



DAMARIS YOUNG

Damaris grew up in Zambia, Botswana and Zimbabwe. *The Dream Eater* emerged from her love of African mythology, and the way natural phenomenon can be personified as good or evil. She likes writing fantasy adventure stories and her favourite book is *Beyond the Deepwoods* by Chris Riddell and Paul Stewart. Damaris doesn't like flying but loves to see new places, so she dreams of one day travelling on the Trans-Siberian Railway. She lives in Bristol, with her boyfriend and their two dogs, Daisy and Jack.

About The Dream Eater

Twelve-year-old Amaya lives with her toddling brother Kaleb and Granny Uma, near a bamboo forest that is dark and deep. When Kaleb is taken by a dream-eating creature called Baqu, Amaya has three days to rescue her brother before Kaleb's dreams are eaten up and the memory of him disappears. Attaching her axe to her belt, Amaya sets off into the forest, along with her pet goat Titan and the woodcutter's daughter, Mally, who has her own reasons for seeking out Baqu.

damaris.young@outlook.com

@damarisyong

THE DREAM EATER

Chapter One

The Switching Hour

I dived down into the dark part of the water. Like the otters had taught me, I twist-turned into the murky depths. Into the swish and sway of liverwort and lake weed, the green fronds whisper-soft against my skin.

I searched for a rock with my feet. With my toes, I clamped on limpet-tight, while I unlatched the harvesting knife from my weighted belt and got to work.

One, two, three mussels, quick-sliced from their rock nests. I put the shellfish in the bag attached to my belt. Before my lungs started to sting, I shot up towards the surface, where I spat out lake water with its grit and fishy taste and pulled clean air into my lungs.

I squinted upwards to read the sun. It had fallen towards the west, but it was still hot enough to lick the water from my skin. I swam closer to the shoreline and reached down to the bottom of the lake until my toes dug into mud. The bag of freshwater mussels grew heavy as I walked out of the water.

My pet goat greeted me with a wriggled tail. He head-butted me hard enough to almost tip me back into the lake.

‘Careful, Titan!’ I scolded.

He’d kept himself busy, while I’d been harvesting mussels. Green moss poked out of the corner of his beard. He must have climbed the boulders that lined the lake, to get the plants that grow in the crevices. There wasn’t much else to eat.

I looked up at the sky and searched for clouds. Even a whisper of haze could be enough to mean the rains were here at last, but there was nothing but the great and empty blue.

‘The clouds are probably lost,’ I murmured to Titan. ‘Maybe tomorrow, the rains will come and find us.’

Nearby, a spadefoot croaked. The toads liked the cool of the evening; I heard the impatience in its voice.

I’d hung my tunic on an acacia tree to dry. I pulled it on and tied it around my waist with twine. My curly hair dripped water, so I shook my head until I felt dizzy.

I looked for the sun. It was lower to the horizon than I’d first read.

The spadefoot croaked again. Louder this time. Then more toads joined in, until the rattle of their song almost shook the earth under my feet.

It would soon be the Switching Hour, where day traded places with the night.

A panic-flutter woke up in my stomach.

‘Let’s go home, Titan!’ I called out with a fierceness that I knew Titan understood. We were running out of time.

I ran down the trail, the fish bucket bump-bumping against my legs. Through the long grass, I pushed. It grew as high as my shoulder, and I stomped my feet to scare away the grass snakes. I followed the trail until I got to the pastures, where two goats grazed.

Zeus, the colour of milk. Hera, the colour of honey.

I whistled with two fingers in my mouth; shrill as the shriek of an egret.

The goats trotted over. Titan danced around the two older goats, just out of range of Zeus’s horns.

‘We have to hurry!’ I said. I threaded twine through their leather collars and pulled them into a walk.

Faster! I willed them, but goats are stubborn creatures and will only go as fast as they want. I tugged on the twine and tried to get them both into a trot.

The Switching Hour had begun. The sun was setting behind the bamboo forest when I caught sight of smoke curling upwards from behind a thicket of acacia trees, their thorny branches black against the sky, where I could already see the first pinpricks of stars.

It was almost dark now. The rising tide of night had washed away the day.

Granny Uma was waiting for me by the cottage door.

