

THE DEAD GOD, DREAMING

an original short story by Rachel Caine

"It is your time."

The whisper seemed to come from everywhere in the dim quiet haven of the tomb. The stones were ancient, and sometimes they spoke to me, but never in so human a voice. I rose from the empty altar in the empty room. The Dead God's victories were painted in blacks and grays on the walls, stretching away into darkness, and in the lamplight the figures seemed to move, to breathe, to die new deaths.

The Tomb of the Dead God had been my home for days, perhaps weeks, longer than any bride before me who had been told to attend him. It was time, and past time, that the God should send for me.

At the end of the room, in the narrow doorway, stood a priestess of the Burning God. She came a precise three steps closer, knelt and pressed her cheek to the floor. Her oiled black curls spilled like snakes, and the rich smell of living skin seemed exotic and somehow disturbing in this place of the dead.

"Now?" I asked. I was afraid, in spite of my faith, and perhaps it showed. The Burning God's priestess sat back on her heels. She had painted her eyelids orange for the sunrise, her lips gold for midday. A crimson sunset wandered over her bared breasts, and her skirt glittered with gold threads. She was day, and I night; I wore gray skirts, black on my eyes and lips, gray powder on my skin. I was a corpse that had not yet ceased to breathe, and yet I was the more beautiful, and she knew it. Only the most beautiful were called to the Dead God's bed.

"It is time," she repeated. "The priests await you with gifts."

Gifts. Captives, proud and angry, bursting with life. It was no wonder there was a flash of insolence and jealousy in her eyes; the captives should have been given to the Burning God, and were his by right, but the Dead God had precedence over all, even her lord.

And so, because I belonged to him, did I .

I retrieved my belongings from the altar. The black-feathered cloak had been my mother's gift, and as I settled it around my shoulders it fluttered restlessly, impatient to be gone. Beneath the cloak lay the stone dagger I had been given on the morning I had been chosen, the Bride's knife, my strength and my gift. I carried it in my right hand and nodded to the Burning God priestess; she turned and led me out.

Narrow, twisting hallways, reaching for dusty silver light. My black-feather cloak whispered, and the damp smells of stone and mold grew faint, replaced by the tang of metal, dust and dung, the smells of Burning God and man, a half-forgotten life I'd left behind. The silver glow became brass, hurtfully bright even through closed eyes, and as the first heat of day hugged my shoulders I paused and slowly, slowly opened my eyes on the world.

The Burning God priestess glittered as she waited, arms folded, gaze steady. Beyond her, clay houses shouldered each other on the amber dusty street, and the walls bloomed with painted signs and pictures, some comical, some reverent. On Harin the clayworker's house, a blue dog with fierce red teeth snapped at a fleeing robber who clutched gold in one hand. Next door, not to be outdone, old Atawa the goldworker had painted a majestic, fiery bird, beak clenched around what was clearly a blue puppy. The

two men had played out their feuds on their walls all the days of my life, and it was strange to realize that it would go on without me. When I went to the God, new paintings would be done, some of them of the ash-gray woman in the embrace of her pale lover.

It was a disquieting, unwelcome thought, and it tasted strangely of loss.

I did not realize, until we had past several houses, how quiet it was. In the distance, a wheeled cart creaked, and I saw a procession of silent figures following. When I looked again, the cart dragged on alone except for the hunched, shadowy man pulling it, and the wagon's bed was filled with bodies, stacked one on the other, arms and legs stiff as broken sticks.

"This way," the priestess said. I nodded and followed her past quiet houses with closed doors. Most of the doors were marked with the bright red symbol of Burning God. There are sickness in the town. Much sickness.

At the end of the street the temple of the Burning God climbed the sky -- soft gold steps, rich red stone, a glittering throng of priests and priestesses to welcome me. I ignored my guide's attempt to walk faster. The sun felt warm and heavy on my skin, as I imagined the God's hands would feel as I went to his bed. A few minutes in the sun, remembering. My feather cloak whispered secrets as we walked.

At the foot of the steps, my priestess stood aside. I set my bare foot on the first step, and the priest who waited there scattered ashes in my path. They felt gritty and harsh, and the gray haze tasted of death.

I should have counted the steps, to be reverent, but I couldn't think of numbers, couldn't think of anything but this last taste of sun and wind, the vivid colors of the town spread out below, the glitters of Burning God's priests. It was so beautiful. I had never expected that.

