dream Casters, with the intended effect that the Dream Casters could act more quickly than the monster.

Jopol-Opo noted what I was doing and nodded his approval.

I found it more difficult to slow the dream stalker, however, for it kept countering my attempts, so I focused instead on preventing it from quickening to match the time-passage of the Dream Casters. Despite my lack of proficiency in this technique, the tactic did prove successful, for the Dream Casters were beginning to inflict real damage against the creature's tail, and I felt its resistance lessen.

Then I felt a wave of hopelessness, insisting that I was indeed not equal to the task and that it will all be, ultimately, for naught. After a momentary, and nearly disastrous, lapse, I recognized the emotion for what it was and had the epiphany to reflect it back at the dream stalker.

I'm certain that that tack wouldn't have succeeded under other conditions, but perhaps the creature had been weakened enough from the attacks that it was itself susceptible. It began to recede, as if it attempted to flee from the dreamscape.

"Do not!" Jopol-Opo shouted. "Do not let it escape!" I was truly becoming overwhelmed, between maintaining the connections—those fewer that remained—altering the passage of time—such as I could—and, now, attempting to keep the creature trapped among us.

"If it escapes, we shall never hope to have as great an opportunity!"

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I fought to keep it within the bubble of my dreamscape, but, in doing so, I momentarily lost concentration on altering the passage of time. The creature ceased its retreat and sped toward me.

Jopol-Opo intercepted it and disappeared into the fathomless black maw.

Jopol-Opo's connection was gone. My mind screamed. Yet his sacrifice delayed the creature enough to allow me to re-alter time, slowing it enough that I could escape its rush.

Behind it, the remaining Dream Casters continued to strike with enhanced pace at the dream stalker's trailing appendage. Its maw opened impossibly wide, as if roaring in pain, though no sound came, then, suddenly, it winked out of existence.

My physical body must have fallen unconscious, for I awoke some time later in the Standing Glade, surrounded by eleven slumped forms, including that of Jopol-Opo. Eight others sat about with stunned, stricken faces. When they saw me awaken, they approached to offer congratulations and condolences. I didn't doubt their sincerity, but the words rung hollow. I would have traded it all to have Jopol-Opo back or, yet better, to have not had to undergo such an experience at all.

For days and weeks later (I don't even recall the journey from the glade back to the village), I was in a daze. I must have eaten and drank, for I yet lived, but I couldn't bring to mind a single instance of either. No doubt, the others of my tribe must have thought my mind shattered from the ordeal.

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At some point—I can't say how long it had been—a warrior burst into my hut. Before I could react, a spiked, flat-headed club struck him in the back of the head, and he dropped into a silent, dead heap, a blowpipe still clutched in his hand.

The warrior who felled him glared at me, as if his anger was directed at me rather than at the would-be assassin. “Dream Master, while you hide yourself away and selfishly indulge your self-pity, death and war seek us out.”

I still hadn't mastered the manipulation of time and, thus, hadn't earned the title of Dream Master. Yet, as the only one remaining of the tribe capable of Dream Casting, all referred to me by that honorific.

Glancing at the dead assassin, I noted that he'd shaved his head to pass for a member of the Forest Tribe. I looked at the pooling blood, smelled its metallic odor, and roused for the first time in what felt like quite a while.

“This isn't even the first attempt we stopped,” he continued, still full of urgency but seemingly glad to have focused my attention. “You aren't even aware of the first attempt, I'd wager.”

He wasn't wrong.

“The tribes who lost their Dream Casters seek to seize advantage of your...incapacitation.”

This kindled my anger, and I leaped to my feet. After the loss of Jopol-Opo, after I sacrificed so much to help all the tribes, they repay me through assassination. “*I will see to it.*” My tone was grim and determined.

He looked hard into my eyes, then nodded.

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It was then that another warrior, breathless in his haste, charged into my hut. I recognized him as one of our scouts from the eastern mountains.

The newcomer looked briefly at the form on the ground, then turned his attention to me, as if a dead body in my hut hardly warranted comment. “Dream Master, I came as quickly as I could. I was scouting along the mountains, and a large force comes. More of their vessels than I could count. They filled the great water like ants upon a trail of honey. All displayed the image of a fish bounding from the waves.”

My mind reeled from the news, and I wanted to shout in despair and frustration. The warriors looked at me expectantly, as if I could, with a dream, set everything to right again. How I wished I could appeal to Jopol-Opo for his wisdom and guidance. Yet, shamefully, I was relieved I didn’t have to face his renewed judgment at the consequence my actions.

Finis