



# The Net Keeper

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**I**t is commonly acknowledged that when the earth was young, all the seas were one sea and all the continents were one continent.

It is also widely accepted that the plants were the first to establish themselves on dry land, before the animals gained much foothold there.

And it is clear from the fossil record that land plants were able to grow to an immense size while the earliest animals were still very small.

What is not so widely known is that at first, the plants walked around quite a bit.

Yes, plants were mobile. They roamed about quite freely. You probably didn't know this—that in the beginning, plant life was ambulatory. It's right there in the fossil record, for anyone to see. But it never occurs to anyone to look.

Indeed, there was a time when giant trees dominated the dry land with their stately peregrinations. Immense fern trees and great spiny cycads strolled across the Ur continent in a slow, elegant sort of sarabande, a gavotte across the polished parquet of creation. Club mosses, seed ferns and horsetails, all of spectacular stature and girth, promenaded in what today we would call slow motion. They traveled during the daylight hours, stirring as soon as the sun was up, gripping the rocky crust with their knuckled roots, pausing occasionally to shake a small boulder or a sharp piece of shale from between their gnarled rhizomes. They bowed their plumy green crowns from left to right and then back again in cordial salutations. Their only duty and their sole delight was to wander and explore. They had no need to hunt or scavenge for food—they drank the sun and rain as if they were mother's milk. And when night fell across the vast landmass, each tree would find a good place to settle. Then it would curl its roots and furl its fronds and drift off into an innocent sleep. All told, the plants were a gentle, harmless race of giants who spoke ill of no one—indeed, they did not speak at all—and they wished no harm to each other or to any creature.

Soon after the plants arrived on dry land came the Net Keeper, whose task was to keep house for the creation. She was a handsome young woman, tall and strong and dignified in bearing. Each evening at dusk, the Net Keeper emerged from her underground cave bearing an armful of immense white nets. As the sun set, she would fling her nets across the landscape—across fields and meadows, prairies and marshes, dunes, steppes, tundras and taigas. By dawn, her nets were heavy with fallen leaves, spent seed cones, shagged off bark, broken beetle carapaces—all the detritus of the growing biome.

And each sunrise, the Net Keeper would gather in her nets and retreat to her cave with her heavy burden. There she would pick the nets clean of debris, tossing the refuse into the river that ran through the bottom of her cave to the center of the earth.

Only when her nets were soft and white again did she stretch out upon them and take her well-earned rest before night fell once more.

And how the Net Keeper loved her nets! They were as dear to her as children. She gave them beautiful names, names like *Marasmius*, *Coprinella*, *Amanita* and *Clavaria*. Each evening as she spun her nets into the world, she called out to them by name. Go lightly, *Armillaria*! I will not forget you, *Clitocybe*! I will return for you, my sweet *Russula*!

Indeed, no one who saw the Net Keeper ever forgot her deep and selfless love for her nets. Nor did they forget her strong, white arms, or the coppery tresses she wound about her head in a luxuriant braid, or those eyes the color of midnight. She was a model and an avatar, a goddess, an exemplar of all that was good and beautiful and true.

For the trees.

But for the animals? Well, life for the land animals was a different story.

I speak of land animals such as they were at that time. Some small reptiles and amphibians. Arthropods—cockroaches, dragonflies, spiders, scorpions, wasps—some of which had become very large. The odd giant millipede. To be frank, the animals had little to boast about in those days. And probably on account of their low self-esteem, they were a peevish, fractious lot. Feeling themselves vaguely inferior but unable to say why, the animals cast about seeking a reason for this floating anxiety in the plant world. They soon discovered how easy it is to find fault in others who are unlike us.

There was, for instance, the matter of language.

“That rustling sound of their leaves drives me nuts,” complained one animal. “Why can't they speak in words like we do?”

“Theirs is a language suited only for primitives,” said another.

Or there was the matter of color, always at the forefront of any grievance list.

“Green and brown,” whined one animal. “All green and brown. Nothing but green and brown. As if they were trying to prove something

about green and brown.”

“What's to prove about green and brown?” asked another.

“Borrerrr-ring,” agreed a third.

And then, there was the matter of perceived laziness.

“They don't want to work,” was the common complaint. “They don't need to store up seeds and berries for the lean months like we do. They can just lark around the planet all year and wait for us to fertilize them with our poor, dead, overworked bodies!”

“No work ethic,” said one animal scornfully.

“Perhaps you meant to say ‘ethnic?’” sneered another.

They shared an acerbic chuckle over this lame quip.

Looming over all these issues was the matter of mobility.

As long as these enormous *Plantae* moved freely about the landscape as if they owned it, everyone agreed that the sensitive, delicate *Animalia* would never be able to settle down safely in one spot and attend to the development of the phylum. As things were, the animals were doomed to live their entire lives just a heartbeat away from some crushing catastrophe. Already they had lost an entire branch of the family to the brute force of giant taproots grinding across bedrock. Or at least if it wasn't lost, they couldn't find it.

And there was the fundamental question of whose sky it was.

A few of the animals had dared to climb, hop or flap up into the crowns of the giant trees to see what they and their friends down on the ground were missing. They were aghast. They came back down to earth and reported:

“The trees are monopolizing the best part of creation!” went the buzz.

“There is blue sky up there! There are the golden rays of the sun! There are red sunrises and purple sunsets!”

