
The Turtle God

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ON THE EVE of the day of the turtle god, Aurora was at her wit's end. She stood in the turtle god's cave, her hands planted on her hips, trying to look commanding. It didn't help that she was ankle-deep in green water. There was water everywhere. Water dripped from the roof of the cave, plinking into deep puddles. Water overflowed from the basin of the turtle god's fountain, droplets sparking in the light from the candles on the wall. Water ran through hidden pipes, rolled out over the stone tongue of the turtle god's head, and splashed down again in an endless wet cycle.

Aurora glared at Tenectus the turtle god. ?How could you do this? The queen will be here tomorrow morning. Do you think she will wade through a flood just to pay homage to you??

The pattern of water rolling over Tenectus's tongue shifted like quicksilver as Tenectus answered, the sound of the water shaped into words. "The queen will come, because it is her duty," said Tenectus, sounding as pompous as ever. "It is her duty, because a monarch's reign is but an eyeblink beside the lives of the gods. All men must bow to the glory of the gods."

"If that's so," said Aurora, "then how do you explain the fact that I'm your only priestess? And that no one else ever comes to pray to you? Except, of course, on the one day a year that the queen visits?"

"There must have been some error," said Tenectus. "Possibly an oversight by one of the court clerks. Once I have spoken to the queen, I am certain she will send stonewrights and goldsmiths to restore my temple, soldiers to guard its approach, maidens of noble descent whose sole task will be to scatter the essence of flowers to perfume the air by my fountain."

A year ago Aurora would never have imagined that a stone turtle could sound so pompous. She had not believed it when she first recognized words of ancient Amarthese in the burbling noise of the turtle fountain. Aside from scholars, few people knew the ancient tongue. But Aurora's grandfather had been one of the few, and she had learned it from him as she cleaned his house, her thoughts filling with legends and myths, a world far-removed from the dusty village she grew up in.

Doubtless that was why she had applied for a position as Tenectus's priestess. Where others saw only an old god fallen to decay, she saw the glory of the past. Even so, Aurora had thought her mind was playing tricks when she heard the ancient words in the rush of the fountain. Perhaps she merely imagined her grandfather's voice because she missed him. But when she realized that Tenectus was truly talking to her, visions of glory danced before her again: she had uncovered the speech of a god!

And so she had spent months teaching Tenectus modern-day Amarthese as he corrected her usage of the ancient tongue. At first she could barely make out his words, the syllables twisted toward liquid vowels and sibilant consonants. But the more Tenectus spoke, the clearer his voice had grown.

If only Aurora were more confident that Tenectus wouldn't use his new-found command of the language to insult the queen. Trying to ignore the water trickling down her back, Aurora stepped up to the fountain and glared eye-to-eye at Tenectus. "I was only away for an hour. Since you made all this mess in that time, I expect you to clear it up equally quickly."

"Ah," said Tenectus. "Well. You see, I have an affinity for water, an understanding?"

"Exactly. So get rid of it."

"Ah," said Tenectus. "Well?"

There was a pause. Too long a pause. A cold trickle of water skittered down Aurora's leg.

Tenectus blinked his stone eyelids. "I, ah, cannot disperse the water any faster than the natural process?"

"But that will take days? what were you thinking? Do you want to remain the least of the twenty-eight lesser gods for the rest of eternity?"

"I forgot the queen was coming," said Tenectus, and he didn't sound pompous this time. He sounded like Aurora's little brother used to when he knew he had done something wrong. "I was happy, so I sang. When I sing, it rains within the cavern."

Aurora sighed, unable to summon any more indignation. She sat down heavily on the edge of the fountain. Her knees throbbed from scrubbing the cave floors in preparation for the royal visit. Now all her efforts were awash in water. She was likely to spend the rest of her days here, living on the charity of the nearby villagers. Even they seemed embarrassed by the lowly status of their god, leaving food and candles for Aurora, but never staying to visit Tenectus.

?Then the queen won't come to pray to me?? said Tenectus, so quietly that Aurora had difficulty hearing him.

?I doubt it.? Aurora got up slowly. The villagers had left a mound of fresh-cut reeds to spread on the floor. She might as well lay all the reeds in the entrance chamber, since the queen was unlikely to get much further. Aurora splashed over to the first of the candelabra and snuffed out the candles. ?Good night, Tenectus.?

?Good night,? said Tenectus, still in a small voice.

* * * *

Tenectus watched Aurora snuff out the last candle in his cavern and grab the lantern from its hook on the wall. He watched the girl walk down to the next cavern, her thin silhouette disappearing out of sight. The light of the lantern flickered yellow-white on the water, and then it too vanished.

Tenectus sighed very quietly. For a minute more, he listened to the faint splash-splash of Aurora's progress. The passage through the caverns grew deeper before finally rising to the surface. The girl would probably have to swim at points, which would make her all the more angry with him.