At the top of the temple, I passed into the dark stone room of the Dead God.

The light within was silver, reflecting from polished sheets near the altar. I spread my arms in a rustle of feathers and bowed to the empty altar, the darkness behind that I knew was inhabited by the God. As I rose, I saw the captives -- pale men, like bled corpses, their hair brown or gold, the colors of Burning God. They wore thick layers of leather and cloth, and stank of dead meat and fear. Evil strangers, these men. One of them shouted at me in a strange slurring language, his eyes bright with fear. One of them was sick, his eyes vague and gray, his skin erupted in red circles.

The knife felt cold as shadow in my hand, then hot as I slashed it across the first captive's throat. The priests held him over the basin and caught his blood, and when he was drained they carried his corpse away, to be divided into pieces for Burning God.

Four more throats. It seemed dreamlike to me, as I breathed in the thick incense and the smell of their blood; I felt exalted and moved by their sacrifice, so much so that I wept in gratitude. By the death of such base creatures, my people would live. Must live.

And in the midst of the dream, the Dead God came.

He whispered from the shadows, pale, his eyes were black and empty. His hair as dark as midnight. He bared his teeth, and his eyes took on a hunting cat's glow. I waited, silent, as he bent to the bowl, lapping with a neat, strange grace at the offering. The dead captives were taken out, and the priests closed the doors with hollow booms.

I was alone with Death.

"I am your bride," I said, the only words ever spoken in this place, in the intoxication of death. "I was yours on the day I was born. I am your life."

Anxious, aching, restless fear, like a woman waiting on a marriage bed. I knelt and put the knife to my palms, slashing deep. Blood welled in the bowl of my hands.

His lips teased my skin, feather-soft. His hands lifted me up and pressed my back to the cold black stone of the wall. His eyes were beautiful and strange, his mouth wet with my life. I leaned forward to lick at his lips, and his mouth closed around mine, sealing us together. When his teeth tore into my throat it was agony for an instant, like the bright flash of the sun, like the tearing of virginity, and then we were one, falling, falling, drowning together in the sweet red tide.

All too quickly, he stepped away, eyes still cat-bright, my blood swirling and blushing under his skin.

"Lord?" I asked uncertainly, and my knees suddenly felt weak, my head stuffed with darkness. I reached out without meaning to, and his hands caught me, held me upright. His skin was cool and soft. "Am I not pleasing?"

He turned away from me, pacing, flowing into the shadows and out again, the bowl of red between us. The smell of blood was chokingly strong. I read agitation in his steps and feared I had done something wrong, something terrible.

"Lord?" I said again. He paused, eyes gleaming green in the shadow, and lunged forward. His hand dipped into the bowl and came up red and dripping, blood cradled in his palm. He held it out to me.

Did he want me to drink? No, I thought. I looked down at the blood and watched it slowly wind in ribbons down the pallor of his arm, splash on thirsty dark stone.

And then, suddenly, I saw the faces in the blood. The faces of my mother, my sisters, my brother. Slain and rotten, slashed with terrible wounds. My youngest sister's boy crawled weakly in the dust, weeping, his face swollen and black with hideous sickness. I cried out, caught at the Dead God's wrist.

The city, dying. Blood in the streets, on the clay houses. The dead everywhere, the sick feeble and dying.

A city of the dead. And in the midst of them, helpless, stood the Dead God, staring at the destruction of his people.

I flung myself back from the vision, back to the cool support of the wall. He let the blood trickle away through his fingers, watching me.

"Must it be?" I whispered. "Is there nothing to be done?"

He dipped his hand again in the bowl. Held it out to me. Clearly, this time, to drink.

I knew, from the light in his eyes, that I was drinking in Death.

But I drank, the taste copper-bright on my tongue, heavy and choking in my throat. I swallowed

mouthfuls until I could swallow no more, until tears ran hot down my cheeks.

The Dead God sat in the shadows, watching me. I understood there was no leaving this place. I was the Dead God's bride, and my life was his.

When I woke, later, I felt the first sickening flush of fever.

