

## God of the Lost

A child once asked: "Why does Marreq'thar look so sad? Is it because he doesn't like people?"

Marreq'thar has created every right to be sad. But not because he does not like people. Some would even say Marreq'thar is not sad at all—but he is so alone that it is tough to think of him in any other way.

Maybe it is because he knows how easy it is to make the world resent him. Maybe because he is there when the world burns. Maybe he looks sad because he is looked at.

But because he does not like people? No.

Marreq'thar the Sinful, the Despised, God of the Lost. He is who he is because of what he shapes himself into.

As one of the Five, he lives in Evyseina in peace from the Magi and the eternal flame. As one of the Five, he controls the night and the overlooked.

I once heard a story about Marreq'thar.

One day, Marreq'thar walked the dark and lonely pathways of the gardens, hoping to be alone and let his thoughts fly.

Yet, disturbing his solace, Tairys, the wild-haired, came soaring down, his wyvern crashing into the nearest tree, making a racket that Marreq'thar could still hear when he pulled his cloak up around his ears.

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“Sinner!” Tairys shouted, as his wyvern regained its footing on the thin branch. Tairys himself sat comfortably on the back of the ferocious creature. “What have you done?”

“Nothing, as usual. And as usual, you suspect me,” Marreq’tar answered.

“Silence the lies. I don’t have time for them right now. The world is collapsing out of shape.”

“When isn’t it?”

The wyvern spread its wings chaotically, almost taking flight and rushing down toward him but stopped at the behest of its master.

“The people of Senna are starving,” he said. “And there are rumors about unrest in the Magi. Have you given in to your daughter once again? Is she helping them?”

“I haven’t seen her in months, you suspecting fool. And the Magi never rest. I have nothing to do with this.”

“When people die it always has something to do with your daughter. And thus with you.”

“You’re too kind.”

Tairys whisked up a wind and spun to Marreq’tar, who lost his uneven footing in the gale. “You are mistaken if you think you can sneak your sorry skin out of this one. You know something, you fix it. Find your daughter and figure out why people are starving.”

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Marreq'thar gathered himself painfully and stared into the Weathergod's old eyes with contempt. "You can fly. Don't you think it would go faster if you do the searching and I do the talking?"

Tairys looked like he considered punching him. "Fine. I'll *help* search."

"Wonderful," Marreq'thar said and crooked his mouth in agony. "You go search in the mountains. I haven't been up there in a long time."

Tairys hesitated another moment but then turned around.

"You know what to look for," Marreq'thar said as Tairys flew away.

*Quiet.*

The God of the Lost sat down on the nearby bench and listened to the silence while he tended to his legs and crooked skin. His entire body, as always, ached and hurt, and this brief encounter with the wind had made it all worse again. His thin, wooden fingers traced across the ghastly skin, trying to feel how it hurt this time.

When he was correcting his knee by sliding the kneecap into place and pulling his tendons, he heard a sound again.

"Oh, please," he said as he saw who it was. "Can't I get a second alone any more?"

The Keymaster stood in front of him, now in her first shape, wearing her traditional robes and holding her mirror so it obscured her face.

"Tairys came to see you, no?" said the plural voices masking her true sound.

"What? You're going to make me labor for you as well? What now? The Sarrvaethi have betrayed you again?"

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She snickered. “Nothing more than what you have already been tasked. But the matter does need tending.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m doing it. He’s finding her is he not?”

“You know your daughter is not in the mountains.” Her many voices collided and pushed each other while they spoke, as if fighting for space.

“He’ll find her eventually.”

“Not for a while. And you should go to her first.”

Marreq’tar stretched his arms over his head and twisted from the pain.

“I will, I will. I need to cry some days too.”

“Not then. Now.” She stood perfectly still and yet her mirror moved, shifted and deformed around her face.

“Why do you care? You know people die. Starvation in Senna is not exactly something new.”

“Tairys overreacts about the wrong things. Senna is not the problem. The Magi are moving.”

“Of course they are. What did you expect them to do? Sit in their cages forever? Not like we ever actually built cages for them.”

“You misunderstand, wretched one. They are disappearing.”

He turned his head sideways in fake confusion. “That sounds like a pretty wonderful thing? Let them disappear and tell them the gods won’t miss them.”

“Because they will, of course, disappear into their own existence and finally be gone forever?”

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“Naturally,” the Despised answered, knowing his tone conveyed the falsehood of his words.

The Keeper of Secrets moved close, removing her mirror as her face came within inches of his. This revealed a false face of a woman.

“Find her. I could find her myself but you have a way to speak with her dread that few possess. We need to solve this before it escalates.”

