

# **Keal NaNoWriMo 2007**

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# 1 Young Keal

## Trouble on the Road

The road seemed to go on and on forever. On both sides the wild forest spread out so thick that it was impossible to see more than a few yards into it. Keal wondered how the road were not overgrown and impossible to use. Perhaps it had something to do with the strange black rocks that had been used to pave them in some distant future no one could remember. Back at the tribe Fredic had, during his less wicked moments, talked to no one in particular about the history of the forest world they called Lyreth. From what Keal had picked up there had been some kind of dark age where the Human race had been nearly destroyed. Some of this Keal had heard from his guardians back in Porbuyat and at first this had caused Keal to feel very grateful to be alive. As the years passed, especially since his capture by the tribe and “adoption” by Fredic he found fewer and fewer things to be grateful for. The old man’s mumblings had not often been all that understandable so the few pieces of information Keal did manage to pick up were scattered and most of it did not make a lot of sense. As far as he could make out the dark age had been caused by some catastrophe of some sort, the nature of which was lost in the mists of history. Across the known world, mainly in the larger towns and cities, old pieces of machinery had survived old age and some of them were still working though no one really knew how their internals functioned.

From his early childhood back in Porbuyat he could remember the large, greasy chimneys that spewed endless plumes of pitch black smoke towards the sky. Unfortunately, his guardians had set off with one of the caravans before Keal was old enough to learn more about how the world worked. And his years with the tribe that had murdered his guardians had seemed to neither know nor care about these things.

That was one thing Keal hoped would change now that he was away from those horrible people. Deep inside him there still burned a desire to learn things, to do more than simply worry about where his next meal should come from. He shifted the small back pack and spicked up his pace. Even though he had no idea where he was headed and when, if ever, he would come across other people in this great forest he felt as a bird that had one day found the door in its cage open. Fredic was dead, he thought, and that small thing made all the difference to Keal.

As he walked on darker thoughts entered his mind. He was reminded of the strange apparition he had seen in his tent, or had he been somewhere else?

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There still had not been time for him to really think much about what had happened back in the camp. Everything had been so confusing after Fredic's death with the others in the tribe going through their belongings not caring which were Fredic's and which were Keal's. At the end of it he had found himself pushed out of the tribe without much of value to take with him. It was only by sheer luck the tribesmen had not found the small stash of bread and cheese Keal had gotten into the habit of collecting. He never knew when Fredic would give him food so whenever he had had the chance he had tried to hide away that which he did not need right at the moment. Sometimes he had even managed to pilfer some from Fredic's wagon when the old man had either fallen asleep early or been too busy grumbling in a corner to notice.

But the apparition. Keal tried to remember what it had said. Here in the daylight it all seemed very unreal. Like it had happened to someone else in another world. A part of him kept telling him that this was so even though he could not shake the memory from his mind. Now that he began to work it over in his head a lot of details started coming back to him. With a shiver he remembered the moment he had recognised the God of Bad Luck. For a while he had managed to forget that distressing detail along with the coin the god had placed in him. His hand unconsciously moved to his wrist feeling for the coin. Keal let out a small sigh of relief when he could not feel it. Perhaps it really had been a dream of some kind after all. He truly hoped it had. From what he remembered of the old tales his guardians had recited to him Jinx was not someone you wanted to be marked by. Not if you had any sensible bone in your body.

Lost in his thoughts Keal did not notice the tipped over wagon at the side of the road until he was almost next to it. With a jerk he stopped and looked around. No one was around so he walked closer to the wagon to see what had happened to it. At first it looked like it had simply tipped over and been left by its owner, but when he took a closer look at the seat he could see dried blood on the side hidden by the tall grass. Upon closer examination he saw that it was not merely a few drops but a very large smear spattering most of the side of the wagon and part of the seat. It was almost as if someone had been crushed by the wagon and dragged along for a while. Feeling nervous he glanced around once more for signs that the owner, or worse, whoever had been the cause of this. Still there were no signs of anyone else but him so he proceeded to take a look inside the wagon.

The first thing that struck him when he pulled back the canvas covering the back of the wagon was the stench. It felt like a hard punch directly to his nose and he recoiled from the reek with a gasp. After the initial shock his stomach caught up with what was going on and lurched making Keal vomit violently into the grass. For a while he just lay there on his knees puking his guts out while the calm wind cleared the worst of the smell away from the wagon's interior.

Getting up on shaking legs Keal covered his mouth with his hand and looked once more into the wagon to see what caused the stench. A horrific sight met him: two hacked up bodies had been thrown inside the wagon, obviously after it had been tipped over. The damp air of the forest, helped by all kinds of crawling insects, had rotted the flesh of the bodies and left them dripping foul looking and smelling goo onto the canvas. Even as Keal watched a

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large piece of flesh fell off what had once been an arm and landed with a sickening sound among similar pieces of flesh. Where the piece of flesh had been Keal could see maggots and worms crawling around surprised that their meal had suddenly been taken from them.

Again Keal's bowels upended themselves and he staggered away from the scene. Whatever was left inside the wagon would be covered in blood and pieces of rotted flesh and Keal had no intentions of even looking at it again to see if he could find anything useful. Coughing he walked back onto the road and started stumbling onward.

As the foul stench cleared from his nostrils and the distance to the wagon increased he thought about what might have happened. Memories from the assault on his guardians' caravan leapt into his mind sending shivers down his spine. The forest that such a short time ago had been filled with promises of freedom and life away from the abuse of the tribe suddenly took on a sinister atmosphere. The quiet rustling of the leaves turned into hushed whispers of trees who had witnessed the brutality of Humans. Even the chirping of the birds now sounded more like warning calls than music to Keal. And the wind drifting up from behind him still held traces, or so he imagined, of the rotted corpses. He pulled his thin cloak tighter about him and increased his speed, one simple goal on his mind: to get as far away from the wagon as possible.

The rest of the day and quite a while into the night he kept pushing on as hard as he could and when he finally crawled a short distance into the forest to hide for the night he did not get much sleep. Throughout the night he was haunted by nightmares of what might have happened to the people in the wagon. The more he thought about it the less sense it all made to him. He could not understand who would have gone through all the trouble of flipping over the wagon, killing and dismembering whoever those two people had been and then stuffing the body parts back into the wagon and closing the canvas cover. It was not as if the wagon had been hidden so the bodies would soon have been found no matter what. A slight trembling went through him every time his mind went back to the horrific scene. Lying in the darkness he wished he had at least attempted to see if there had been any tracks leading away from the wagon. If he had found any he might have had an idea of whether he was travelling towards or away from whoever had done this. Every few minutes he would be startled by the tiniest of sounds in the dark forest. Even though he was used to the night time sounds every rustling leaf, every crawling rodent, every bird's call would jerk him back awake until he finally collapsed into troubled sleep not long before dawn.

