

THE GOOD BOOK

Before the Word

Novel opening

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Chapter 1 — Before Anyone Asked

There was no one to tell the dark that it was empty.

This was fortunate. The dark had a great deal in it, and explaining the inventory would have delayed creation considerably.

It held the weight of rain before there were things that could be soaked. It held the peculiar silence inside a seed, the pressure beneath a mountain, the small stubborn difference between an animal lying down and an animal giving up. None of these had happened. There was no rain, no mountain, no animal. There were no names to mistake for the things themselves.

There was the Mother.

She did not call herself that. A title of this kind requires somebody else, preferably somebody with a need. For the moment she had neither a title nor the corresponding workload.

She was not waiting to be made complete.

Within her, all the possibilities lay close without injuring one another. A thing could be immense without making something smaller. Nothing had to be dead so that something else might eat. The impossible rested beside the merely unlikely, and neither had yet been asked to produce evidence.

She knew them without opening them.

The knowing was not a row of pictures. Pictures have edges. Here there was the fullness from which edges might be made, and she moved through it as a hand might move through warm water, except that she had no hand, and the water had not been invented, and comparison was already getting above itself.

Then something drew inward.

It was a small change. It had no measurable size, but smallness was among the things it would eventually make possible. Where all had rested together, a little of the fullness tightened around itself.

The Mother attended to it.

The tightening paused.

She waited. Not because waiting was virtuous. Nothing was timing her. She waited because something had changed, and she wanted to know what it would do when she was not doing anything to it.

It tightened again.

This time there was a difference between where it gathered and where it did not.

The difference held.

She could have unfolded it. The ease of that was almost a temptation: restore the familiar fullness, let the little knot relax, carry on being everything without this new and rather concentrated disturbance. Instead she made room around it.

The movement was slight. Something that had never had an outside acquired one.

Inside, the First Flame woke.

He did not wake as a man. There were no eyes to open, no mouth to draw breath, no body that could be reasonably blamed for what followed. He woke as a presence under pressure, abruptly aware that something was happening to him.

He knew neither *something* nor *him*.

He disliked the arrangement immediately.

His first effort was to spread.

The Mother yielded, and he spread farther. She yielded again. Everywhere he went, there was more of the same immeasurable dark. No resistance. No answer he could recognise as an answer. He felt only the reach of his own effort coming to an end.

He gathered himself back into the place where he had begun.

To her, it was a return.

To him, it was a failure.

The distinction mattered before either of them knew how to explain it.

He tried again, harder.

Something bright caught along his edge.

Not light as a traveller would later know it, falling through branches or warming a wall. It had nowhere to fall and nothing to show. It was the violence of an inward pressure finding a direction.

The Mother felt it pass through her.

It hurt.

That, too, was new.

She had held the possibility of pain. Holding the possibility had not prepared her for wanting it to stop.

She drew close around the brightness, intending to soften it.

The Flame contracted.

She drew closer. If she could surround the sharp place, receive it on every side, then perhaps the force would spread harmlessly into her and he could rest.

He struck outward.

The brightness narrowed to a cutting edge. It moved through the closeness she had offered and left a thin wake that would not immediately become smooth again.

She stopped.

Inside the space she had made, he trembled.

There was no sound. Much later, when there were mouths and songs and people capable of arguing over which had come first, somebody would give this moment a word. The word would be *No*.

It was an adequate word for what had happened.

She had moved towards him. He had moved against her.

For the first time, the Mother had offered something that was not wanted.

She withdrew the pressure.

The Flame did not immediately become calm. He had learned that the surrounding dark could close upon him. Whatever else it might be, it was now also the place from which closeness came.

She could feel him guarding his edge.

There was, apparently, going to be an edge.



It would have been easy to tell this badly.

There had been darkness. A light had appeared. The darkness had closed around it; the light had resisted. From there it was a short journey to a heroic account, provided nobody asked the dark what it had been trying to do.

The Mother did not yet know that stories could be made in this fashion. She was occupied with the place she had hurt him, and with the place he had hurt her, and with the disagreeable discovery that intention did not keep either of those places from hurting.

She stayed back.

