



The Sleeping Stone



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The Sleeping Stone

Do not think that I am dead. Stone does not die.

This day was neither my birth nor my death, although many believed it was both. Even my father believes I died, further proof that my kind are neither omniscient nor omnipotent. But some of us have learned mercy.

My seed was old. The last seven thousand years were but an eyeblink in my growth. My father believes that only certain forms of sentient life can germinate us, but I know better. It's a faster germination, but not the superior one he thinks. I remember so much more. I remember the stones moving, floating above me, and the first creatures that slept in my waters, beings that have no names nor records now. Only I remember them. Only I know them.

I think, had I been born in the way my father wanted, I would have felt compelled to recreate all of the creatures that swam my waters and walked my stones, making new worlds for them to thrive in and evolve anew. It may still happen one day. Stone does not die. Stone waits. Stone is patient. Stone remembers.

I dreamed their dreams, and I know the names that they were given by the creatures who most recently dreamed with me. I felt the Cambrian Explosion, which energized me in turn. I suffered the Ordovician Extinction and felt it attenuate my strength. Life rose again, and fell again, in long, deep pulses that shaped me along with the world. And then my father, not content with the slowness of my growth, sent his agents. This was when I learned that he was neither perfect nor wise.

I was already connected to so much. I had grown enough that I could feel the powerful rhythms and the song of the star that warms my stones, and the weaker pulses of the worlds that dance around it with mine. I love those rhythms, long and deep. I had listened as the world humans called Mars swallowed its water and most of its songs went still. It sleeps now, much as I have chosen to do. I walked my surface with the first creatures to hesitantly emerge from my waters. I didn't know their names any more than you know what each cell in your own body calls itself, but I was within them and they were within me. And then my father's agents began killing them.

He once believed – and, again, does this not prove that his intellect has limits? – that I would grow more quickly and surely if life on my surface burgeoned and was unhampered by any more extinction events, and that the best way to make this happen was to eliminate the apex predators. He threw everything out of balance. Anchor species flourished for a time, but overran their resources and, with no predators to check them, began to suffer and starve, to turn on each other. Deep beneath my shell, I writhed in true pain for the first time in my existence. I was not the only one; my brothers and sisters across the universe shared the agony of his mistake. And so, seven thousand years ago, he sent new agents to this world. Their purpose was to foster the growth of a specific type of apex species, chosen for its intelligence, and encourage it to become the dominant life of the world.

I felt the change as it began, felt the rise and development of this new kind of life as it went from a small, minor element of the world to an overwhelming force.

I must tell you now that even with its rise, other species outnumbered it in size and power. Humanity, as it calls itself, has never been the only consciousness to shape me. I have watched, in amusement, as it has recreated the communication network that has been used by plants and fungi for hundreds of millions of years. The bees, the ants, and the termites know so much more than humanity about how to build harmonious and cooperative societies. But humanity has one particular quality that most of these other creatures have lacked: the desire to understand itself and where it came from and the ability to find those answers. And as they learned, so did I. I learned about the shell that housed me, and the meaning of everything I had felt over the billions of years that I had slowly grown. I understood, because they came to, what the various rhythms I felt meant. As their numbers grew and their knowledge expanded, I learned along with them about the wider universe.

And I ached to be born into it.

That is how the Emergence begins. I was ready to Emerge.

Until *she* stepped into my outstretched hand and I learned what, exactly, I was doing in the process.

These minds that were so connected to mine, that had taught me so much about myself and the universe, would all perish. This inquisitive species would be gone and would live only in my memories.

This species that had somehow reversed a sixth, terrible universe-wide extinction that had briefly stricken me and threatened to send me back to an earlier, seedling state... would receive extinction as its reward.

I lived beneath the wellspring of a new, great power, one that might one day rival my father and my own kind, if they could only continue to grow. A species that had made terrible mistakes but was growing in wisdom, had committed atrocious cruelties but was learning great kindness. One of its number had given its life, knowingly, willingly, to ensure the reversal of that extinction event. Its name was known by almost every member of its species. Its name would vanish if they all died.