While he was sleeping a figure slid quietly through the trees surrounding Keal's small hideout. The grey shadow walked to within a pace of the sleeping boy and looked down on him. When it seemed like Keal had not been disturbed the figure knelt down and gently touched his wrist while whispering softly.

"I may not be able to undo my brother's curse completely, but it can be kept at bay. Though you may not like the price."

The rest of the night the figure kept sitting crouched by Keal's side watching as his sleep calmed and his breathing slowed to a steady rhythm. As the singing of birds heralded the coming of dawn the creature rose silently and slipped back into the forest. As soon as it had withdrawn completely of out sight Keal sat up with a sharp intake of breath. His

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head spinning he dropped down on his back trying to get his bearings. Images from the day before still danced in his mind, but they now seemed a little distant making the scene seem more like something out of a nightmare than from reality. Sitting up again he listened to the forest's sounds and now found them soothing. Where the darkness of night had turned the scuttling of animals into approaching madmen they now seemed to indicate that everything was in order and that life went on as always.

Slowly he got up and rummaged through his meager belongings for something to eat. There was still a few loaves of bread and some cheese left so he ate some of it and saved a little for later. It was not much and he would most likely have to start scavenging for edibles in the forest. Judging from the number of small animals he could hear there should be a plentitude of roots and nuts, probably also some berries. Packing away the rest of the food he went back out to the road pausing only to make sure no one was nearby when he left the treeline. The day seemed better than yesterday. His feeling of freedom had returned as it dawned on him that he had just spent his first night as a completely free man. Yes, he would have to scrape by on what he could find in the forest. And yes, he had no real idea of where he was or where he was headed. But he was free. He could make his own choices.

Both the day and the miles went quickly and in the late afternoon he began thinking about finding somewhere to rest for the night and gather a little food. He looked from one side of the road to the other trying to decide which side he should go into. Again a small smile spread on his lips as he felt butterflies fluttering around in his stomach. As strange as the feeling was it was still a small thing to be able to choose to go left or right and when he became conscious of just how ridiculous it really was he gave a small laugh and headed off to his left in the direction of the slowly setting sun. Just as he had hoped he soon had a small collection of berries, roots and nuts and he sat down cross legged in a small clearing near a slow flowing stream he had also found. The fresh food and clear water filled his stomach nicely and before the sun set completely he had crawled off to hide behind some bushes and fell asleep. If he had any dreams he could not remember them. So sound did he sleep that a squirrel had crept close to steal a couple of the nuts he had carelessly left wrapped up in a small piece of cloth next to him.

When he woke up the squirrel was startled away and for a while Keal blinked his eyes and looked around with a puzzled look on his face trying to figure out who was making angry chirping noises at him. Yawning heartily he walked down to the stream and splashed a little water in his face to clear the sleep out of his eyes. He then went back and ate the rest of his bread and cheese. Looking at the empty pieces of cloth that had held his small supply of food his heart sank a little. It would be long before he would eat this well and with a sigh he packed his bag and went down to the stream for a little drink of water.

He sat down and bent forward to scoop up some water in his hands and was just about to start drinking when, out of the corner of his eye, he noticed someone moving on the other side of the stream. He pretended not to notice as he tried to follow the movements and see if he could see more of the person without giving away that he was aware he was not alone. As it turned out he had not needed to worry for only seconds later he heard a frail, but deep, voice.

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“Good morning, lad,” the voice said, “you seem far from home.”

It was not so much a question as a statement of fact. Keal slowly rose and took his time looking at the stranger before answering. On the other side of the stream stood an old man dressed in loose, white breeches and a dark blue tunic that looked like it had seen better days. The man was leaning a little on a long walking stick and as he took a half step towards the stream Keal noticed that the stick was probably necessary as the man seemed to limp slightly on his right leg. With what he hoped was a strong, yet non-hostile, look Keal looked straight into the man’s kind eyes and spoke warily.

“Indeed, sir. Something we have in common.”

At this the old man chuckled warmly and nodded so vigourously that his wild beard and grey, curled hair bounced around on his head.

“Indeed, lad, indeed. But tell me, could you please give me a hand across the stream? It is not deep, but my legs are not as steady as they have been.”

The old man took the last step down to the brink of the stream and held out his hand apparently expecting Keal to help him. The thin, almost bony, hand felt oddly warm in Keal’s own hand as he indeed did help the old man. Even though he somehow felt he should be careful around strangers the old man just did not seem threateningly in any way. And besides, the years in Fredic’s service had sharpened his reflexes so if the old man did attempt some kind of foul play Keal would have a good chance to jump clear.

But the old man did not attempt anything other than cross the stream clutching Keal’s hand and lower arm for support. When he was across he took a respectful step away from Keal, as much for his own safety as for Keal’s. For a few moments they stood looking at each other until Keal finally broke the silence if for no other reason than because he was used to being a servant and it felt odd to him to not be respectful to his elders.

“I’d offer you a bite of bread, old man,” he said, “but I’m all out so...”

He shrugged.

“Then allow me,” the old man replied. “I have the good fortune of a small appetite this late in my life and it’s the least I can do after you helping me.”

Keal supposed there was some truth to this and gladly accepted a small, hard biscuit the old man pulled out of a small sack hanging from his shoulder. The biscuit was very dry, but combined with a drink of water from the stream it felt like it expanded generously in his stomach and he leaned back against a tree wondering if he would ever be able to eat anything again. As he padded his belly the old man chuckled again.

“Such appetite, lad. Normally a single trail biscuit will keep a grown man from hunger for a day’s time.”

Lifting an eyebrow at the mention of this Keal reassessed his impression of the old man. He might be frail, but anyone who had the rare trail biscuits that were said to only be produced somewhere Keal could not remember could not be a simple traveller or beggar. Now that they were a little closer Keal could also see very faint runes carved into the old man’s staff. Noticing his gaze the old man spoke again.

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“Ah, lad, where are my manners?”

He gave a small smile and a nod to Keal.

“I am Father Metobaph, a wanderer from a faraway monastery. Who do I have to thank for my dry feet today?”

“Name’s Keal, old man. Not really from anywhere. Definitely wandering, though.”

Keal was not sure precisely what a monastery was nor why the old man would think it important to let him know he had children. Metobaph had an air of kindness around him, though, so he decided to be a little trusting.

