

"Vraget"
Dana Wood

The first time I saw Vraget, the foremost city of a virgin world, I had a bird's eye view. Bizarre and ungainly, it was a faded gray mass without concern for planning or uniformity. The most important, heaviest, or wealthiest structures sat on the boxy hull. Smaller dwellings stretched into the trees and damp murk on the wings, and, with some imagination, you might make out the shape of the original craft. I had little enthusiasm for this rugged place, but the strange city intrigued me, and I observed it curiously until it vanished from sight.

"Miss?" A flight attendant balanced herself in the aisle, a suspiciously sealed tube in hand. "Please roll up your sleeve."

"What for?" I asked, distracted enough to obey before I got a reply.

She broke the pressurized cap, releasing the needle. "We'll be landing soon, and you don't meet regulation standards."

Still reeling from the surprise shot, feeling oddly exhausted, I managed to disembark before I collapsed, right in the middle of the lobby. Slipping when I tried to stand, I was caught and led aside by a man who to this day refuses to acknowledge that the first thing he did to "help" me was to curse the transport company to high heaven for "making another victim of their stingy, tainted swill." I hadn't known I needed vaccination for entry, but apparently it was their responsibility to provide it.

"What's your name, miss?" he asked, sitting me on a cot in a little clinic sectioned off from the rest of the terminal.

"Magali," I answered groggily.

"Magali, my name is Warren. I'm a volunteer with the local medical assistance district. I'm subbing for one of the regular port nurses, but I am trained, and you can trust me not to let you die," he told me seriously. I think he was trying to be funny. "What brings you to my corner of the universe?" he inquired, pulling up my sleeve.

Following his eyes, I noted with fear the faint white veins spreading from the prick like cracks in a windshield. "My father has a job in Vraget. I'm moving in with him."

Perceiving my clear distress, he told me reassuringly, "Don't worry, Magali. You're suffering from

poor-quality Vraget Sickness extract. The side effects should finish soon. The extract itself isn't fatal, but it won't provide much protection from the real thing."

He was interrupted by a sudden thud on the window. We both jumped, and I nearly gagged when I saw what had hit it. Mosquitoes had smashed into the glass trying to get in; though they were larger than any mosquitoes I had ever seen, with thicker legs, still twitching, too many pairs of wings, and mouths like toothpicks. I shivered as Warren pulled down the shade. "That," he announced wryly, "is what we're trying to protect you from."

"What are they?" I whispered. "Man-eaters?"

"Blood-suckers," he corrected solemnly, seeming to reach a decision. "Listen, Magali, we can't send you out there unaware. It's too different from Earth. If you're willing to endure my shift, I can tell you about it."

So I met Warren, my first friend in the new world. He had never seen Earth and understood more about Vraget than my father, the city health commissioner.

During that afternoon and the months ahead, we grew close, and I learned the tragic history behind the planet.

Over 40 years ago, a mass-transit spaceship was forced to leave the new galactic speedway and make an emergency landing on a previously unexplored planet. It crashed into a marsh, sank to its belly, and stuck. The passengers messaged Earth for help, but were informed it would be some time before they were rescued. Unwilling to jeopardize their chances of being found again, they decided not to leave the area and built shelter on the only solid surface in the swamp- their fallen shuttle.

Rather than retrieve the castaways, Earth simply adopted the planet as fresh territory for expansion. The marooned became settlers, and their descendants, like Warren, became natives. Enterprising colonists congregated in Vraget, modernizing the city with electricity, banishing the darkness from its walls and corridors. Suddenly, they succumbed to a strange illness marked by white "webs" on the skin, and people began dropping like flies. Only a few weeks in, the death toll hit the thousands.

Rushing to contain the epidemic, specialists hurriedly correlated the appearance of the disease, named "Vraget Sickness," to a dramatic leap in the mosquito population. Humans contracted the illness from the insect's bite, inducing a slow, steady, but unstoppable deterioration. Without any natural resistance or cure, death was guaranteed.

A vaccine was developed, but its potency was short-lived and ineffective. Authorities tried tearing down swampland in an attempt to destroy the carriers' habitat, but after a subsequent spike in deaths, abandoned the project. Restricting immigration was the latest effort to contain the plague; only special citizens' relatives like me were granted entry.