‘You’re late, Amaya!’ she said, her voice scratched with worry. She grabbed the harness rope out of my hand and pushed me towards the open door.

Chapter 2

Lock the Door

While Granny Uma locked Zeus and Hera in the goat shed, I snuck Titan into the cottage. He went straight to the rug near the hearth and curled up. He snuffled and closed his eyes.

I tweaked his tail.

‘Lazy goat,’ I muttered.

I dropped the fish bucket on to the table with a thump.

A chuckling noise sounded from under the table. I peeked underneath. Kaleb sat plump and upright on the kitchen floor, gnawing on a rind of pumpkin skin. He dropped it as soon as he saw me looking and he stretched upwards, clenching and unclenching his hands.

I bent down and picked him up. I pretended to groan with the weight of him.

‘You’re getting fat on pumpkin, small brother. Soon, you’ll turn into a pumpkin yourself!’ I squeezed him tight, and he laughed.

He had a whooping laugh, full of belly sound. He smelt of trampled grass, and soil from the garden.

I wiped the mud from his hands.

‘You need a bath,’ I said. Kaleb wriggled out of my arms.

The cottage door closed with enough force to shake the dust from the thatch. I squared my shoulders and prepared for one of Granny Uma’s angry silences.

It was my responsibility to latch the windows up each night. Locking the outside out. It didn’t take long. Our cottage was only one room, with four windows. One set in each thick stone wall. Once the windows were secured, I went and stood next to Granny Uma, ready for the door locking routine.

Granny Uma locked the door. Then I checked it. Then she checked it again, pushing on the bolt to make sure it was secured with the metal clasp.

It was something that we'd done, ever since I was old enough to reach the bolt myself. It always felt silly to keep checking it, when I knew it was locked.

I stifled a yawn. Granny Uma looked at me with dagger-sharp eyes. Her hair had untidied from her braids.

'You're lucky to be on this side of the door, Amaya.'

'I'm sorry.' I tried to say it with heart.

'It's not enough to be sorry, Amaya. You know the dangers. You're twelve summers old.' Granny Uma's voice splintered into an almost-sob that hurt more than words could. 'What if you hadn't made it back in time?'

The floor was all I could look at. Beaten earth polished to a shine by our bare feet.

'Do you think it's a game, staying out as late as you want?' she asked.

I mumbled, 'I was fishing. I forgot to read the sun.' I didn't look up. I knew she wouldn't care about the fish or the mussels. It wasn't a good enough excuse. Getting caught outside after the Switching Hour was a death sentence. Once the Switching Hour was over, the night-creatures roamed.

Granny Uma clicked her tongue.

'Help me with supper,' she said. 'And don't waste time bringing the goats home if you're late. Your life is far more precious than a goat's.'

I glanced at Titan, curled up close to the fire. He looked like a muddy snowball, his white fur all dirty. When Hera rejected him for being birthed sickly small, I had loved him and raised him up strong.

'Hurry, Amaya!' Granny Uma called over from the kitchen table.

From the fishing bucket, I grabbed the bream and laid it out on the wooden board on the table. Selecting the filleting knife, I carved the fish open in one smooth movement.

The insides of the bream spilled out. I slopped the pink and white worm-like entrails into the chum bucket. The knife was sharp, and I chopped off the dead-eyed head with one satisfying slice. I quickly closed the wooden top of the bucket, so that the smell wouldn't fill the room. Tomorrow, I would mix it into the composting heap.

I cut the bream into thumb-sized chunks that would cook easily in the stew. Afterwards, I wiped the knife carefully with the washcloth before putting it back in the high-up wood block, away from Kaleb's grabbing hands.

Fish scales glittered like pearl dust under my fingernails. I waggled them at Kaleb, but he tried to bite my fingers.

‘Bite on your pumpkin, you nippy pup!’ I said. All of his tiny teeth had shoved their way out of his gums, and he was biting everything he could grab on to. Titan had learnt to stay out of his way.

‘Where’s that fish, Amaya? The stew is bubbling,’ Granny Uma said. She dipped a ladle into the iron pot hanging over the fire and slurped a taste. She tutted. ‘Needs more garlic.’

While Granny Uma crushed up another clove, I carried the fish over to the pot and tossed them in with the vegetables. The chunks disappeared under the stew-skin with a gloop.