“Until recently I was a servant, or slave really, but when my master died I was cast out of the tribe he was in.”

“One of the tribes, eh? That can be a harsh life.”

The old man spoke very softly and nodded knowingly as Keal’s hand unconsciously rubbed the lingering remains of a bruise Fredic had given him not three days ago.

“Where are you off to then, Keal, now that you are on your own?”

Keal just shrugged.

“Undecided? Well, if you stick to the road you should come to a small settlement in a day or two. It’s a bit off the road, but there’s a small path up to a large clearing in the forest where they’re trying to keep some farms alive. I’m sure they could use a spare set of hands. Mind you, it might be harsher than it was in the tribe.”

“Hardly,” said Keal, “I wasn’t exactly a valued member of the tribe.”

For a brief moment Keal thought back on how one of the tribe’s elders had those exact words, “not a valued member”, one day. Even though the elder’s back had been turned he must have known Keal was standing nearby or else he would not have raised his voice just a little bit when he said it. A bitter smile crept unto his lips. Sometimes he thought the only reason he, and Fredic for that matter, had not been thrown out of the tribe sooner was that his old master must have once held some kind of respect that had not waned so much that he had been thrown out. It definitely had not seemed like the tribe’s elders had been much fonder of Fredic than they were of Keal.

“Definitely can’t be harsher than the tribe. But what’s this monastery place you come from?”

“A place far from here where some of my brethren live peaceful lives working on their souls as well as the soil.”

As the day got started they sat at the stream talking a little. The old man did not seem to be in a hurry to get anywhere and Keal found that the prospect of soon being among another tribe, even if they were farmers, was not to his liking. And after a short while Metobaph drifted from the here and now to other stories either about his travels or what seemed like the stories that were told around the camp fires until late at night. A while before noon the old man clapped his hand and rose to his feet, helped by his staff.

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“Well, can’t sit around here all day, can we?”

The joviality in his voice infected Keal and he found himself jumping to his feet as well. He opened his mouth to ask Metobaph about something, but closed it again. Then he opened again and asked, slightly too hurried for his own liking, if he could join the old man.

“Out for more biscuits, eh? Oh, come now, don’t look so startled. It’s only natural to be on the lookout for food. But I’m only jesting. Of course you’re welcome to join me. Who knows what other mighty rivers need crossing?”

The last question was asked with a wink of the eye and Keal could not help laughing. A slow stream that could be crossed with a long stride could hardly be called a mighty river. Or maybe it could. Keal’s laughter stopped as he reflected upon how easily he could have jumped across but how difficult it would have been for Metobaph to cross it on his own without stepping in. His musings did not go unnoticed by the old man.

“Glad to see they didn’t knock your brain completely loose, lad,” he said softly, “now lead on and let us get back on the road. We can skip the farmers if you don’t feel like it.”

And so Keal led the old man out of the tangled forest and onto the paved road leading to their futures.

## **Finally Some Gods**

Late at night, a week or so after they had met, Keal and Metobaph set up camp in a small clearing in the forest. The clearing was safely hidden away from the road by a small ridge with dense bushes. Earlier that day they had been fortunate enough to come across a group of travelling merchants that had traded them some meat and cheese in exchange for Metobaph helping one of them who had injured his arm in an accident. Keal had looked on with a morbid fascination as Metobaph had cut open the man’s arm to remove a couple of splinters that had broken off from the bone. It had taken all four of the other merchants to hold the struggling man down, but eventually Metobaph had finished his bloody work and splinted and bandaged the arm.

The merchants had been very grateful and had even asked if they would like to join them as they were headed towards Porbuyat hoping to sell their wares. Before Keal could even begin to voice his objections Metobaph had kindly declined the invitation claiming that they were heading in the opposite direction. While it was actually the truth Metobaph had never actually mentioned any specific destination so Keal had been left wondering if the old man really was just travelling aimlessly or if there was some kind of other purpose with his journey. As they shared some of the meat for dinner he decided to ask.

“Meto, why did you tell the merchant that we were headed in the opposite direction? I mean, I don’t mind. Wouldn’t want to go to the city now. It’s just that I’m thinking you may actually have a destination in mind.”

A sad smile crept onto the old man’s face as he sighed and replied.

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“Yes, there actually is a destination. Not one I look forward to, but eventually all journeys must end.”

Keal said nothing and waited patiently for the old man to continue. Throughout the last week he had come to recognise the distant look in Metobaph’s eyes. He would get it whenever he talked about the monastery where he had apparently spent the better part of his life. Once more Metobaph got that far away look in his eyes and his voice seemed very sad when he continued.

“I have put off my return to the monastery for over a year now. You might as well know this as there may not be a lot of time for explanations once we get there.

“Before I left I held the position of, well, the title will mean nothing to you. Suffice it to say that it was fairly high up in our hierarchy. You see, the order I belong to, the Order of Peace, may both preach and believe in equality and treating people alike. But as always some kind of structure seems to be necessary. And so it is that we eventually created different levels of influence, power really, within the order.”

“Yes,” said Keal, “I remember you telling me about how the monks, they’re called monks, right, how the monks would have different roles and areas of responsibility.”

“Indeed. That is, however, only sharing the combined responsibility in order to make sure things are actually done. It’s a bit like when you collect wood for the fire while I clear the ground of stones and dig a small pit for the fire. Neither task is more important than the other but both should be done and it makes sense to split the tasks. The hierarchy within the order started based on the teachings. Back in the beginning of our days it made a lot of sense to simply let the most knowledgeable, or at least oldest, member of the order be responsible for teaching the younger. The order grew in size and so more ‘levels’ were created and over the years these levels got titles and eventually they became positions of power rather than indications of teachings.”

This seemed somewhat familiar to Keal. In the tribe he had grown up in there had been similar positions with the tribe’s leader at the top and a handful of people who were responsible for the different aspects of daily life. Yet something still confused him.

“Don’t they teach anymore, then?”

“Some do, some don’t,” Metobaph answered. “It depends a lot on the position. And the individual, I guess.”

He sighed.

“The original idea behind the order was far different and I must admit that I’m not entirely pleased with the way things are now. Hence the delay in returning to the monastery. It’s been several years since I was there and I fear I may not get an overly warm welcome.”

“Then why are you going back?”

“Because of my vows, lad, because of my vows. Whatever I may think and feel about the order I do not have it in me to abandon the vows and promises I made to myself and our god. The Supreme is distant from this world, yes, but he’s still very much alive inside us. In our souls.”