“There is even an enormous moon!” (For the moon was much closer to earth at that time. It floated on the horizon day and night, emblazoning the heavens with its filigree of impact craters.)

“And only the trees can see them! We can't!”

It seemed to the aggrieved animals

that their side of creation had been exiled to the dark understory, to huddle in the mud, wretched and chilled by the perpetual shadows of that vast, sunny, perambulating mass of liverworts, ferns and cycads.

"Nothing warms us!" the animals cried. "Nothing nourishes us. Nothing energizes us. We are deficient in every vitamin—and most minerals!"

"That could lead to fractals," said one.

"Fractures," said another.

"Those too," agreed a third.

Deep in the community burrow, the animals burned the midnight oil, inveighing against their perceived enemies, the plants.

"Yokels! Rubes! Vainglorious weeds!" cried the name-callers.

"Go back to where you came from!" cried the go-homers.

"We will not be replaced!" went the rhetoric at its highest pitch.

"What is that supposed to mean?" asked one animal.

"I don't know. It just sounded good," responded another.

Louder and louder the animals railed, until they all talked at once and nobody knew what to think. Amid all this chaos, they almost failed to hear one low, orotund voice striving to make itself heard above the din. This was a new voice, coming from somewhere overhead in the dark burrow.

"No good can come of this," the voice kept repeating.

"Wait! Shhh! Listen! Let him speak," said a cockroach.

All faces turned toward the ceiling of the burrow.

High above them, eight onyx eyes and eight striped legs rotated at the end of an exquisitely fine thread.

"The way forward is clear," the creature said.

"What makes you think so?" challenged a scrappy little pillbug.

"I know something about nets," intoned the spider.

He knew something about something? Now here was a concept. Perhaps he was someone they should listen to.

The newcomer's manner of speaking was courtly and statesmanlike. His voice inspired confidence in the rabble of animals beneath him. Furthermore, he was lean and sleek

and cleanly striped—a sort of proto-CEO. The crowd listened respectfully as he proposed a plan of such simple genius that not a one of them could think of a single argument against it.

A mumble of concurrence arose on the floor. Hearing this, the spider seized the advantage. At his initiative, a vote was taken. The vote was unanimous.

They would act the next evening, said the spider, at nightfall.

The sun rose, the sun set, the moon rose. All animal life hid behind rocks and watched the Net Keeper emerge from her cave. She was taller than they remembered, and much more imposing. As always, she carried her bundle of fresh, white nets trailing behind her in a diaphanous mist. Now the hidden animals heard the sweep and flight of her nets as she cast them over the longitudes and latitudes of creation. They watched her return to her cave where, the spider assured them, she slept until awakened by the first ray of dawn.

At this, they fell into formation. The order to march came first, then the hup-two-three-four, and finally a heave and a ho were heard from shore to shore, and then another, and then another. Heave ho! Heave ho! Soon the sea-bottom crinoids were straining at their holdfasts to get a better view of the action. Brachiopods, ammonites and horseshoe crabs muddled the shallow margins of the shores in search of mezzanine seating. The sea boiled with a trillion tiny lights as abyssal forams and radiolarians rose to the surface to see what those crazy air breathers were up to. In the end, they say it took nearly every animal body on dry land to roll that immense boulder up to the mouth of the Net Keeper's cave. When, finally, the entire animal kingdom lay slack-jawed and panting on the forest floor, the entrance to the Net Keeper's cave was sealed so tightly that not one ray of morning light could penetrate within.

And so, the Net Keeper slept through dawn. She slept into the noon hour. She slept until the heat of the afternoon finally awakened her. Stirring, she rubbed her eyes and wondered what seemed so strange, so different, so not quite right.

Instinctively, she reached for her nets. But she felt only the bare cave floor beneath her. Instantly, she was on her feet.

"I overslept!"

As for that stone, that legendary boulder that had taken the entire animal kingdom to jockey into place—well, the Net Keeper pushed that stone aside with one strong, white hand as if it were merely a piece of dried flotsam. She emerged from her cave, rubbing her eyes in the bright sunlight, and looked around, dazed, wondering where to begin. It was then that she understood: she was too late.

The giant trees, awakening at dawn as they had always done, had unfurled their fronds and uncurled their roots and set out upon their morning ramble. They were unaware that they were treading on the Net Keeper's nets. As they proceeded, the trees drove the nets deeper and deeper into the ground. As they trampled, their roots became more and more entangled in the nets. Their progress slowed as the day wore on and no one appeared to disentangle them. Finally, with one vast, collective sigh that was loud enough to be heard on the surface of the not-so-distant moon, the trees came wholly to a halt.

And there they have remained ever since.

Today the Net Keeper is an old, old woman—as old as the continents that have drifted apart and taken her nets to all quarters of the globe. She is so old that she no longer remembers why she weeps, or for whom. But her children remember. And when she weeps, they dry up her tears and seek to console her with little gifts—toys and trinkets that once upon a time amused and distracted her. Scarlet bells, which had always been her favorites. Bronze and ivory globes that roll and tumble in the wind. Leathery saddles to be mounted and ridden by elfin cavalry. Lavender parasols beneath which fairies can hide. The Net Keeper lifts these follies in her ancient hands and holds them to the light and smiles. She remembers when she and her nets were young and, for a while, she is comforted. 🕷