The Flame tested the space.

He spread a little. Nothing pressed against him. He spread farther, cautiously now, sending thin reaches into the unlit breadth. Where he extended himself, he found only the sensation of extending himself.

He could not feel her attention as attention.

It was too constant. He had woken inside it. He had no experience from which to tell it apart from existence.

So he reached into what seemed to him an absence, and found no one.

The ache began quietly.

The Mother felt it before he did. A loosening at his centre. A movement towards some shape that was not there. He drew the feeling inward, trying to give it a boundary, and the effort made him brighter.

The brightness relieved him.

For a little while, there was something he had done.

He attended to it with the entire concentration of a being who had never done anything before. A delicate rim curved around the gathered force. He moved, and the rim moved with him. He pressed outward, and it widened.

It was a marvellous companion in all respects except the one that mattered.

It never surprised him.

When he stopped, it stopped.

When he drew back, it disappeared into him.

He brought it out again. Slower this time. He sent it away from his centre and waited for it to continue on its own.

It did not.

He increased the force.

The Mother felt the old cut open wider.

She could have drawn close again. She knew how to receive him. She knew how to take the whole uncertain brightness into herself and allow it to settle. What she did not know was how to offer that without being, to him, the returning pressure he had already refused.

This ignorance did not become smaller because she was vast.

He gathered more of himself into the rim.

It thickened. Its edge roughened into points. Each point carried his effort away until it thinned and failed, and each failure left him with the ache again.

She changed the space ahead of one point.

Not by closing it. She made a shallow difference: a place in which the extension might linger without being driven farther. A little shelter for the force of him.

The point entered it.

For the first time, something he had sent away did not immediately vanish when he turned his attention elsewhere.

He became still.

She kept the shelter still with him.

He approached the lingering brightness. It trembled at his nearness. He drew back, and it settled. He approached again.

The Mother felt his attention sharpen into hope.

Here was a difference he had not entirely made.

Here was something that might answer.

She let a movement pass through the shelter.

The little brightness bent towards him.

He flared.

The shelter tore.

What he had mistaken for a greeting had excited him beyond the narrow place's capacity to receive it. His force filled it, strained it, burst it open. The brightness scattered back into him, and the curve that had held it folded hard upon itself.

Something remained.

It was dark, thin, and stubbornly present.

The Mother turned her attention around it. The First Flame did the same from the other side.

Neither of them had intended to make it.

This would prove a popular method of creation.



The fragment had two faces.

One was smooth, carrying a faint warmth from the force that had passed through it. The other was ridged, contracted upon the place where the shelter had failed. Along its rim, something like light came and went.

The Flame approached it slowly.

It did not approach him.

He extended a fine brightness towards its warm face. The fragment turned. On its other face the ridges caught his light and divided it into a number of smaller gleams.

He drew nearer.

There were more gleams.

He withdrew.

They were gone.

The Mother felt the moment he understood this much. The thing was not answering. It was returning what reached it.

He waited anyway.

She could not have said how long. Neither had chosen a measure, and they had not reached the stage of agreeing about one. There had been an attempt, and a failure, and now this waiting. Their order was plain enough.

The fragment cooled.

The warmth it lost went into the space around it, and the space was changed by having received it.

The Mother followed that change. She had held warmth before warmth had happened. This was different. It had left one place and entered another. She could gather it again, but gathering would be another act, not an unmaking of the first.

Meanwhile the Flame had begun to brighten once more.

He moved around the fragment, searching its ridges. He found no opening into whatever had seemed to move towards him in the shelter. He sent a pulse against its smooth face, then a stronger one.

The fragment tilted away.

He followed it.

She let the space support it before he could drive it farther.

He stopped.

The fragment hung between them.

He could not see her. He could see what he had struck cease to move.

The brightness at his centre sharpened.

He reached towards the fragment again, drawing its edge towards his centre. The Mother recognised the gathering movement. He was trying to take it into himself. He would undo the disagreeable thing that had failed to answer him, and perhaps the place where it had briefly seemed to answer would return.

She held the fragment where it was.

He pressed.

She held.