He hadn't meant to upset her. He just forgot; it was easy to forget, to doze in the moist dark of the cavern. He had been dozing for years, maybe decades, before Aurora came. He couldn't remember the names of the last few priestesses before her, mousy creatures whose faces blurred together in his memory. They had never lingered in his cavern, scurrying back to the surface as soon as they could.

But Aurora had lingered.

He remembered the first time he had noticed her. She had been peering at the frieze along the wall, tracing the carved stone figures with her finger, humming in counterpoint to the music of the fountain. She was a scrawny thing, her chin too small to suit her face, but the eagerness with which she studied the frieze was contagious. As Aurora had touched each figure, the kings and the queens, the priestesses and guards, Tenectus had whispered their names to himself.

Now in the darkness he recited the lineage of the royal family. With each name, he remembered a different age, the myriad lights that sparkled on his waters, the pilgrims bending over the basin beneath him, dipping their foreheads into the green water. Aurora belonged somewhere like that, noisy with people.

Tenectus had hoped to so impress the queen that she would raise his status, give him a dozen acolytes, and promote Aurora to chief priestess. But he had lost track of time, and squandered the opportunity for a year.

Maybe he had wanted to forget. Maybe he had wanted to keep Aurora to himself. Tenectus rumbled, endeavoring to twist in the stone. Gods were immortal, invulnerable, not subject to petty aches and pains. But still Tenectus felt uncomfortable, and he rolled his eyes and opened his mouth as wide as he could.

Something splashed in the distance, and again. Aurora was returning.

He strained to catch the glimmer of her lantern, watched as the bobbing circle of light grew larger. ?Is it morning already??

?No.? Aurora lit two candles near the fountain, but left the rest dark. She sat on the rim of the basin beneath him, one hand trailing in the water. ?I couldn't sleep.?

?Ah. The night watch used to be the duty of the youngest acolyte. Most of them slept on the ledge above the fountain, but a few would ask questions. That was the best time to talk, in the quiet??

?What did they wear??

?Wear?? Tenectus blinked. ?Before they took their final vows, they wore much what you do, cotton shifts and woollen cloaks.?

?Oh.? The girl looked disappointed. She fingered the grey cotton of her shift.

?But the priestesses,? said Tenectus, and he raised his voice and adopted the ceremonial tone, ?the priestesses wore pure white satin, embroidered with gold thread and edged at the neck with emeralds from the kingdom of Myrnh.?

?Myrnh of the thousand mountains,? said Aurora, and Tenectus saw the way her smile softened her face. ?Where Salit the thrice-forgotten tamed the fastest stallion ever foaled. Go on.?

?About the priestesses? arms were bands of copper and silver and gold. And for high rituals the priestesses would stand each in her own boat, and they would shine like the moon, so much light reflected from the jewels they wore that??

?Boats?? Aurora stood up, and waded over to the frieze. There, cut into the stone, was a tiny figure standing in a boat, light blazing from a jewel set about her forehead. ?What happened to the boats??

?They were taken away three generations ago.? Tenectus paused, hating the disappointment that followed in the girl's expression. Without thinking any more than that, he said, ?If you wish, I shall fashion a boat for your queen to ride in.?

?Really?? Aurora bit her lip, then knelt down in the water, the ends of her hair spreading out behind her. ?Tenectus, if you can, if you would??

?Oh, get up,? growled Tenectus, already regretting his hastiness. To create a boat fit for a queen, he would have to give up a portion of his own body. Through one hundred and eighty-seven human generations, he had never done something so foolish. Not that the fraction needed for this deed would cause him serious harm, but forever after he would be flawed, imperfect.

Still, he had promised. He stared at Aurora. If he was doing this, he might as well fashion a dress for the girl as well. He concentrated on a small spot on the side of his shell. After a moment, there was a sharp crack. A sliver of stone fell from his shell into the fountain basin.

Aurora gazed round-eyed at the stone chip.

?Well, lift it out then. What are you waiting for??

Aurora lifted the chip up. Already the stone was changing, darkening.

?Set it down in the water at your feet.? Tenectus studied the stone for a minute, watching it float on the water as the material expanded to the size of Aurora's hand, its color changing to a polished oak. First came the hollowed shell shape of the boat's main body, then the line of the keel, and the seats within it, and a white satin dress draped on one of the seats. When the boat was the length of Aurora's arm, Tenectus looked away and stared at the girl. Ah, yes, that was better. When she smiled like that, he wanted to sing.

And why not? Now they had a boat, they needed more water, not less. Tenectus opened his mouth wide, and sang the first note.

* * * *

Queen Penelope sighed noisily and pointedly as her guard helped her out of her carriage, and escorted her into the first of the turtle god's caverns. Of all her duties, she ranked visiting the lesser gods as the second from worst. It was always the same, she would struggle into some musty grotto where a stone, or a tree, or an animal was hailed as a god. And then she would be expected to get down on her knees, while some peasant girl turned priestess mumbled prayers.

