

**Orm the Beautiful**  
**by Elizabeth Bear**

Orm the Beautiful sang in his sleep, to his brothers and sisters, as the sea sings to itself. He would never die. But neither could he live much longer.

Dreaming on jewels, hearing their ancestor-song, he did not think that he would mind. The men were coming; Orm the Beautiful knew it with the wisdom of his bones. He thought he would not fight them. He thought he would close the mountain and let them scratch outside.

He would die there in the mother-cave, and so stay with the Chord. There was no-one after him to take his place as warden, and Orm the Beautiful was old.

Because he was the last warden of the mother-cave, his hoard was enormous, chromatic in hue and harmony. There was jade and lapis—the bequests of Orm the Exquisite and Orm the Luminous, respectively—and chrysoprase and turquoise and the semiprecious feldspars. There were three cracked sections of an amethyst pipe as massive as a fallen tree, and Orm the Beautiful was careful never to breathe fire upon them; the stones would jaundice to smoke color in the heat.

He lay closest by the jagged heap of beryls—green as emerald, green as poison, green as grass—that were the mortal remains of his sister, Orm the Radiant. And just beyond her was the legacy of her mate, Orm the Magnificent, charcoal-and-silver labradorite overshot with an absinthe shimmer. The Magnificent's song, in death, was high and sweet, utterly at odds with the aged slithering hulk he had become before he changed.

Orm the Beautiful stretched his long neck among the glorious rubble of his kin and dozed to their songs. Soon he would be with them, returned to their harmony, their many-threaded round. Only his radiance illuminated them now. Only his eye remembered their sheen. And he too would lose the power to shine with more than reflected light before long, and all in the mother-cave would be dark and full of music.

He was pale, palest of his kin, blue-white as skimmed milk and just as translucent. The flash that ran across his scales when he crawled into the light, however, was spectral: green-electric and blue-actinic, and a vermilion so sharp it could burn an afterimage in a human eye.

It had been a long time since he climbed into the light. Perhaps he'd seal the cave now, to be ready.

Yes.

When he was done, he lay down among his treasures, his beloveds, under the mountain, and his thoughts were dragonish.

But when the men came they came not single spies but in battalions, with dragons of their own. Iron dragons, yellow metal monsters that creaked and hissed as they gnawed the rocks. And they brought, with the dragons, channeled fire.

There was a thump, a tremble, and sifting dust followed. Cold winter air trickling down the shaft woke Orm the Beautiful from his chorale slumber.

He blinked lambent eyes, raising his head from the petrified, singing