I woke to feverish whispers, and realized that I lay in the embrace of the sun, wrong, so wrong, I should be lying with my lover now, lying cold and still, but my skin was hot and my head ached and I felt a terrible scorching thirst and weakness. Someone dribbled water into my mouth and I drank deeply, gratefully, and looked up into the face of the Burning God priestess who had brought me to my bridal bed.

Her face was streaked with tears, her glittering face paint smeared and awry. She looked lost as a child.

"He is dead," she mourned. They had all taken it up, the keening, devastated cry. "The Dead God is dead."

The tainted blood had killed him. My gift, spilled by my knife, had brought him death, black rotting pustules on his flesh, his beauty ruined. I could not even weep, so great was my despair. I had no God to take me in his arms, to soothe my passing. I was alone.

The Burning God priestesses keened and tore at the body of the Dead God, carrying away bits and pieces. The bits and scraps of flesh would be kept as sacred relics, boxed and displayed in the houses of worshippers. They offered his heart to me, and I ate it hungrily, savoring the cold tough muscle and the copper snap of blood. I fell asleep again, his blood on my hands and on my lips, and dreamed of gray shadows and bright suns, and a city of the dead in which I walked like a whisper, unheard.

"The Dead God is coming," the stones whispered to me. I woke in agony, my body on fire, my throat bloated and thick. My eyes had learned the dark again, and when I raised my head I saw my skin shimmering with blood, drops forcing themselves from my skin like a net of fine jewels. The altar was slick with it, my clothes sodden, my hair wet.

The Burning God priestess sat on the floor, golden skirts spread around her like the God's disk, and watched me. When she saw that I moved, she came forward and bathed my skin with cool water, rising away the blood and wiping me clean with a coarsely woven rag. I tried to drink but the water sickened me. She returned to her vigil, waiting.

My skin began to sweat blood again, slow patient drops that ran down my arms, over my chest, my face. I wept and the tears were blood.

My God was dead. There was no end to the pain.

On the third waking, I saw that the Burning God priestess had put away her golden skirt and dressed in gray. Her fine oiled hair was matted with ash, and her face stark with pale dust. She danced me a funeral dance, silent except for the whisper of her feet and the rustle of her skirts. The breezes of her movements felt cold on my bleeding skin.

I struggled for breath.

Choked.

My body labored, failed, and died.

Her skirts swirled to a halt, and she lowered her arms to cover her face. She came to the altar and reached out to close my eyes.

Her hand was so close. I reached for it, pulled it to my lips, tore at the skin until my mouth was filled with a river of blood, and the ecstasy of hunger closed my ears to her cries until her body's stream faded to a trickle, and she crumpled, a heap of dust and ashes, at the foot of the altar. I lifted her up to look into her face.

She stared at me with brilliant, sun-drenched eyes, and whispered, "I am your bride. I have waited for you, for the salvation of the people. You are the Dead God."

I kissed her and took the rest of her life into me, weeping with the pain of it.

It was full night when I descended from the Temple, counting steps reverently this time, and walked the silent streets. No lights burned in the houses, but I heard the beat of their hearts. They were hushed in mourning for the Dead God, in terror that death knew no master and no law.

I went to the first house marked with the Burning God's sign and entered. Inside, a feverish woman wept her agony. I cut my finger and let fall a single ruby drop into her open mouth. She swallowed and coughed, and I traced the sign of the Dead God on her forehead in broad strokes of my blood. Her husband was dead. I opened his veins and drank – I could not save him, but I could take this last silent offering. The children slept soundly, only the youngest fevered. Her I gave another precious drop, letting her suckle on the wound like a teat until the sickness was cleansed from her.

I moved slowly from house to house all the long night, healing the sick, draining the dying and the dead. As the Burning God's time came, I found a beautiful young boy, almost a man, and made the mark of the Bride on his chest, so that he would be my salvation and my legacy, when the time came for Death to die.

I went among the soldiers and gave them drink from my veins, waking fire, gifting them my own strength and bloodthirst. It would not prevent them from meeting the gaze of Burning God if our enemies came in daylight, but it would allow them to destroy our enemies, from now until even the Gods died.

As the sun blushed the sky, I ascended the golden steps to the Temple and found the bed prepared for the Dead God, and slept. I dreamed of a city of blood and beauty, hidden from the sight of evil pale men. I dreamed of an unbroken legacy of the Dead God and Brides, and I knew that I dreamed true.

I was the Dead God, and I dreamed our victory.

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