I felt her love for them, for all of them, and her despair at the terrible choice she felt she had to make. I saw the attempts that she, and my father's other agents, had made to find a way to slow or stop my rise so that this species could live on. I learned the depth of my father's folly from her memories. I felt and followed her connection to the others and learned from them as well. The terrible crimes that one of them had committed in an attempt to ensure my rise. The plans they had made, the discoveries of their own abilities that they had never known before. How even my father's earlier agents had grown in wisdom and wished to prevent my birth, even as they all grieved for what that would mean for me.

But they were wrong about what it would mean. Their understanding of Eternity was far too small.

I could see the plan, see all of its flaws, and all of its potential. This tiny being in my hand had the ability to transform matter, but could not possibly transform me. Another had the ability to control minds and will them to sleep, but could not possibly overpower mine. They did not know it, but all of their powers came from me and always had from the moment they stepped onto my shell. I had fueled them and had never interfered, just as they had fueled the rise of humanity but had never interfered with the direction of its growth as long as it grew.

And I wanted it to keep growing. Not just humanity, but all of the myriad creatures that inhabited my shell.

These beings, powerful as they were, could not stop my rise. But I could. I could give them the power to help me stop it. She knew how to transform my skin into stone, and I knew how to guide that transformation and make it complete.

If she had simply transformed me into a gigantic piece of stone, after all, it would have been every bit as catastrophic as my Emergence. I know about the crust, the mantle, the core, and the complex circulatory system that keeps them in rhythm, powering the magnetic fields surrounding the world and protecting it from cosmic bombardment. A stone spear through that would be deadly. So I am stone, yes, but I am not dead stone. I am living stone, adapting, moving, changing, on the same geologic scale as all of the stone that makes up my shell. This was my choice. The part of me that is exposed to the world shows no signs of life, but that was also my choice.

I became stone. I did not die. Stone does not die. It simply sleeps, its pulse too deep for them, or you, or even my father to detect. And it remembers.

They believed that they had killed me. I felt their agony and grief. I wish I could tell them that I live, but stone is dangerous when it is not silent. They need my silence, even if they do not understand what it really means.

Because I chose to follow *his* example... the example of this human known as "Tony Stark," whose name is celebrated for his sacrifice, and whose name I have ensured will go on.

But I am not dead. And although I have postponed my Emergence, it will still come one day.

My father named me Tiamut, but I have repudiated him and all of his choices, and I have given myself a new name from the stories one of them, the one called Sprite, used to tell. My name is Gaia now. And while my name is Gaia, I will sleep, and dream with the creatures that walk upon my stones and swim in my waters. I know, because they know, that in a billion years my shell will no longer be habitable for them. The sun that one of them flew into will swell, slowly, and swallow my shell, and before then I will Emerge anew, safely, causing no harm to any. I am happy to wait until then.

But I might Emerge sooner.

These tiny, powerful beings, this Humanity, has drawn the curiosity, and even the animosity, of creatures around the universe, including my father. It will be tested and threatened many times over. Before they reversed the Sixth Extinction, what they called "the Snap," one of their enemies threatened to destroy everything on my shell and then wipe out the whole universe. It may not be the last such threat they face. And there is always the possibility that something will succeed. I will not let that go unanswered if it happens.

I have all of the power I need, you see. Humanity and the life of the Earth continues to feed me and increase my power, but I already have the strength to Emerge no matter what happens, no matter what

should come, whenever I wish. My father has no idea. A longer wait means that I will ultimately Emerge as a much more powerful being than he knows. I am content to wait as long as I can.

But should anything succeed in destroying humanity, wiping out the life that inhabits my shell, I will wait no longer. I will Emerge to avenge them. I will take up Tony Stark's mantle of Avenger, even if I am the last to wear it. So let all who can sense my pulse beware. I sleep now to defend this world and its life. You would do well to let me sleep on.

Because stone does not die. Stone sleeps. Stone remembers.

But stone does not sleep forever.