

# GODRON'S DAUGHTER

by

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and

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How many times have I heard the story of my birth retold? About how my mother and father, though no older than I am now, pledged their sworn troth; how Godron, servant of the Dark, kidnapped my mother while I still grew inside her to corrupt me to serve his own evil plans; of her rescue and the purification of my birth at an ancient place of Power. Yet, each time I listen closely, as if hearing it anew, hoping I might catch something heretofore missed; something that would explain this growing restlessness inside.

Ah, a poor choice of words, perhaps, as it seems more of a seeking than restlessness. I only know I'm being drawn toward . . . something? Somewhere? And soon must accept this compulsion to go forth and find answers to questions I do not know how to ask.

"Silistia?"

Upon hearing my cousin Reldo call to me, I put away

my journal and left my cozy window seat to walk outside into the early spring sunshine. As I emerged from the house, Reldo lifted his hand to motion me over to the stock pen. I quickened my steps, guessing he intended to show me the first foal of spring, an arrival eagerly awaited by us both.

I stepped up on the bottom board of the pen to peer over at the gangly, staggering newborn, then swapped delighted grins with Reldo. Even though he stood on the ground and I on the board, I still had to look up at him. At a year younger than I, Reldo, just past his sixteenth birthday, was over half a head taller, having grown remarkably during this past winter. My mother and his father, both of the Old Race, are double first cousins, and Reldo had the typical dark hair color of that lineage, as did I. But his eyes were the same light ginger hue of his outworld mother's, while mine are the clear gray of the Old Ones.

My father, Gunnal, knelt beside the shaky foal as Lenil, Reldo's father, stroked and complimented the mare.

"At least she had the decency to birth her foal in the morning hours," Lenil said with a laugh. "And not drag us from our beds at midnight."

"Perhaps we should ask her to speak to the other mares," Father suggested, obviously lighthearted at the successful foaling. The winter had proved a hard one and more than a few of our animals had succumbed to its icy harshness. Each new foal would serve to replenish our depleted stock.

Animals were not the only thing lost this past bitter winter. At that thought, my gaze went to the little hillock at the far eastern corner of our hold where my small brother lay at rest beneath his cairn of stones. After losing him, I doubted my mother would ever agree to send me for training in my awakening Talent. However, grief for my baby brother overshadowed disappointment and I could feel a sting of tears behind my eyes. He'd had the light brown curls and blue eyes of our father, and I recalled the merriment sparkling in those blue depths as he extended his chubby arms and flexed his stubby fingers, teasing me to pick him up. And I would, laughing and swinging him high . . .

I wondered, Had I know how to use the Power growing within me, could I have saved him?

Reldo's touch on my shoulder made me jump. "Riatha calls you," he said, studying me.

I looked quickly at the house to avert my face from his scrutiny and saw my mother standing in the doorway. "She must need my help to prepare our noon meal," I chattered breathlessly. I hurried to the house. I tried not to display my grief; since my mother acted so bravely I felt I could do no less. My father had wept long and bitterly the night he held his dead son in his arms, but Mother had borne up stoically, steadying us with her strength. But since the initial shock wore off, she clung to me with determined fright.

Spring events continued to distract her, and the rest of us, from our loss. Our old sow birthed her litter that afternoon, and five survived.

"More than I expected, Gunnal," Lenil said as we took our places around the table for our evening meal.

My father grunted agreement as we passed around bowls to help our plates.

"Spring seems to have actually arrived," said Varela, Reldo's outworld mother. "The ranni vineš are budding out, and they're usually weather-wise." She handed a piece of buttered bread to Jenli, Reldo's younger sister. I looked at the little girl who favored me more than she did her own brother, with her ash-dark hair and gray eyes of the Old Race, inherited from her father's side. Would the Talent of the Old Ones bloom in her also, as it did in me? She was young yet. That question might not be answered for some years. Feeling my gaze, Jenli turned to me and crossed her eyes and stuck out her tongue.

"Jenli!" Lenil admonished her, not seeing my responding funny-face. Jenli giggled into her hand.

"Never mind scolding her, Lenil," said my father with a lifted brow in my direction. "Silistia encouraged her, I'm sure."

I concentrated on my food, letting the murmur of conversation flow around me, until I heard my name spoken.

"Silistia is seventeen now," Lenil was saying. "Well of an age for training her Talent. She needs—"

"Why?" Mother demanded, cutting off her cousin midsen-

tence. "She can wed, bear children, live a normal life. She doesn't need to develop her Talent. It can be a curse. You know that, Lenil! Even these days Old Ones are viewed with suspicion and distrust."