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Keal raised an eye brow at this. It was the first time Metobaph had mentioned anything specific about the gods. Most of the time he seemed to merely speak of daily things or, to Keal's confusion, about the soul he claimed everyone has. According to the things Keal knew about the gods you would indeed pass on to another realm when you died, but the way his guardians had taught it it had seemed to Keal as if he, himself, would pass on. Not some mysterious, invisible thing living inside him. And now Metobaph mentioned this Supreme god. Keal had ever heard about this god before and was not entirely sure he really wanted to know about more gods. He shivered as memories of Jinx returned to him and, following it, the horrific sight of the mutilated bodies in the wagon.

"I don't know much about gods," he said, "except the, erm, stories about how they choose people to aid them in their goals. That doesn't seem too distant to me."

"Ah, you're thinking of the old gods, then."

Metobaph sat watching Keal for a moment. It was plain that Keal felt uncomfortable about the direction the discussion was headed which intrigued him. Normally, Keal had a very well balanced mix between wanting to know more and not wanting to ask too many questions. This particular topic was different. It was almost as if Keal neither wanted to know more or even talk about it. He decided to abandon the topic of gods and take their discussion in another direction.

"Have you thought more about where you might be headed in the future?" he asked.

"Not really," Keal admitted. "It seems strange to think about these things. It's not more than a week ago that I was in the tribe. Now it seems like everything is possible. And yet nothing really does seem possible. I mean, sure, perhaps a farm would take me in. Or perhaps we'll come across another group of merchants that might have some need for me to, I don't know, carry their stuff or whatever."

It just doesn't seem like an improvement over life in the tribe. There I at least knew where my next meal would come from. Even if it wasn't a very large meal."

They both grew silent for a while. The sun had set and darkness was settling rapidly over the forest as the small fire crackled lustily. Keal dragged his blanket up around his shoulders to ward off the cold. The evening's talk of gods had forced more than just the images and memories to his mind. He could not even begin to understand why Jinx had appeared before him. What he could do was accept it. Absently he rubbed his wrist where the coin had entered his body. It felt like it was still there. Hiding just beyond his touch. Taking a deep breath he looked Metobaph directly in the eyes.

"Do you believe the gods walk the earth?" he asked.

It looked like Metobaph was just about to say something. He shifted his gaze from Keal to the fire and sat contemplating the question for a while before answering.

"I believe there are things in this world we might call gods. But I also believe that there is only one entity, the Supreme, that truly is a god. Sadly, not many seem to agree on this."

"But you do believe the gods, the ones you call the old gods, are here? In this world?"

Seeing at the eager look on Keal's face it was Metobaph's turn to feel a little uncomfortable.

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“What are you really asking me, lad?” he asked.

“It’s just. . .” he began, but did not know how to start explaining his meeting with Jinx. Half the time he himself did not believe, or at least would not believe it, so how could he expect a stranger to believe his fantastic tale.

“Never mind,” he mumbled, “I’m just tired tonight. I think I’ll go to sleep now.”

With those words he lay down on his side and rolled his blanket around him. He had no idea how long it took before sleep finally found him and the minutes or hours before it did was filled with the all too familiar images of Jinx, the wagon and Fredic.

Metobaph sat watching the boy tossing and turning in his sleep. Over the past couple of days he had noticed that the boy had an interesting knack of being able to fall asleep almost the minute he lay down. Or maybe sleep was not the correct term. Keal’s body was indeed sleeping, but his mind was still very much awake although it seemed to be somewhere else. With a small sigh he said a prayer under his breath and smiled sadly as he saw Keal find something resembling a peaceful sleep. It would not leave him as well rested as a real sleep for even though Metobaph had indeed studied long and hard when he was younger he had never learned the finer points of how to take enough of the Supreme’s power into his own being to be able to do more than just prodding the world into a slightly different place than where it had been only moments before. As least the sleep Metobaph could offer must be better than the nightmare ridden dreams Keal seemed to have every night.

Settling back into his own blanket he gazed into the small fire and listened to the sounds of the night. After a few minutes he could begin to feel the gentle touch of the headaches using the Supreme’s power always instilled in him.

“Another sleepless night,” he mumbled and put another branch on the fire. He nearly jumped out of his seat when a quiet voice answered him.

“At least tonight you’ll have a little company, old man,” the voice said.

Metobaph turned his head towards the voice. It had come from the edge of the trees around the clearing they had camped in. Squinting to see better in the dark he slowly began to make out a figure leaning against one of the trees.

“Mind if I join you?”

Gesturing at the fire to indicate his accept Metobaph tried to get a better look as the figure approached and entered the flickering light of the fire. A young, bearded man dressed in dark grey clothes sat down next to him. His clothes were a clean, deep grey colour rather than the faded greyish colour of worn clothes. After seating himself he pulled out a small, slim pipe and used a branch from the fire to light it. In the light from the fire Metobaph recognised a face he had not seen in ages.

“You!” he said accusingly. “Cursed Luck! What are you doing here?”

“Just keeping an eye on young Keal here,” Jinx said. “He’s got a long road ahead of him.”

“Hrmp! Not if you’re standing at the side.”

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“You of all people should know that there are far worse situations to be in than to be dead. No, Keal need not worry about dying. What he needs to worry about is that he is alive. And will be far longer than what he’ll want to.”

While speaking Jinx’ appearance changed gradually between several different bodies one face flowing gently into another. When next it spoke its face had settled back into that of a young man.

“I know you don’t believe me, Meto, but I am doing my best to keep Keal safe. It’s just, ah, you know how it is. However little sense it makes even gods don’t always have much choice in these matters.”

“Gods? Pah! You know my views on that matter, you oversized spirit!”

The otherwise calm old man looked at Jinx with a steely gaze. His mouth had retracted to a thin line and Jinx visibly shrank back from him. Metobaph held his gaze on Jinx for a few heartbeats before letting his face returned to his normal lines with a short harumph.

“I guess I should take some solace/pleasure in the fact that at least one of you young upstarts recognise actual power when you face it,” he said.

Jinx just shrugged not wanting to either admit it was afraid of Metobaph. Or rather, that it was afraid of the old man’s god. There had been many discussions in the Grand Halls about whether this new power that had emerged over the last centuries really was as old as it claimed or if it was just an attempt at a rapid rise to power by making the other gods too afraid to oppose it. As usual Jinx had stayed out of these discussions as it was all too clear to the God of Misfortune that it might also have a shot at the title of God of Confusion since it never could make up its mind about whether this Supreme, be it a real god or just a powerful spirit or dragon, was what it said or not. Most of the other gods quite simply refused to believe that there could be anyone more powerful than them. Being less than popular with the other gods Jinx was probably the one of them who had spent the most time in the mortal realms and this had given it a lot of opportunities to see what the effects of all the gods, spirits and dragons. And most importantly, the effects of the Supreme and its followers.