I looked for Kaleb. He’d clambered up on the stool, stretching for the stew ladle.

‘Come here, pumpkin boy!’ I picked him up and lugged him over to the fireside, where I sat down on the hearth rug and leant against Titan’s warm side, the rumble of his snoring against my back.

Kaleb tried to get my bracelet off my wrist. I unhooked it and dangled it above him. He laughed, reaching up to try and catch it.

I’d made the bracelet with wool dyed blue, green and black. The colours of the sky, the grasslands and the forest, where the night-creatures lived.

The chair creaked as Granny Uma sat down. She passed me a bowl of stew. I spoon-fed Kaleb first and laughed at his gawping mouth.

‘You’ve got the belly of a goat!’ I told him. Granny Uma smiled for the first time since I’d got home. The firelight smoothed out the crags in her face. She looked like Mama.

Mama had gone to the bamboo forest to collect firewood almost a whole year ago. Granny Uma had cried as if Mama was really gone. But I don’t believe that. I knew in my bones that she’s alive. She’ll come back home.

My mama is brave. Braver than me.

Granny Uma caught me watching her. ‘How are the lake levels?’ she asked.

‘Lower than yesterday,’ I replied. I knew the well had started to draw silt along with the water; it wouldn’t be long until it dried up unless the rains appeared soon.

Granny Uma clicked her tongue loudly. She didn’t say anything more

about it, but I knew she was worried, I could see it in the way her mouth went taut as a fishing line.

We finished the stew, using crumbling sorghum bread to soak it up.

With his stomach full, Kaleb fell asleep on my lap. My arm ached with holding up his head, but I didn't want to wake him by moving.

I looked down at his face. His hair was black, like mine, and grew in tight spirals. His eyelashes were long and dark, making shadows on his cheek. His skin glowed like honey. He pursed his lips, as though he was dreaming of milk.

'Time for bed Amaya,' Granny Uma said softly, so as not to wake Kaleb.

I carried him to his wooden cot and put him down. I placed my hand gently on his chest and felt the rise and fall of his sleeping breath.

By the time I'd wrapped myself up in wool blankets and settled down to sleep, Granny Uma was snoring louder than Titan.

Chapter 3

Don't Let the Outside In

I awoke with a start.

My hair and pillow were sweat dampened. I felt it drip, spider-like down my skin. I caught snatches of dreams before they disappeared like mist. Dark hair and darker eyes.

Mama. I'd dreamt of the forest and Mama.

But it wasn't a dream that'd woken me.

It'd been something from outside my dreams.

I sat up and removed the blankets that had become entangled in my legs. I always kicked out fiercely when I have nightmares. Sometimes Granny Uma shakes me awake.

But not tonight. Her snores could still be heard from the other bed.

I listened, breathing quietly.

All I heard was the usual night noises. The skitter of a mouse across the roof beams, and the cricket hum from outside. The churring call of a nightjar sounded from the acacia thicket. *Had that been what had woken me?*

I eased out of bed and tiptoed over to Kaleb's crib. I peered in. Kaleb was asleep, his arms and legs sprawled across the mattress.

I turned to go back to bed.

Then I heard it.

A sound from outside the cottage door.

I stood frozen and listened over my hammering heartbeat.

Something was crying. But it wasn't the sound of an animal.

'A baby!' I whispered in the dark.

I stepped silently across the room, feeling every lump and bump of the beaten earth under my bare feet.

The baby cried out again.

Granny Uma stirred in her sleep. She mumbled and turned over, but she didn't wake.

I reached the cottage door and stopped.

The crying grew louder, as if it *knew* I was nearby. My chest squeezed at the hiccup of misery in its small voice. I thought of Kaleb. When he cried, I always ran to him and picked him up. I kissed the hurt away and wiped his tears.

But it was the rule. Never open the door after the Switching Hour!

The baby cried louder.

Maybe I could just open it and peek out?

I reached for the bolt. The metal was cold.

The crying sounded desperate now. A screaming infant noise.

Never let the outside in! I remembered Granny Uma's warning.

With my hand on the latch, I paused.

I leaned my head against the wood of the door.

My heart beat *thud, thud, thud* in my ear.

No baby cry.

But something else, a different sound. A scratch and scritch against the grain of the door. Nails against wood.

Claws.