I joined Warren as a medical volunteer to combat the disease. Warren's dedication to protecting Vraget was absolute; I didn't understand his devotion to such a gloomy place, but I understood we had to defend ourselves. We distributed vaccine and microfiber cloaks, transparent, weightless tarps to hide under when the swarms attacked. It was the best we could do. Yet the plague persisted, breeding more turmoil. Angry and frightened crowds frequently gathered outside an official's residence, violently demanding a solution. Vraget, already our fragile haven of last resort, was plummeting towards chaos.

"It's a stupid idea," I grumbled as Warren walked me home after our shift. City commissioners, including my father, had decided on a drastic, idiotic plan to finish Vraget Sickness once and for all. Our route was unusually quiet and empty, but I blamed the heat for keeping people inside.

"I don't like it either," he conceded wearily. "But everyone's desperate for a solution; they'll try anything, and risk the cost."

"It'll get worse!" I cried, prodding him. "You know that better than I do- you were here the last time they tried 'deforestation!' It only set the monsters off!"

Warren suddenly grabbed my arm, pulling me up short. I whipped around and saw we had turned onto my road. Not a block away, men and women shouted outside my address, roaring as a pack and pounding on the front door. I wasn't worried about my father, since we'd just left him in his office. Perhaps I'd expected we'd be next, but I was shocked by how soon, and how vicious the crowd appeared.

I stepped back, then again, until finally I was dragging Warren with me, faster and faster. His voice and hands shook. "We'll duck down the next alley."

I almost believed we'd make it, but a woman shrieked, the yelling and stomping surged, and we bolted. Alleys, roads, courtyards, we flew over them, recklessly barging through trash and mud, chased by the sound of the gaining mob. I cast about wildly for a hiding place, somewhere they wouldn't follow. We came to the edge of the wing, the marsh at our side.

Struck by an idea, I shouted Warren's name and plunged into the muck. Heart pounding in my ears, I crashed through undergrowth, half-blind under the canopy. I couldn't tell how far I went, but neither could I hear our pursuers.

Ferns rustled, and Warren emerged, dirty, wide-eyed, and breathless, gasping, "This is a death wish. Are we crazy?"

"Yeah," I said, exhausted, as he drew his tarp from his sleeve, "so were they."

"I haven't seen a mosquito," he remarked glumly, draping it over our heads, "so they're probably feeding."

"I'll find a flashlight," I replied, rooting through my bag. Night fell early in the marsh. I already had difficulty seeing Warren's face or the path we'd taken.

"It'll be brighter in the morning," he murmured as I finally grasped the torch. I nodded, though he couldn't see. No one would dare rescue us out here. We had to get ourselves back to Vraget.

"This isn't much," I admitted, turning it on. The bog dwarfed its weak illumination, withering our beacon. Within minutes, however, we were surrounded.

The buzzing came first, a steady groan that rapidly grew to a whirlwind. Then we saw them, thousands of them, whizzing and whirring on all sides. I screamed and almost dropped the lantern as we dove for cover among gnarled roots, curling up and swiftly hitching the end of the cloak under our feet. They honed in on us, struggling and failing to burrow through the cloth. "We won't be able to get through that," I breathed mournfully, "even after sunrise."

Warren was uncharacteristically speechless. Expecting some comment, I worriedly nudged him and heard a louder, closer hum. My fear jumped to new heights as I spotted a single mosquito, swooping with hungry, sinister aim, by my friend's face. Intent on remaining motionless, he didn't even flinch as it rested menacingly on his cheek. I was not so composed. I swung without mercy, yowling as I crushed it between my fingers. Drawing back, my hand stung, and his face was red, but I got it, with a squishy smear for proof.

Heaving a collective sigh, we laughed faintly, brokenly as I wiped it on my shoe, though by the flashlight we saw the sweat glistening on each other's forehead.

"Thank you," he said, hushed, squeezing my shoulder and taking the torch.