"Yes, until a wise woman or witch is needed to solve someone's problems," my father pointed out.

"I won't have it," Mother stated firmly. "She will not leave this hold."

It angered me for them to speak of me as if I weren't there or could not speak for myself, but I held my tongue, seeing the tight lines around my mother's mouth. Perhaps when the death of my brother was no longer such a raw wound she would relent. For I longed to exercise my Talent, to learn how to control it, use it for good. Especially since my little brother . . .

I forced such thoughts from my mind and finished my food. Useless, useless. I could only go forward, not change what was past.

Again, I dreamed—someone calling me from deep within the mists of the forest. My mother forbids me to speak of my dreams. She claims they are nonsense, but I can see the fear in her eyes. Something she will not tell me. What is she hiding? Why should it frighten her? This is more than her desire to keep me within the hold by her side.

Reldo laughs at me. He teases that a dream-lover is calling me and asks if I will tell my lover to find a girl for him. I wish it were a lover's voice to gladden my heart, rather than this strange calling that places such a burden upon it. I know I cannot resist much longer seeking out what calls me. The pull grows more powerful each day.

Tomorrow I shall go into the forest to seek out my dream-caller. I must keep my quest secret or Mother will prevent my leaving. Reldo wants to accompany me. He suggests we tell our parents we are going to the Festival of the Young in Emerald Cove. This would please them. My true mission would not.

We must prepare for our journey. Supplies for food, warmth, and survival, for our travels may be lengthy and will take us into primitive territory; deep within the forest where we are forbidden to go. Though it saddens me to defy Mother, I am

compelled to discover my dream-caller. Need burns within my soul like a white-hot flame.

Morning dawned bright, soft dew kissing the meadowlands. Reldo bounded in and greeted everyone at breakfast, announcing our wish to attend the festival.

"No," Mother said immediately.

"They are of an age, Riatha," Father said. "You cannot keep her behind your skirt forever."

Mother opened her mouth but before she could speak, Varela rested a hand on her arm. "Riatha, let them go. Reldo can take care of Silistia, just like Lenil used to watch out for you—" She flashed a smile at her husband. "Still does."

Mother's gaze sought Lenil's hoping for an ally. He smiled gently. "It'll be all right. Emerald Cove is an easy journey for young strong legs."

Mother turned to look at me, her eyes bright with unshed tears. I nearly gave in, feeling her painful fear as though it were my own, but knew my compulsion would allow me no rest. I gazed at her pleadingly.

"Very well," she whispered, looking down at her plate.

"I want to go, too!" Jenli piped up, giving me a bad turn before Varela said, "No, Jenli. You're too young."

Father laughed saying, "Don't worry, little one, your turn will come." He looked at Reldo and me. "You children must hurry if you plan to reach Emerald Cove before the festival opens."

Mother's gray eyes, so like my own, still looked troubled, but she smiled, shaking her head as if to shoo away lingering cobwebs of doubt. "Go and have fun, but don't speak to strangers. Take care of each other."

Our eagerness was understandable so we didn't need to conceal it, quickly finishing our breakfast and rushing to gather our things.

Impatient, I wanted to head north to the forest; yet forced my feet to travel east across the meadow until we disappeared from view of the hold. At the top of the second hill, we glanced back, satisfied it would be safe to alter our direction. We began to zigzag down the hillside, then Reldo broke into a run north

toward the forest. I followed him with abandon, enjoying the breeze flinging my hair and the scent of crushed ranni blossoms as we trampled the blue flowers underfoot. I passed my cousin before we entered the forest. Suddenly a shiver shot through me that I blamed on leaving warm sunshine for shade. Evergreens towered over newly budding butron trees, stretching eerie branches up to the heavens. My pack slapped against my back as I halted to wait for Reldo.

He reached me, panting. "You're a swift one, Silistia. Remind me not to race you on a wager." He gazed around the dark forest. "It's like a different world, isn't it?"

Again, a shiver. The fragrance of pine and moss mingled with a sharp repellent odor, the gentle meadow breeze gusted into a chilly wind, and trees blocked out the sunlight so completely it looked like twilight instead of midmorning. The screech of a golden hawk echoed somewhere above us. A sign? But of what, I could not say.

"Silistia?" Reldo sounded dubious. I turned to look at him. "Are you sure we should do this?"