Marreq'thar looked down and twisted his wrist. “Leave me and I'll talk with her. She's... in a mood.”

“Of course,” she smiled and flickered away, the mirror back in front of her head.

The cripple leaned back on the bench and sighed, his back cracking in five places.

He looked back at where she had come from, half expecting someone else to show up. Nodding to himself, he agreed there wasn't. Misplacing his foot and disjuncting his wrist, he got up and started walking south.

Sirrone, the created daughter of the Sinner, was often in a bad mood. In fact, the Goddess of Sorrow could never be otherwise. It was her nature, as it was her name. Marreq'thar had created her only to pull away his sorrow and yet, he couldn't abandon her. She was his, after all. His only real creation. She lived across the many places where the dead exist, wandering from stone to stone. However, Marreq'thar had a knack for finding her. Call it an understanding

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among the lost, if you will—even if it might take him several hours to spot her out on a good day.

This time, though, he knew exactly where she was.

He walked through the temple gardens, across the river and down into the tunnels below the hills. Where everyone would have walked right he walked left. Where a common man would have turned around he went ahead. Where other gods would doubt themselves he stepped forward.

He felt a tear form under his eye; he was close. Turning another corner and feeling his calluses splinter, he noticed the air grow colder and his eyes water.

He stopped and spoke. “Your Vaekyr have been busy, I take it?”

“What are you doing here?” he heard her say. Her voice was fast and fickle.

“A father can’t visit his daughter?”

“I told you. I don’t want to see anyone.”

“You did, and I listened, but they found out anyway.”

She turned a corner, and stood in as much visibility as her constant shroud allowed. Her body was masked and clouded in a black and white smoke, fuming from unknown places inside her. She stared at him with worry.

“They know?”

“Tairys knows people in Senna are dying of starvation. They’ll all know soon.”

“What’s the problem? People die all the time. My Vaekyr have indeed been busy.”

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He managed a weak smile, which hurt as well. "For my sake, you can do what you want there. But they think the Magi are involved."

"I haven't seen them," she said. "I don't know what they are doing."

"I don't suspect that. But you might have to be a little patient."

Her smoke flared and twisted, the outer breaches flirted with a red tint.

"You promised I'd be left alone."

"I know, my sweet. But we cannot ignore—"

"You *promised*."

"And I hate having to do this, trust me. I'm tired and want to be alone, just as you do."

She looked at him with a puffed mouth and large eyes. Her smoke whirled and danced around her in frightening patterns. "That's your problem. I just oversee the dead."

"And you will." He curled his fingers awkwardly, "Look, I'll get a handle on this immediately. It shouldn't last long, if all goes well."

"It better not." She put on her best stern voice behind her timidity.

Marreq'thar sighed in relief and bowed down. "Thank you, dear."

"It's the Magi isn't it? They make you all scared."

He thought of a better word but there was only one he could say. "Yes."

"Throw them to me. They'll fry in the deepest reaches of the flaming seas when I'm done."

"Don't." He shook his head. "They just enjoy it."

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Marreq'thar hurried back as fast as his failing legs could carry him and stopped at the House of Brothers. Excessive and rarely used, the house was built when the brothers arrived in Evyseina. Today, it mostly serves a purpose of stature.

Marreq'thar held still outside and adjusted his twisted collarbone. He stretched his fingers so they became longer, cleaning the nails in the process. He pushed in his waist and corrected his feet, making them slimmer. He used his hands to mould his breast into the shape of a woman's and massaged his hair, extending it and unnaturally changing the color to a pure black. His hips grew along with his height. He sculpted his neck and altered his voice. Delicately, he brushed his face and formed it into different shapes until he was content with the look. He did not need a mirror for this; he had seen her enough times to know. Finally, he threw his hands down and his smudged robes whirled into bright green colors, flowing like a long robe.

Then, the woman every man has seen when they close their eyes went inside.

"Traveller. I need you," she said into the empty rooms. "Vianih, come home."

Vianih, as one of the brothers, was not originally from Evyseina. He is not one of the Five, but has long since been granted the stature most other gods possess—indisputable after Asyeinde took him into her bed.

"What are you doing here?" A pleasantly surprised voice said in his head. "I'm busy with some annoying complication with the Magi, so I'm afraid I can't stay."

"I know. I can help."

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Before Marreq'thar could see how, Vainih stood in front of the goddess, not fazed from the speeds he had been travelling at. "Hells, I've missed your face."

She smiled with her body. "I know. You've been away for a long time." She stepped close in slow, distracting steps. "I have barely seen you."

"Yes, indeed. But the world is a busy place. And now the Magi are disappearing."

"Disappearing? Where to?"

"Southeast of the Coer. A little north of Vishenai."