Despite never feeling cold or warm Jinx nevertheless pulled its jacket tighter around itself. Over the years it had crossed the path of several people following the Supreme and all of them had had something special about them. It was not arrogance or the selfassuredness that naturally followed extreme power. Casting a sideways glance at Metobaph it was once more struck by how different this human seemed. He had some of the same confidence about him as the other followers of the Supreme had had. Strangely enough Metobaph had less of it than some of the others. There was something else that made Jinx more worried and sometimes even downright afraid. Until this moment Jinx had been unable to define precisely what it was. But when Metobaph had looked it straight into the eye it had really seemed like the old man’s gaze could have killed even a god if he had wanted it to. That was when Jinx had known what it was that made Metobaph different from the others. He possessed within him a raw power whose strength Jinx could not even begin to guess at. And that was not even what scared Jinx the most. The truly frightening part was that

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Metobaph seemed to both understand and control that power. Jinx shivered and shifted his gaze to the fire hoping to escape a line of thinking that could only lead to one conclusion: that the Supreme was, in fact, completely accurately named.

“Why did you take an interest in Keal?” Metobaph asked.

The question startled Jinx out of its thoughts. It was almost as if the old man was trying to help him think about something else. As this thought struck Jinx it shivered again but decided to take the outstretched hand leading away from its thoughts. Even if the mere fact that that hand was there could be seen as proof that Jinx’ fears were justified.

“It all began a while back when Keal was still too young to really be aware of what went on around him. He was always getting into trouble, even back then.”

Jinx smiled at some unmentioned memory.

“His guardians had taken him in after his parents had been killed in an accident at the machinery they worked in,” it continued. “This is not in itself anything extraordinary since these accidents happen on a daily basis. Oh, they rarely have fatal consequences, but it’s happened often enough. To be honest I think the foreman was more concerned about the knowledge lost than the people.”

“You were there?” Metobaph asked.

“Ah... yes. I was. Let’s just leave it at that.”

A particularly guilty look crossed Jinx’ face. Metobaph waved his hand as if to dismiss his comment and Jinx continued.

“No, his parents’ deaths were not what drew me to Keal. It was that he was with them when it happened.”

At this Metobaph raised both eyebrows.

“You mean, he was somewhere nearby? I understand that some of the machineries are realistic enough to use some spare space, if they have it, for the children of the more important workers. Probably hope this will keep them working longer and get the children started in the sweat shops as soon as possible.”

“No, no. When I said that he was with them I mean just that. He. Was. With. Them.”

As they spoke Jinx’ features had changed into that of a sad young woman.

“Apparently some of the kids had found it funny to see who of them was best at escaping from the section they were in. Not an easy task given the number of people looking after them and that they were physically locked away from the actual machinery to avoid them doing just what they did.

Anyways, it turned out that even at the age of three or four, I can’t remember, Keal was already very proficient at escaping notice and he succeeded where even some of the older kids had failed. Unfortunately, he did not possess anything resembling good sense which probably isn’t all that surprising, I guess. So he ran off to show his parents how good he had been at the game he was playing with the other children.”

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“He didn’t just ‘escape’ from the play house but actually managed it all the way into the machinery? Or did his parents work outside it?”

“His parents were boiler mechanics. They were working on fixing some of the valves/ventiler that were meant to release the boiler’s pressure if it got too high. Long story short, the boiler ruptured literally boiling his parents and several others on the spot. And it happened just as Keal had reached them.”

For a few moments they both stared silently at nothing, Jinx reliving the memory, Metobaph taking in the enormity of what he had just heard. He had never been into the innards of the machineries, but knew that a boiler would at least have held several hundred liters water. Boiling and under pressure making a rupture into something between a small explosion and a deadly warm steam bath. No one within several meters of the boiler should have been able to survive the rupture itself and anyone in the same room would likely have suffered severe burns most of them probably fatal as well.

“How many died in the accident?”

“Apart from Keal’s parents? Four were killed on the spot, a few more died of their injuries afterwards. Not Keal though. Once the wreckage was cleared away they found him standing next to what people guessed must have been his parents. The poor soul was crying his heart out but was otherwise unharmed. The crew guessed he had somehow run into the wreckage after the explosion in search of his parents and recognised their clothes or something.”

Jinx shook its head. It had been in the room, unseen, above the boiler when it ruptured and nearly took the entire building with it. This particular boiler had been a remake of one of the large subterranean machines left over from the time before the Weapon went off and was therefore in a wooden building near the docks. If the boiler had been the same size as the original the accident would definitely have levelled the building and done serious damage to the neighbouring warehouses.

Another few moments of silence passed, Jinx’ quiet nodding confirming Metobaph’s unvoiced question as to whether the god had seen the accident with its own eyes or not.

“Did you see what saved him?”

“Nothing did. At least nothing I could see or sense. And it happened despite me being within twenty meters of him. That in itself should have caused all manner of bad luck for him.”

“As opposed to the joy of having his parents killed right before his eyes?”

“Sorry, I didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that somehow he made it through the accident unharmed so yeah, I suppose something must have saved him. But what?”

Jinx hesitated before asking a question that in itself could call down the wrath of virtually every other god in existence if they knew he had asked it to a follower of the Supreme.

“Could it have been. . . your god?”

Metobaph sighed and poked the fire for a while.

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“Difficult to say. It’s unlike Him to spare someone death only to live through the horror the experience must have instilled in Keal. But then again, maybe He has some unknown plan for the boy. Even the oldest and wisest of his followers dare not even guess at what He’s planning.”

This time it was Jinx’ turn to give a small snort of amusement.

“So you’re all running around after some guy none of you have seen and none of you know what his plans are or what he’s doing and what he isn’t?”

Even as the words left Jinx’ mouth the god regretted saying them. Again he shrank back from Metobaph’s gaze this time not because of the power hidden in the man, but because of the anger that flashed in his eyes. In an unusually moment of strength Jinx managed to look Metobaph straight in the eye and it forced its appearance into that of the young, bearded man again.

“What? Isn’t that what you do?” it sneered.

“Begone, you foul creature!” Metobaph shouted. “How dare you come here like some scavenger picking on whatever’s left of this poor boy? How dare you insult the Supreme? I know of some of the things you’ve seen, you pathetic excuse for a dead worm’s ethereal excrements! Those things should prove to you beyond a doubt that you and the other selfproclaimed gods are worthless leeches sucking on the souls of humanity!”

