

## Imaginary Friends

Part of the Bloodstone Bestiary

When I was a child, we lived in a village on the edge of the forest. I suppose it is more accurate to say we lived in the woods outside the village, though. My father was a woodsman and my mother a fletcher, so it was only natural for them to be out in the wilds, and they took us with them. I enjoyed my time in the wild if I am honest. It was quiet and calm, and if you knew and respected the natural, it was even rather safe. Nothing was outstanding or special about those years, to my memory - though at the time, I did not write everything down as I do now, so I may have missed something.

This story, though, is not about my life there. As much as I would like to discuss that, you asked of my experience with monsters, and the mundane details of the life of a woodsman's children aren't what you sought. What is necessary is an understanding of who we were, though. We were not educated folk, at least at the time. My skill for memory and aptitude for learning eventually allowed my parents to secure me a spot as a scribe's apprentice, but it was nothing less than exceptional that they were able to do so. It was, in all descriptions, a changing of stars for me. This did lead to some unwelcome changes.

I had been blessed to have a younger sibling, a sister. She was a few seasons younger than me, and well and proper followed in our parents' footsteps. From an early age, she enjoyed exploring the woodlands. She learned bow craft while working as a fletcher, and she learned to hunt while following my father in the woods. Even though she was young, she was skilled – and she enjoyed the wilds. She loved nothing more than run in the wilds.

It was a lonely life for her, I imagine. There were few children her age, and I was almost always busy with my studies and the constant need to practice script. She played alone for much of her life, as did I, I suppose. But I always had my studies on which to focus my attention. I believed then that loneliness engaged her imagination. She found a way to deal with that on her own. She began telling us stories of Eremurus.

From her descriptions, he was a young boy about her age. The other details, as they so often do with children, tended to change. His appearance or his demeanor often seemed to change based on her whims for that evening when telling the story. At first, it was harmless fun. It was just a girl who needed a friend creating one for her own. She told stories and tales of their adventures out in the wilderness. These were stories of fun, of jumping creeks and running through briars. These were things that friends did in this village, silly and pointless fun. It was healthy for children to play, and so my parents and I wrote it off. It was the same as anyone would have done.

But it became odder. Her descriptions over time became clearer, and they became less friendly. It was clear that her friend had an unhealthy streak. At first, it was only small things. Items were misplaced, things moved to strange locations in the night. Whenever my sister was confronted, she would deny it, and say that it was Eremurus. She was adamant, regardless of the minor punishments that were doled out to her. She never hesitated to claim her innocence and fought our parents' accusations in earnest.

Things did grow worse and worse. More things disappeared, and anytime my sister would be blamed, it seemed that she would act out. She would fight back, crying, and wailing that she hadn't done anything. It eventually became unbearable. Finally, one evening, a fire was set in the house – and again, my parents blamed my sister, though I believed her when she said it wasn't her. Her blaming Eremurus was almost with a tone of defeat in her voice. She was sad, almost betrayed in a way. After a few weeks, the events stopped.

Then, if I am telling the truth, I don't remember her speaking of Eremurus much. I believe she mentioned him from time to time, but for the most part, his name was no longer mentioned as far as I remember. We grew up, and while the occasional misplacement remained, the stories of the boy in the woods faded to memory.

Things were not good, though. It was in those years that the war came to our little village. Conscripts were sought out, and the men of the village were called to service. I was lucky. I was a scribe. I was given the role of a messenger, given a horse, and spent much of the war riding back and forth with messages for commanders. It allowed me to send letters home rather often. I spoke to my sister and mother often enough in this way. The letters were short and often abrupt.

A year into the war, these letters stopped. I would hear soon after that our village had fallen to you and your kind. I often wondered what happened to my father, and when. At least with my mother and sister, I know when something happened to them. When I returned here, I found many people had been killed, including my mother and sister. Such is war, unfortunately. So many of us ended up orphans.

I supposed when your forces dragged me here that it was for something military-related. I would never have expected you to want me here for more superstitious reasons. I was even more curious when your men wouldn't follow me. They walked me to the edge of town and told me to walk to the home in the forest - my home. And so, I did. I had every intention of fleeing when I arrived there. But I saw my house burned down, and I felt a grief I've never felt before. You had taken everything from me, and there was a moment, a few moments, really, of overwhelming vulnerability and loss. I was alone, for the first time in my life, truly alone.

But I had been listening to the troops you brought with you. I listened to the superstitions. I heard them worrying about the pranks, the misplaced and missing items, and I suddenly remembered his name. Eremurus. Was that what you had found? Was that what was causing you trouble? I asked him. It was a foolish thing. There was no one in the woods, so asking an imaginary friend to come out was nonsensical. A foolish prayer from a lonely spirit to another.

Imagine my surprise when he answered. He looked like my sister described. He was constantly shifting his form, not sure which to be. He was an animal, a boy, something in between – all at once. He was so excited to see me. So happy one of the family came. And he excitedly asked if I would play with him if I had brought my sister. It took me some time to explain to him what had happened, to explain the concept of death and war.

He struggled to understand, at least at first. I had to find a way to explain to a nature spirit the concept of pointless violence, inflicted upon the less fortunate by the selfish. It took me time to find the words, but once I had succeeded, I returned to your guards to tell you what I had discovered. The thing

that has been haunting you was a playful spirit, looking for his friend. But listen closely. You've only heard my words for the past few minutes. Aside from my speaking, there has only been silence. Do you hear it now?

That's what happens when you anger a nature spirit. The forest itself has turned on you – but, I could only explain war to it one way. It was simpler than I expected, once I found the word.

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