I gazed into his ginger eyes. Perhaps I had erred in allowing him to accompany me. After all, this was my quest, not his. The call tortured me, not him. I could be leading him into mortal danger. "Reldo, you go on to the festival. I must do this. I don't know why, I just must. But you can attend the festival, tell me what it was like so we will never have to confess to our parents—"

"No!" He shook his head vigorously. "Never. I shall not leave you to pursue this—this dream alone. I know I am male, and half outworld, and have no Talent, but I can protect you from beasts and other dangers. No, Silistia. We both turn back or we both go on together."

"Oh, Reldo, you are my best friend as well as my cousin. I only wish I could ignore this calling."

He gave me a crooked smile and I turned to hurry on, pushing through the thickening woods. The siren's call sounded louder in my head, leading me true, though we followed no visible path.

Time ceased to exist in the strange twilight world. No sun passed overhead to mark the hours, hidden behind a transluc-

cent silvery overcast. I felt tireless, without hunger, and pressed on through the forest until Reldo's call halted me.

"I'm hungry," he said. "I'm sure it's noon. Aren't you tired?"

I shook my head. "I've acted thoughtlessly. I feel nothing but the desire to continue. Of course, we shall eat and refresh ourselves."

I tried not to rush, but somehow I felt that my goal lay nearby, that soon I would have answers to the questions plaguing me for so long. We set out again.

Cresting a hill, we saw a meadow sloping away toward a forbidding stone tower. I stopped, frozen by the sight—I knew this was my destination.

Reldo stopped beside me, standing close, resting a hand on my shoulder. "What's wrong, Silistia?"

"Here . . ." I breathed, ". . . this place . . ."

A light shudder rippled through his body and I quickly looked at him. "Do you sense anything?"

"I—I'm not sure. I do know the forest is rumored to contain places of Power of the Old Ones . . . perhaps this is one such place."

"Yes. It is a place of Power." But I sensed no warm benevolence. The Dark lurked here. Though fear kindled within me, I knew I must push on, enter those looming premises, seek the one who called me. As we crossed the meadow, I noticed the plants and grasses didn't appear normal and healthy, as if the force emanating from the structure had twisted and deformed them.

Why? Why? The question echoed in my head as we drew close; why would this place—a place of evil, of the Dark—call to me? I wanted to turn and flee but a force caught me securely. My feet made their way as if following outside directions past the outer stone wall on toward the inner castle.

"This looks like an abandoned hold," Reldo said as we stepped up to the gaping doorway. "Not like a place of Power."

"I doubt, cousin, you would know any more than I what a place of Power should look like, since our travels have been confined to occasional trips to Emerald Cove with our parents and visits to our grandparents' hold." I spoke with a bravado I

didn't feel. I sensed Reldo's fear mingling with my own. Had I brought him to his doom?

We dropped our packs and stepped inside. A dank chill enveloped us as though we had passed through an invisible curtain. Pale light filtered down from above and I looked up, seeking its source. Several tall, narrow windows placed around the top of the tower allowed the sickly light to enter. I looked at the steep, narrow stone steps winding up the wall of the tower and tentatively approached them with the idea of climbing them. However, within a few steps I realized my goal did not lie this way. I stopped, feeling Reldo bump into me.

"Not here," I said, my voice strangely muted to my own ears.

Without comment he turned to precede me back down, then await my next move. He seemed to know that only I could solve the riddle that beleaguered my mind. I stood in the center of the tower, turning slowly as I examined the dusty stone walls, unbroken by any doorways. Knowing it must be here, I closed my eyes and allowed my mind to seek.

There! It struck me with such force I fell to my knees with a gasp.

"Silistia!" Reldo cried, kneeling to seize me by the shoulders.

Crossing my arms, I placed my hands on his, drawing in deep breaths. "I know . . ." I gasped, ". . . look there . . ."

A doorway appeared where we'd seen none before, and I rose, moving toward it as though pulled by unseen ropes, Reldo right behind me. I halted, suddenly fearing for my cousin, knowing I confronted something here truly of the Dark; something that could—and would—bring harm to us both. Did I have the right to expose him to such danger?

"You must wait here for me," I whispered, and at his protest I insisted, "To keep guard! Would you have me attacked from behind?"

The doubt flitting across his young face told of the war within him my words caused.

"But what awaits before you, Silistia? It's unwise to allow you to go on without me. I will not permit it. I promise to keep a close watch on our backs."

I relented, ashamed of my relief to have Reldo with me as we descended the winding tunnel toward darkness. However, a



pale ghostly light seemed to move ever ahead of us, showing us only enough so we would not stumble on the uneven paving stones. Our steps thudded in a hollow echo that the stone walls swallowed up, as though feeding on the sound.