“Keep your voice down, you old cripple,” Jinx spat out. “Or you poor, helpless boy, who, I might remind you, called upon us spiritual shits to kill a man less than the passing of a moon ago, wakes up!”

“Pah! Keal will sleep soundly throughout the night, aided by the power of the Supreme. Not drugged up like what happens when one of your kind tries to ‘help’ humans by forcing them unconscious.”

Jinx was about to reply angrily, but Metobaph reached out to grab his walking stick and stabbed it at the god. Just as the stick was about to touch Jinx the god disappeared and the stick only stabbed at the empty air. Metobaph cursed the gods and all their foul doings to all their own false netherworlds and back. As he did this Keal’s sleep became troubled once more and the old man forced himself to be calm. Knowing Keal needed the sleep more than himself he settled into a traditional cross legged position of his order’s meditations and crossed his hands in his lap. He took a deep breath and prepared for a night of prayer and meditation to help Keal through his nightmares.

## **The Monastery**

Slowly but steadily the weeks passed as Keal and Metobaph travelled together. Since there were not many roads through the forests they rarely had to choose which way they were going. Gradually their lives settled into a quiet routine of walking most of the day and then gathering food and firewood, sometimes even hunting a little for rabbits. Most of the time they did not speak much. This suited both of them quite well. Keal obviously needed

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to make a lot of things settle in his mind and everytime he and the old man did talk his mind seemed to be filled up with new questions and thoughts. The long walks gave him ample time to sift through what had happened back in the tribe and as time passed he came to terms with the fact that he quite simply had seen something that night in the tent. During one of his talks with Metobaph the old man seemed very pleased when Keal had stumblingly come up with the theory that yes, something had manifested itself in front of him, but no, he did not know what it was. It could just as easily be the God of Misfortune as it could be something entirely different.

“I guess the only thing I’m really sure of,” he had said one day, “is that whatever it was was something beyond this physical world.”

At this Metobaph had smiled his quiet, content smile and simply nodded.

The more time Keal spent with the old man the more he came to like his company. Even, or perhaps especially, when they were just walking on the roads or sitting silently at the fire in the evening. It was the first time in his life he had ever simply been in the presence of someone else without being ordered around, told stories or somehow else being involved in some way. Now he was simply enjoying the feeling of sitting at night, leaned back against a tree, knowing he was not alone. That there was someone who accepted him as who he was without trying to force him to change. It was a very sharp contrast to Fredic’s abuse. During these weeks his dreams also settled down and the memories from his grizzly encounter of the mutilated bodies turned into vague images that no longer caused nightmares or chills. In short, Keal was simply enjoying life and he found himself taking more and more interest in what the future might bring. It was not easy for him to think that far ahead as he had not really known any other life than what he had had back with the tribe so there seemed to be an infinite number of options, possibilities.

One day, sitting in the last rays from the setting sun, he found himself especially well rested and relaxed. They had made good progress that week and a few days earlier they had emerged from the forest to find themselves at the edge of a wide plain leading to some cloud covered mountains in the horizon. The sudden change from the illusion of shelter in the thick forest to the openness of the plain had started a lot of thoughts in him and as they made their way across the plain he had come to realise that he was beginning to be aware of what he wanted to do, at least in the immediate future. So as he and Metobaph relaxed in the fading light with full stomachs he broached a topic he had been thinking a lot about for some time.

“Remember a few days ago when you told me that story about how one of the old monks had tried to build a large rainwater tank that had collapsed giving everyone nearby a very improvised and cold bath?”

“Huh? Oh, haha, yes. That was great fun. No matter how hard we all tried we couldn’t help laughing. At first there was the slight shock and worry that someone might have gotten hurt. But still, the sight of the head monk standing there in his drenched robes not knowing if he should explode with fury or just shiver from the cold... ah, yes. Those were good times.”

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The old man sighed and gazed at the mountains while this and other pleasant memories from his life at the monastery played themselves out in his head.

“I was thinking,” Keal continued, “you’ve mentioned a few times that it’s been long since you’ve been back there. And. I don’t know. From what you’ve told me it seems like a good life. Sure, there’s hard work, I guess. But I figure I’d find that no matter where I end up. So I was wondering... if you did return there at some point do you think I could go with you?”

With a slow sigh and a gentle smile Metobaph closed his eyes and thought for a few moments before answering. Keal could not remember ever feeling so nervous in his entire life. It was not fear or worry that was making his stomach flutter like a field of butterflies. Anticipation, excitement and hope. Those feelings he had not known for most of his life were swelling inside him as he had finally found it in himself to ask that question. In a brief moment of clarity he realised that it was the first time in years that he had so directly asked a favour of anyone without trying to make himself as small and subdued as possible. Should Metobaph decide against it and say no Keal was sure he would simply do so calmly without any kind of punishment. Actually, he thought, the worst that might happen would be that he would be allowed to go to the monastery. He sat reflecting a little on the warmth he felt inside at he noticed that the worst that could happen was still very much a good thing until Metobaph cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter.

“You know I neither can nor will stop you from going wherever you want. That is one of the important things about how we live our lives at the monastery. This does not mean that anyone is completely free to do anything she pleases. What it means is that each and every one of us carry the responsibility to respect other people’s rights and wills. As easy as it may sound I can promise you that working twelve hours on a farm with no breaks every day for the rest of your life is likely to be easier. Far easier. However, if you do choose this you will change in far different ways from what you are likely to do at a farm. So it is really not a matter of whether I let you come or not. It’s a matter of whether you let yourself go or not.”

If Keal had heard this before meeting Metobaph he would quite likely just have shrugged it off as the ramblings of an old man. Now he did not. Instead he thought it over for a few moments before giving his reply. He let the words settle for a while and swirled them around in his mind trying to see not only the words and their meanings but also what was hidden between them. In the end, he realised, the simple fact that he was considering the words so carefully was more of an answer than what he might come up with in direct reply to Metobaph’s indirect question. Still, he had come to like the small, verbal “battles” they had had together so far so he felt some kind of reply other than a simple yes or no was in order. With a short laugh he looked at the old man with a half smile on his face.

“It’s not a matter of me letting myself go. Probably more of a problem if I can stop myself from going, really.”