"I'm amazed it worked," I began, when my palm caught the light. A white web coiled from a fresh puncture wound. I was too slow. Silenced, I wrapped my arm around his waist, and he brought me to his shoulder. I didn't need to tell him what was on his face. We didn't need to say what our chances were.

"Turn it off," I muttered after a time, glancing desolately at the tireless bugs beyond the curtain. "I don't want to see them anymore."

Warren killed the beam without comment. Strangely, the buzzing tapered, as if the swarm had retreated. It was a maddening respite, because we knew they lingered still, awaiting the next opportunity.

"I wish I was on Earth," I complained wistfully, feeling hopeless and immature. "It was my decision to come, but I was safer there."

"I agree," he replied. Surprised, I waited and felt him shrug in the dark. "I can't just abandon my home, but I do know Vraget's dangerous. The rest of the world may be fine, but I'm convinced humans weren't meant to exist here. The sooner everyone can leave the city, the better."

I wanted to say something more, when an elegant blue spark flitted into view. Others arrived, bobbing slowly, gracefully, meandering together like blinking stars. "Fireflies?" I wondered aloud as one alighted on the cloak. It lit up, revealing lacy wings and a thin bejeweled body. Astonished, I recognized it. "No, it's a dragonfly. A glowing dragonfly."

"It's the most beautiful thing I've seen in Vraget," Warren whispered, echoing my thoughts.

Enchanted, we watched them nimbly dance and dart about. "On Earth," I mused dreamily, "dragonflies are symbols of good luck, especially if one lands on you."

"Good luck," Warren repeated. He paused, then threw off the cloak and clambered out, dusting off as he ran towards the lights: "I think we could use some luck."

"Warren!" I hissed with alarm, scrambling after him. "You don't know what they are, what they might do to you!"

"Does it really make a difference now?" he questioned, out in the thick of them, holding his hands up as perches. Reminded of our webs, I couldn't argue.

A familiar drone caught my attention. I made to sprint for the sheet, when I realized we were not the prey, or mosquitoes even the predators. Instead, dragonflies scouted the darkest crevices, flashed brilliantly, and snatched and gobbled the mosquitoes flocking to meet them.

"Warren," I exclaimed excitedly, "the mosquitoes are attracted to light, and the dragonflies can only eat them in the dark- that's why they target Vraget, because it's the brightest place in the swamp, and they can't be hunted! Tearing down trees only let in more sun!"

"Look, Magali," he called, stepping to show off the dragonfly clinging to his face. "They go for the mark. Put out your hand."

Hesitant, but too curious to resist, I raised my palm. Instantly, one seized the chance to investigate. More extraordinary, it unfurled a delicate tongue, like a butterfly, purposely into the mosquito wound, and tickled so much I burst into giggles. Startled, it flew away.

"Amazing," Warren admired, joining me. "Mine hasn't come back."

I stared at him in awe. "That's because it's done its job," I told him, tapping his cheek where the web had been. "You're clean."

Comprehension dawned, and he quickly retrieved a length of thread from the medical kit. "If this is what I think it is, Magali, if this is our answer, we're going to need evidence," he declared, laying it over the web. "Keep still."

When the insect returned, I clamped my hand over my mouth, and Warren gently knotted a loop around its body. It finished drinking the malady and departed, testing its limits on the string while I marveled at the fading stain.

Hidden under the cloak and wielding the dragonfly, Warren and I quit the bog safely and found Vrajet before sunrise. Wary of the insect, even our former assailants avoided us on the way to my father. The city council and the other commissioners had to be told the story. Incredulous, they insisted on destroying the marsh, but after the miracle bug cured a terminal patient before their very eyes, they tore up the destructive plan and proclaimed Vrajet saved.

The planet's made a full recovery since then. Trees remain standing, lights are off before sundown, sick wards are empty, and the dragonflies are welcome residents. Vrajet Sickness is disappearing, but, truthfully, so is Vrajet. With migrants and money pouring in from Earth again, the world is peaceful and prosperous. Vrajet's inhabitants have gradually moved away to explore the land and work in the new towns and cities, Warren and me with them. Whole districts sit empty, and every day nature recovers another piece of the old wreck. It will soon be a ghost town, perhaps to sink and vanish for good.