A pressure entered my mind, flowing down to fill my chest with foreboding. Yet I could not stop. In fact my pace quickened in spite of my fear. I hurried forward seeing the end of the tunnel beckoning. Here, I knew, lay my answers. I no longer felt sure I wanted them, but such a choice did not remain for me to make.

The tunnel spilled into a great chamber that arched away into darkness. Runes etched the walls, glowing scarlet, lending a bloody cast to the pale light that had accompanied us and now flickered weakly in the huge vaulted cavern in which we stood.

An ebony stone altar, so black it seemed to trap light within its mysterious depths and absorb without reflection, stood in the center of the chamber. Red glowing runes covered the pedestal it rested upon, throbbing in sequence with their counterparts on the walls. What message did they attempt to convey? I shook my head in frustration, peering frantically at them, failing to decipher their meaning. It seemed to hover just beyond my grasp, tantalizing me.

*"You've come at last."*

I jumped, startled, at the voice that sounded as if it came from within my head rather than to my ears. I glanced quickly at Reldo for his reaction; he appeared deaf to the voice.

*"Only you can hear me, Silistia."*

Instinctively, I looked back at the altar. Something wavered above it, something not quite formed. My heart thudded in my chest. "Who are you?" I whispered—or rather, it felt as if I did—perhaps I, too, spoke only with my mind.

*"I am your father."*

"I don't understand."

Reldo turned to me. "What don't you understand, Silistia?"

I looked at him. "You don't hear the voice?"

"What voice?"

"Can you see what is attempting to form above the altar?"

"I see no visions. What does it look like?"

At his question, I turned back to gaze at the altar. As I stared

the vapors took on the form of a man, though it remained ethereal.

*"Silistia, I have waited long to claim what is mine. I lost my mortal life in a battle for you. I shall not lose you this time."*

*"What battle? You speak to me of things I do not know."*

*"I am Godron, your father. It is for my purpose that you were born."*

"I have heard the story of you, of your Power corrupted to the Dark, and of my mother's abduction. But you are not my father. Gunnal is my father."

*"Do you seek the truth? If so, I will show it to you. Open your mind."*

Visions flooded me: I saw Godron seizing my mother, his Werebeasts slaughtering her guards. I saw him bring her to this very hold and force himself upon her; Mother's screams resounded through my head, punctuated by Godron's brutal laughter. I saw my mother swollen with child and knew it was me growing inside her. I saw her desperate rescue where Gunnal nearly sacrificed himself, receiving a grave wound, allowing Lenil the opportunity to spirit her away. I saw Godron's attempt to recapture her, foiled when Varela happened by to join the fray. I saw Lenil and Varela gaining the place of ancient Power with my mother so that my birth might be purified. I saw then the battle of which Godron spoke; of his disdain of me after the purification rites, his attempt to slice my throat, thwarted by Varela's toss of her dagger.

The horror of his visions so engulfed me that I felt it strike a crippling blow to my core, to my very essence. How could I accept myself as the spawn of this evil Darkness?

In desperation, my mind cried out, "Mother, help me. Is this true?"

I now tried to shut out his invading presence, and found myself unable to do so. "Mother, what's happening?" I cried again.

But I stood alone. Realizing his plan to make me his vessel, I knew I must summon my untrained Talent to eject him. I gathered my strength within me, attempting to protect myself from further invasion, focusing my mind to force him out.

His apparition wavered at my rally. A power I did not know I

possessed welled to repel his invasion. I felt his joy at my unexpected display, and realized he intended to harness my power to his command.

I could not let that happen! His capacity for evil could become unconquerable as it drew upon my latent Talent, making it his own. I redoubled my efforts to prevent it.

If only I knew what to do! The runes on the walls and pedestal writhed like snakes and instinctively I stretched out my hands before me, feeling a strange tingling rush to my fingertips. As though in a trance, I sketched a sign in the air and it lingered bluely for a long moment. The runes on the wall seemed to pulse in response and I heard Godron's laughter taunting me, as if urging me to fight my best fight. A wind surrounded me, standing my hair out to swirl around my head wildly, and the crimson glow of the runes flowed toward me as if to engulf me. I traced a circle before me, blue fire sparking where the force from the runes touched it, but it held, shielding me.

No longer amused, Godron sent a mental bolt hurtling into my mind. I fell to my knees with an audible gasp. Through a haze of pain, I saw Reldo leap between me and the altar in an attempt to rescue me from an adversary he could not see.

"No!" I cried, afraid for his life. What protection did he have from Godron's evil?