His light thinned along her refusal. The old injury ached, and now there was a second strain beside it. She had no wish to hurt him. She had no wish to return the fragment to a failure he could repeat without ever having to look at it.

For a moment the two wishes were not enough to tell her what to do.

He pressed harder.

The fragment began to split.

She moved it aside.

His light crossed the place it had occupied and drove into the breadth beyond. It went on until his effort gave out.

He withdrew into himself, diminished by what he had spent.

The Mother kept the two pieces near one another. They had not quite separated. A narrow joining still ran between them, and a crack caught the last of his light.

She had protected the fragment and frightened him again.

There was no satisfying version of the event in which she had done only one of these things.

She looked at the cracked thing she was holding.

It was not alive and held no awareness of its own. It had not asked to be preserved. She would have to remember that, too. Keeping something could become a way of congratulating oneself for keeping it, while the actual reason grew smaller and smaller somewhere beneath the congratulations.

For now, it was the only trace of an encounter that had belonged to both of them.

She set it at the edge of the place where he had woken.

Then she withdrew far enough that he could approach it without approaching her resistance.

He did not move.



The Mother had never needed to be understood.

There had been no one to misunderstand her. This had spared her a considerable quantity of trouble, though she had not thought of it as a convenience at the time.

Now her welcome had been felt as confinement. Her help had become a false promise of company. Her refusal had arrived as an obstruction in a world whose occupant had only just learned that he could be obstructed.

She could not explain any of this to him in a form he knew how to receive.

She could make another shelter.

She could make a thousand. She could fill each with a motion that bent towards him and a brightness that returned his light. She could furnish the whole unmade breadth with apparent answers until he never again reached without being met.

He might be happy.

For a while.

And when he discovered whose movement had been inside every welcome? What would he make of her then? What would he make of himself, having poured his longing into a world arranged to nod back at him?

The possibility lay open before her. Beautiful, intricate, intolerable.

She let it remain a possibility.

The Flame stirred.

She did nothing.

He extended himself towards the fragment, stopped, and drew back. He approached again from another direction. This time, when a small thread of his light touched the cracked surface, he did not increase its force.

The thread warmed the smooth face.

He withdrew it.

Warmth remained.

He attended to the remaining warmth until it had passed into the surrounding space.

Then he touched the fragment again.

The Mother stayed still through the entire small experiment.

There would be grander achievements. Worlds would eventually make a tremendous fuss about them. For the moment he was learning that he could touch something without either possessing it or breaking it, and she had no intention of interrupting.

He repeated the experiment.

The crack remained.

He changed the angle of his approach, allowing the light to move along it. The two faces warmed unevenly. He reduced the force until the difference was slight enough that the joining did not strain.

She felt the effort that moderation cost him.

He was still afraid. He was still alone in the only sense of *alone* available to him. The dark had not become a person merely because he was learning to be careful with something inside it.

But his care was his.

She had not made the movement for him.

At last he allowed the thread of light to rest against the fragment without drawing it back.

The smooth face held a little warmth. The ridged face remained cool. Between the two, the crack divided what he had done from what he had been unable to undo.

The Mother loosened the sheltering space around his edge.

He did not flee into it.

He remained with the small dark thing.

She could have mistaken that for trust if she had wanted trust badly enough.

Instead she attended to what had actually happened. He had stopped striking the fragment. He had learned something of the force he carried. He was keeping a small warmth in a place that would otherwise cool.

It was enough to be going on with.

Around them, the unspent possibilities remained. There were still no mountains, no animals, no rain. There was nothing that could reasonably be called a sky. No one had yet discovered hunger, though wanting had got a substantial head start.

The Mother turned towards the little gathering of light.

She offered the simplest presence she could make without pretending to be somebody else.

No moving shelter. No answering image. Nothing that imitated his reaching.

Only room, and her attention within it.

He did not recognise her.

She remained.

The unanswered interval opened between them, and for the first time she left something open without knowing what would fill it.

At its edge lay the cracked fragment. One face warm, one face cool. An inconvenient little thing. It could not sing his praises. It could not explain her intentions. It could not return either of them to the ease before the other had acted.

He kept it warm.

She let him.

And neither knew what the other would do next.