The smile that spread on the old man’s face was everything Keal needed to know that there had not been a right or wrong answer to Metobaph’s question. That there had not, in fact, been an actual question. This was the thing that had changed Keal’s way of thinking the

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most, the old man's ability to not ask specific questions but give comments that made Keal ask them himself. As confused as this had often left him it was also something he had greatly come to appreciate because the act of thinking for himself and drawing his own conclusions were worth far more than anything he had ever been taught about the gods, life, cooking or anything else. For a split second it felt as his heart had stopped. The past weeks of freedom and his thoughts about the future suddenly seemed to pale against the freedom his mind had just created inside himself.

During breakfast the next morning Metobaph pointed towards the mountains and winked.

"Now isn't it just a strange coincidence that those are actually the mountains where the monastery lies?"

"What? Oh, you sneaky git!" Keal laughed. "You were planning to go straight up to it without asking me?"

"Well, it's true that I was heading in that general direction. And yes, I admit to not asking you. Does it matter? You couldn't seem to settle on a destination for yourself and it means little if you're drifting left or right, no? As long as you're drifting."

"Hmmm... can't argue with that, I guess."

For a few moments Keal looked thoughtfully at the mountains while new thoughts entered his head. It dawned on him that he had never given much thought to how he would fit in at the monastery. From what he understood the monks usually joined when they were young boys and got their entire schooling within the walls of the monastery. Thinking back on the parts of his nearly sixteen years long life he realised that while he had learned a lot of things about how to avoid getting beaten there was little else he knew. This dispirited him a lot though he did his best to hide it. If Metobaph had not outright objected then there would be some kind of solution for his lack of skills or knowledge. And he knew he would do his best once they got there. There was not much else he could do.

They set out for the day's walk and as the blood started flowing through his body Keal found his mood was getting better so he started asking all sorts of question about life at the monastery, what he would be set to do at first, how far it was and so on. The closest he got to an answer, though, was that it would probably take less than a week to reach their destination and that while curiosity was a good thing patience was better. Mulling this over while they set out across the plain Keal found that he did not agree with this and the distance to the mountains seemed to grow larger with every step he took rather than shorter.

Eventually they reached first the hills and then the mountains. And so it was that they found themselves climbing a steep mountain trail several days later. There had been times during the climb where Keal had bitterly regretted his decision, at least temporarily. The so called trail was little more than a few scraped rocks here and there and the past two days, after they had left the foot hills surrounding the mountains, had consisted more of trying to avoid broken ankles than actual walking. For Keal it also did not help that Metobaph possessed an uncanny ability to find the right place to step seemingly without thinking. Almost all the walking Keal had done so far in his life had been on fairly level ground.

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There had been a few hills, but with the roads they had only been a matter of walking upwards rather than straight out. Scrambling around, over and sometimes under large rocks was something completely different. Not only because the footing was treacherous, the way his back pack shifted back and forth across his back also made things difficult. He had often come close to losing his balance while balancing on the edge of a rock because he had forgotten the weight on his shoulders.

“Don’t get me wrong,” he said breathing heavily, “I just can’t help wondering why you don’t have some kind of road or at least a path or trail. This must make it horribly difficult to get things to and from the monastery.”

“Ah, well that might just be the point, no?”

There was once more a light tone in Metobaph’s voice that Keal had not noticed until they had reached the mountains themselves. Combined with the spring in Metobaph’s steps as he moved from one rock to the next made it clear that despite his previous reluctance to return to the monastery he was now happy to be near their destination. It rubbed off a little on Keal and made him feel like the troubles might be worth it after all.

Further and further up in the mountains they climbed and the air started to get colder and it felt like the sun itself grew colder. A little warmth could still be gleaned(?) from its rays, but not much and it was so little that they soon felt cold when a cloud covered the sun or they turned around a corner and walked into the shade. As night grew near on the coldest day they had seen so far Keal could not contain himself any longer. As he huddled under his thin blanket he started complaining about the cold, how far they had climbed and how long it had been since they had had any real food.

“You are free to turn back,” Metobaph said, “though I would suggest against it since I plan on continuing and there are not that many trail biscuits left.”

“Ugh! You can keep those. I’d much rather eat rocks now.”

Keal sullenly drew the blanket up over his head and curled up against a rock trying to find shelter from the wind and cold. He did not succeed and slept only a little that night. The times he woke up he could see the old man still sitting at the fire apparently not even attempting to sleep. This added to Keal’s frustration and he turned his back on both the man and the fire and did manage to get a little sleep before the world turned grey in the pre dawn light.

“Keal, get up!”

Shaking the boy’s shoulder and talking urgently Metobaph finally managed to rouse Keal.

“Come on. Quickly! And stay completely silent!”

As he saw Keal blink his eyes and begin to move Metobaph picked up his pack and walked around a large rock outcropping leading further on. Mumbling quiet curses to himself Keal kicked the blanket off him, then quickly gathered it around him as the chill morning air hit him. He wrapped up his belongings and stuffed them in his back before scrambling after Metobaph. It took a few moments for his legs to start working properly after the cold night and the rash/hurried awakening and as he rounded the corner he was staring down at

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his legs rubbing them with his hands. Then he looked up and saw a sight he would never forget.

The first rays of the rising sun spread out around a small peak not far from where Keal stood. There was a very clear path leading from where he was standing squinting his eyes against the light and all the way up to a large building that squatted just below the snow covered top of the peak. The path was almost completely straight and ran across a large plateau covered in green fields. For a few seconds Keal just stood there blinking as the sun rose directly behind the monastery, for this could not be anything else. Then he heard the deep tolling of a large bell sounding out from the peak shortly after followed by an even deeper rumbling sounds. It took him a few moments to realise that it must be some kind of gigantic horn which made the sound. The combination of the sight and the sounds made it impossible for him to move a muscle so he could only stand there taking in the splendour and beauty of it all while it lasted. Once the sun had risen/rised(?) above the monastery the bell and horn stopped playing and Keal was shaken from his reverie.

All thoughts of the cold and the hard climb vapourised and he bounced on along the path wanting to catch up with Metobaph as soon as possible. While he had stood still looking at the rising sun the old man must have moved on for he was no longer anywhere to be seen. Being distracted by finally having reached their destination Keal did not stop to realise that there were nowhere his companion could have hidden. From where he had walked around the corner the ground was level and there were no large rocks to hide behind or small gulleys/ditches(?) that might hide Metobaph from his sight. Full of anticipation he just walk as quickly as he dared, slipping into a quick trot every few minutes. There was still at least an hour's walk to the monastery and while he was eager to get there he did not want to arrive completely out of breath with his tongue hanging out like some playful puppy.