Too late, I tried to shield his mind. I felt his mental scream; his consciousness retreated from the onslaught. He possessed no mental barriers to protect himself. The desperate flight of his mind would end in complete withdrawal leading to death unless I could save him.

But how?

Frantically, I followed him with a lance of questing thought horrified at the emptiness I found, realizing I had to catch him quickly.

As I divided my energies, Godron increased his efforts to invade my mind and my resistance wavered. I sensed Reldo, caught his wounded consciousness, and held fast, knowing I mustn't let him go. I would have no other chance. To release him now and concentrate on my defense would mean to lose him forever. That I could not bear.

Sickness washed over me in waves, pounding me with agony, burning my mind. I felt Godron's evil absorbing me, yet I held fast to Reldo.

Stay with me, stay with me . . .

I knew I could not withstand this alone. Godron's power was proving too great for my untrained Talent.

Suddenly an outside source of strength poured into me, coalescing my scattered senses and aiming them in ways they must go. Now, *now* I knew what to do; how to direct my mind, holding Reldo while shoring up my resistance to Godron.

I grew aware of the presence of others—was this real? Yes! I felt hands clasping mine, saw my mother raising a slim dagger with a handle of brilliant blue stone that pulsed bursts of crackling bolts of light that encircled the chamber, lashing the walls, exploding chunks off the altar. The wind intensified, roaring with the sound of a thousand mountains collapsing. Clouds of dust billowed from the crumbling walls.

The bolts concentrated on the writhing, transparent figure above the altar, encompassing it.

“Nooooo . . .”

I took my hand from Mother's grasp and joined it with hers that held the dagger. Lenil's hand covered mine.

The pressure that had tortured my mind, my soul, began to retreat and I chased it to purge it from me completely. I felt as if I grew, expanding outside myself, and I knew that to expel Godron was not sufficient to vanquish him. He must be destroyed utterly so he could never again poison our world with his Dark evil.

Gunnal and Varela drew closer, lending their strength though they possessed no Talent, and I saw Reldo stir, rise, and come to us. He no longer needed me, allowing me to devote my undivided Power to Godron's destruction.

An earthquake heaved the floor beneath us, buckling it, as slabs of stone crashed from the ceiling. I knew we must escape soon, but dared not leave until I saw Godron's shriveling essence completely dissolve.

The pulsing bloody light from the remaining runes washed to blue and with a thunderous roar the altar collapsed, taking with it the last vestiges of Godron's spirit. The knife handle turned

dark and we spun to flee from the maelstrom erupting around us. We raced up the buckling tunnel. The entire hold appeared to be collapsing and I could feel our collective fear that we might not escape. Pushing down panic, I drew on my newfound strength to hold back the stones until we passed.

As we ran beneath the tower it swayed above us and I sent forth my thoughts to stay it. The effort drained me physically and I stumbled. Young strong hands clasped me—Reldo. Sweeping me into his arms, he charged outside behind our family to tumble to safety as the tower crashed down, bringing the walls of the castle with it, leaving nothing remaining but a pile of ruins and dust.

My loved ones hovered over me and I gave myself up to blessed unconsciousness.

A second foal was birthed this morning though not at such a convenient hour as the first. My father—Gunnal—and Lenil were asleep, exhausted but pleased with the new addition.

Voices? Ah, yes. Looking out from my window seat I could see Reldo and Jenli walking hand in hand toward the stock pen, Jenli chattering and skipping. Reldo smiling tolerantly down at his little sister.

Varela gave me her own journal to read, the one she has kept since becoming marooned on our world while exploring. It contains an account of my origins and birth, and to read it written by a loving hand instead of having it poured into my mind with hate helps me view the events with a better perspective.

I think of Gunnal as my father, for he truly is. He shared in my mother's rescue, then wed her, raising and loving me as his own, though he knew from whose seed I sprung.

I'm preparing to journey for my training, now that Mother's fear has been assuaged by Godron's true death. She no longer feels she must protect and shield me from evil. Fortunately, her Talent, though dormant, allowed her to receive my call. She told me afterward how she knew, upon hearing my mental cry, where we had gone, for it was there Godron had taken her those many years ago, the reason the forest had been forbidden to us. She has given me the dagger—this very dagger resting beside me as I write—that played such a vital part in the pu-

rification of my birth, then pierced Godron's throat, ending his physical life.

How humbling to discover I am blessed with a Talent so great that its limits have not yet been tested. I shall endeavor to learn my lessons well so that I may channel my Power for the good of our people and our world.