"Ratisana? Why to the earth?"

"They want to live with humans, maybe."

"Or kill them?" she said after seeming to think.

"That's why we're trying to keep an eye on them, but they're slippery bastards."

"So you're already watching them?" She looked relieved.

"Of course. They never stay ahead of us for long."

"They almost killed us all once. Don't underestimate those you cannot trust, dear."

"Don't worry," he smiled comfortably. "When it's a battle of power, we always win."

"Oh, you know what I say about power." She played with the word, as she always did.

"Yes, Asyiende. I know—"

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“But,” she snatched herself away from him, “no time for frivolities. I need information.”

“Ask.”

“What do you know of what is happening in Senna?”

“In Senna?” He seemed puzzled at the question. “I haven’t heard of anything happening there?”

“Oh, wonderful. Then it’s just Tairys going off on a rumor again.”

“Tairys?”

“Yes. He was flying around earlier screaming about a large starvation in Senna and it was all the Magi’s fault.”

“Hah! Well, I doubt it. Sure, the Magi are close but they seem to be treading water. They won’t be going west for a while.”

“Good to hear. Then I’ll return. I’m sorry to have kept you from your business.”

Vianih hesitated for a moment longer than seemed natural. “I am indeed busy. Farewell for now. Let’s make it a shorter divorce, this time.”

As soon as he had left, the goddess disappeared from the House of Brothers. To anyone who would be watching, though, it seemed like something else walking out of that house: A deformed, frail god dressed in black wool.

Scurrying to a hidden corner of the world, Marreq’tar conjured one of the Vaekyr, Riders of the Dead, and spoke to it. The wraithfire it carried made everything cold to the touch.

“Go to your Lady. Tell her there is no problem any more. Tell her she can continue her acts in Senna until she is satisfied. Tell her... it’s a gift.”

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The white-clad rider nodded once at Marreq'thar and vanished.

With no one looking, the god sighed and left. One remaining: The one who knows all secrets.

The Keymaster. The Keeper of Secrets. The God without voice, gender, or name, and the Goddess with all of each. She, as she is considered female, is said to be impossible to fool because she already knows everything. She is said to never appear before you unless she wants to. And she is known for being disinterested in altering the course of the world.

Even so, Marreq'thar knew she would do all those things; it was only a matter of giving her the right reasons.

In the realms of the living, the Magi got a new apprentice; one they did not know a month earlier. They took him in and showed him their arts, many of which he could repeat without effort. He spent many arduous weeks in the company of those tricksters, but made not a whimper to give his identity away. Meanwhile, the river-city Senna suffered from the worst famine in history.

The apprentice, whom all Magi learned to trust, incited a movement that would later be known as The Following. He told them, proud and hungry as they were, how the gods were weakened and looking the other way. How he had seen them preoccupied with flying around in mountains, searching for little girls, and keeping themselves company while talking about frivolous things. The

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apprentice shared how he had seen even the Keymaster resign herself to leisurely strolls through the gardens out of pure boredom.

The gods, growing wary by the bolder movements from the Magi, only watched, surprised at the extent with which they could get close without being seen.

After many stories, after many sleepless nights on all sides, the gods still waited for an attack. But no such thing was planned. The apprentice—no longer an apprentice—had convinced them all how it was better to infiltrate the people of Ratisana. “Here you’ll find people willing to believe in magic, willing to be fooled,” he said to them. “Stay here, and we can be free from the tyranny of the gods.”

Around the time the famine ended in Senna, the Magi lost their old apprentice and Marreq’tar was once again seen in Evyseina.

“Where have you been?” voices spoke behind him.

He smiled. He hadn’t expected her to be this quick. He turned around to find her wearing the same robes and holding the same mirror in front of her face.

“I thought you knew everything?” he teased.

“I might,” she said.

“So why ask me?”

“Because I want to hear you lie. Figure out how badly you want to hide it.”

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“There’s nothing to hide. I went to Senna to stop the famine you all seem to forget.”

“Oh, did you? How considerate. Dealing with those minor issues all by yourself as we are all focused on the Magi. Well done.” Her many voices made the praise flicker into a void and dissipate.

“Did you all just forget the people completely? A couple odd movements from those we defeated long ago and every other duty is gone like a leaf in the wind. You’re supposed to be gods, aren’t you?”

“Don’t talk to me about responsibility,” she flared. “You have none, you broken mess.”

He laughed. It was a cracked, dry laughter that would sound foreign to anyone.

“They are still able to sneak out even with all of you staring at them. Now you’ve got Magi running all across Ratisana, doing whatever they want. And what did you do to stop it?”

“Stop it? I don’t interfere. It is not wise to mindlessly start cascades you cannot foresee the fallout from.”