The old court records spoke of miracles that even the lesser gods had performed, transmutations and healings, the summoning of storm or earthquake. But the only miracle that Queen Penelope dared hope for was that she would be on her way home by noon.

Queen Penelope blinked in the dimness of the cavern, then blinked again. The girl coming toward her was dressed in what looked like white satin, and, surely not, but, yes, there was a line of emeralds ringing the neck of the girl's gown.

?Your Majesty,? said the girl.

?Priestess.? Queen Penelope dipped her head slightly, and snatched a better look at the emeralds. A perfect shape and color. How had the girl got hold of such magnificent jewels?

?On behalf of the god Tenectus, I welcome you to his temple.? The girl turned and headed along a path sloping down to a second cavern.

Surrounded by her retinue, Queen Penelope followed after the girl. The queen stopped abruptly, causing a guard to stumble so as not to bump into her. The second cavern was flooded.

The priestess was taking off her shoes, lifting the skirt of her robe, and wading into the water.

Queen Penelope peered ahead suspiciously. As her eyes adjusted, she made out the shape of a boat rocking on the water. The priestess was waiting inside. The queen snorted once, indignantly, but she had no intention of letting the girl slip away without explaining where the emeralds came from. She gestured to two of her guards. ?You will lift me into the boat.?

After an awkward and embarrassing passage to the boat, the guards huffing and puffing in a most uncalled for fashion, Queen Penelope plumped down beside the girl.

The boat slipped away without visible aid, moving further into the system of caverns. Candles flickered

on either side, but the queen didn't like the idea of the weight of rock overhead, the dark water beneath them. She stared fixedly at the girl's dress, the luster of the green jewels that decorated the neckline. ?Where did you get such fine emeralds??

?They were a gift from Tenectus, your Majesty.?

?Indeed. Then I take it that the wise and benevolent Tenectus is growing in his powers??

?The power of the gods is unchanging, but Tenectus has recently directed his attention toward us. He has spoken to me many times.?

?Indeed.? The queen tried to recall the proper prayers to offer to the turtle god, but the closest she came was a chant used by the priestesses of the river-snake. Would Tenectus be offended if she offered another god's chant?

A fountain loomed ahead, green water spraying from the mouth of an exceedingly ugly turtle.

Hastily, Queen Penelope knelt down. The boat rocked alarmingly. ?Oh great Tenectus,? said the queen, clutching onto the side of the boat. ?Oh noble and sinuous, that is, ancient one, whose beauty is eternal"?only he looked more like a toad than a turtle?"I beseech you??

Cold water drenched her, the overflow from the turtle's head spouting wildly. She shrieked and jerked backward. The boat rocked. The queen struggled to seat herself. She could have sworn she saw the turtle stick its tongue out.

?I look nothing like a toad,? said Tenectus, water cascading from his tongue. ?Nothing at all.?

?Of course not,? said Queen Penelope. Her teeth were starting to chatter.

?Liar,? said Tenectus. ?I opened your tiny little mind and looked into your tiny little thoughts. Get out of here. Now.?

The boat spun in the water, and shot through the darkness as if pulled by a team of horses.

?Oh my,? said Queen Penelope, patting at her soaked gown. That cursed *thing* back there?she tried to think of something else?what if it read her thoughts again and killed her in rage? She looked at the girl, who was busy apologizing. About the girl's neck, the jewels glistened a pure rich green. ?Oh my, what beautiful emeralds those are. Oh yes indeed. I would certainly be indebted to anyone who gave me a gift like that.?

?You would?? The girl's eyes widened, and she fingered the stones about her neck.

The queen thought she saw the glitter of ambition in the girl's expression. ?Indeed, I might offer them a position as the priestess of one of the three major gods. Yes, I think I would.?

They were entering the second cavern. The guards sprang to attention as the boat approached.

The girl's grip fastened on the emeralds and she shook her head. ?With his gifts, Tenectus has honored me. He is the eldest god, and I am happy in his service. Your Majesty, I will see you in a year's time.?

Queen Penelope stepped out of the boat. ?No,? she said decidedly. ?Next year, I shall send one of my

sons.?

* * * *

?Just what,? asked Aurora, hands on her hips as she glared at Tenectus, ?did you think you were doing insulting the queen??

Tenectus opened his mouth wide, closed it, opened it again. ?I had forgotten how *annoying* most people are. The queen had such a petty mind. Perhaps I should have exercised more restraint.?

?Just so,? said Aurora, but the corners of her mouth twitched. ?She did look silly when you soaked her with water.? Aurora cleared her throat, and tried to look stern again. ?But next year, I expect you to behave with the dignity becoming a god.? She reached up and brushed the chipped edge of Tenectus's shell. ?Thank you,? she said so softly that any but a god might have missed it. ?For the boat, for the dress.?

?You're welcome,? said Tenectus, and at the sight of her smile, he started to sing.

The End

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