“And look where that *wise* mentality has brought us so far,” he said, keeping sarcasm ambiguous. “I am truly honored to be beside someone as talented and insightful as you. Truly, I feel blessed by the company I keep in these parts. I feel myself becoming smaller every day from the amount of austere power I see here.”

She shifted her feet and waited to see if he was done.

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“Yes,” she said. It seemed as though she was breathing, but there was nothing that moved. “It is unfathomable that one so small is considered one of us. The ignorant might be asking how we can stand it.”

He snorted. “The ignorant would not ask. They would *scream*.”

“What do you want?”

Marreq'thar the Despised looked at her and smiled:

“I want to be alone.”

“You have never been more alone than you are now.”

“Omitting the obvious exception at the moment, I assume?”

“No,” the voices scattered and exploded across the skies and she was gone.

He furrowed his brow; it couldn't be so easy.

He walked back to the temples, and strolled through empty halls and silent palaces—for they were empty and silent indeed.

Marreq'thar, God of the Lost, walked through those empty gardens of gods and found himself entirely, purely alone.

He went south across the river and walked left where everyone would have walked right. Where a common man would have turned around he went ahead. Where other gods would doubt themselves he stepped forward.

But she was gone as well. He didn't cry when he got to those depths, there was no sorrow there.

After spending long hours looking at empty rooms wrapped in walls and eerie silence, he realized what had happened. He walked back and laid down on the grass.

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*Some quiet, at least.*

A low, sombre smile spread on a twisted face for nine days. After the first week, he felt his mouth dry and stain his face. After another week, there was a scar beyond healing in the shape of his mouth. A third week, and his eyes were falling inside his head, his arms and hands were thinning, melting on the ground. After a month of long, lonely days, he screamed.

“Told you he would bow under,” he heard a voice from beside him. It was three grey-cloaked, long-masked men whose faces you couldn’t see. The Keymaster’s Sarrvaethi, the three Silent Watchers.

Before Marreq’tar understood what was happening, his world spun and he was back in the same place—only full of gods.

The rest of the Five, clad in their respective sets of clothing, stood around him in a semicircle. The Watchers had already disappeared.

Tairys the Wild to the very left, then Fechqia the Machine, then the Keymaster herself, and finally Asyeinde the Beautiful. The rest of the gods weren’t there.

“Welcome back, crooked one,” the Keymaster greeted him.

“You had me locked in an illusion,” Marreq’tar stated as a realization.

“Yes. Trust me, the others were planning far worse things for you when they were told what you had done. Be glad of where you are.”

She stepped closer, holding her mirror so he could see his body. It was just as the past many days had felt: Famished, twisted, and numb.

“Are you pleased with what you have become?”

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He looked at his greased hair, his scar-stained mouth. He saw his black wool dangle around him, trying to pardon the shapes it betrayed. He stared into the mirror and saw himself as he knew he looked. "I'm tired."

"See?" the Keymaster turned around. "He's pathetic. Just let him be for a month and everything is drained out of him."

She turned back to face the Sinner and shook her head. "The hubris. To think you could out-think us."

"Cut off his hand," Tairys proposed. "That'll teach him to stay within reach of things he can grasp."

"Agreed," Asyiende joined in.

"No," the Keymaster said. "We will only punish ourselves. We cannot allow harm to befall each other—regardless of circumstance. You know that."

"He'll trick his way into a new hand. Just let him writhe for a while, is all," the wild-haired tried once more, but he had already given up. There was no changing the rules. They didn't note that Marreq'thar had not objected.

"Fine, then. Throw him away. Lock him into your illusion again. He can't be allowed to do this. We already can't foresee what this has cost us."

"Unfortunately, illusions only work when you believe them." The mirror rested firmly on him as he hid his cunning smile. "But we can throw you to the realm you so excellently have made full of Magi."

"So he can trick humans instead?" Tairys said. "Not happening. *We* can at least deal with him."

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“I was thinking the Magi could deal with him, but I see your concern.” The mirror turned back to the scarred god. “You stay here. Locked in a cage without a key. *Sarrvaethi*, throw him away. I don’t want to see, hear, or smell him.”

The Silent Watchers materialized again and gripped the Sinful around where his shoulders would be. They carried him off through the aether they so elegantly move through and stopped in a cramped dungeon cell fitting for someone such as him. He landed on the ground and stayed until they were gone. Listening to silence, he felt his skin churn and cripple and change. He sighed, rolled onto his back and felt his body adjust to the blackened room. He didn’t have to hide his expression any more.

Marreq’tar the Despised, God of the Lost, lay alone in the deepest corners of Evyseina and smiled.

*Finally, quiet.*