Somewhere around halfway to the monastery it finally struck him that he should have caught up with Metobaph or at the very least have caught sight of him at some point. He had not been looking at the sunrise that long. This made him slow his pace and more warily he approached the gates. As he drew closer the gates opened and a procession of green clad monks walked out of them, some of the monks carrying what seemed like some kind of altar the likes of which Keal had never seen before. The altar vaguely resembled a large box with strange symbols carved into it and various decorations rose from its top. Slowing his pace almost to the point where he stopped walking entirely he moved to the side of the path to avoid getting in the way of the the serene looking monks. So far none of them had given any sign that they had seen him so he thought it best to keep to the side and let them approach rather than the other way. Slowly the monks came closer and closer and Keal started feeling a little uncomfortable because he seemed to be completely unnoticed. If it had only been a small handful of people he could understand how they might not notice him, but the procession seemed to hold at least 50 monks. At least some of them were bound to have noticed him, even with their hoods drawn that much down over their faces.

Closer and closer they came until they were finally just a few meters from Keal. Being this

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to them he could begin to catch a glimpse of their faces under the cowls of their robes. His breath caught in his throat as he noticed that the first three monks, walking slowly side by side, appeared to be blind, their completely white eyes gazing at nothing. Involuntarily he took a step back nearly fell over as his foot left the path and ventured out on the grass of one of the fields. In an attempt at catching his balance he bent down quickly and ended up kneeling down with one hand on the ground for support. At exactly the same time he heard a voice booming out from somewhere within the first half of the procession.

“Halt! My brothers, a traveller kneels before the Supreme’s altar!”

Looking up Keal was horrified to see that the altar was in fact straight in front of him. He swallowed hard feeling his mouth go dry and the cold chose that moment to return making his entire body shiver. His horror nearly turned to terror as he saw the entire procession stop and every single monk turn to face in his direction. From his position on the ground he had a far too clear view of several dozen empty, white unseeing eyes that all seemed to bore into his very being. It was impossible for him to keep looking at the monks so he turned his gaze to the ground again though this was hardly better as it meant he had no idea what was happening around him. He could hear the shuffling of feet, the whisk of the robes as the wind dragged them across the stones of the path. Then the voice spoke again, this time very, very close to Keal.

“Who approaches the Supreme’s altar? Speak freely, my child, and let us know your name and where you hail(?) from.”

After the initial question the voice no longer sounded as intimidating as it had when ordering the monks to stop. Keal licked his lips and croaked out a hoarse reply.

“My name is Keal, sir. I come from the forest, until recently from a journeying tribe with no real place to call home.”

“And how come you by our valley on this day?”

“An old man led me here. He told me about this place and that he used to live here. I . . . I don’t know where he is. He was with me just this morning as we came into the valley.”

“Impossible,” another voice said, this one sounding far sterner than the first.

“It’s true,” Keal gasped, “I met him several weeks ago while travelling through the forest and eventually our travels led us here and I asked if I could be allowed to come with him to the monastery. He said I could. I swear.”

For some time there was a drawn out silence. Keal felt more and more uncomfortable. He did not know whether to stand up or keep kneeling. He did not even dare to loop up for fear of who he might see before him. Eventually the first voice spoke again still in the calm, friendly tone.

“Then be at peace, my child. And please stand up so we can have a look at you.”

Keal did as asked and saw that two of the monks had left the procession and were now standing right in front of him. Unlike the other monks these two had normal eyes and Keal let out a small sigh of relief. Both men had an air of age and wisdom about them though

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their faces held no clue as to what their age might be. While they did not look youthful they also did not look old. They quite simply, and very disconcertingly, looked ageless. For a few moments the two monks stood appraising Keal until the boy could no longer stand still. Nervously he shifted the pack on his back and bowed his head more from shyness than awe.

“Uhm,” he said, “sorry about interrupting your. . .”

He motioned slightly towards the procession of monks without knowing precisely what to call it. One of the monks looked back at the still monks and snorted. When he once again turned to look at Keal he had an amused smile on his face. This did not exactly make Keal any less nervous when he stole a glance up at the pair.

“Our procession?” the monk said, “oh, do not worry about that. It seems far more likely that it is us who should apologise to you, a stranger seeking our beloved ashram. On this day even more so. Relax, young Keal, and allow me to show you back to the monastery so you can relieve yourself of your pack and find a little rest. My memory, vague though it is, still tells me that the trek through the mountain is an arduous one.”

Keal nodded quietly at the last, implied question. The trek had indeed been hard and the thought of sitting somewhere inside warmed him. He let the monk take his arm and together they walked up the trail towards the gates of the monastery while the other monk angrily mumbled something and the procession started walking again. The monk leading Keal walked serenely until they had passed the end of the column, then he visibly relaxed and winked sideways at Keal.

“Don’t mind old Jamor. He’s always a stiffer for traditions and rituals. A fantastic mind, very gifted, yes. But too hung up on whether to carry the insense burner in the left or the right hand. Ah. Never mind that. Let’s get you inside and pour a little warm soup down your throat. You’re freezing so hard your lips are blue, my young friend. Keal, was it? Oh, that reminds me. I’m Arek, official gate keeper and thus equally officially in charge of who’s allowed inside or not. Jamor wasn’t too keen on letting a stranger inside while all the monks were out, but if you ask me that’s nothing to care about.”

Arek kept talking quietly about nothing in particular all the way back to the monastery keeping a firm grip on Keal’s upper arm as if he needed the support or he would fall over. His relaxed and friendly manner made Keal warm to him almost immediately. Behind him he could hear that the monks in the procession had started chanting in a language unknown to him. It sounded completely different from any of the dialects he had heard while travelling with the tribe. Almost everywhere they had been the language had been more or less the same just with different pronunciations and a few specialised words here and there. The language the monks used sounded very strange. Keal could not really figure out if he liked the language or not. In some ways he founded the almost singing rythm of it beautiful, then he would start noticing the individual words who all sounded very harsh and rough. Since Arek seemed in no real hurry and was already well into explaining how the monastery had been built on top of an old mountain fortress of some kind Keal decided that if he was indeed about to start living here he might as well begin learning some of the

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things he imagined he ought to have learned earlier. If he had joined the monastery as a small boy like Metobaph had.

“Excuse me for interrupting,” he said, “but what language is that they’re singing in? I’ve never heard anything like it before.”

“Oh, that. That’s the holy language. Passed down through the generations it contains all the secret knowledge of the Supreme, the teachings that will let us find inner peace and tranquility and the way to the realms beyond this one.”

From Arek’s solemn voice, quite a contrast to his earlier ramblings, Keal took it that this was something important to the monk. As he thought about it he could see why it would be. The depths and wealth of knowledge that existed in an entirely different language would surely be enormous. Despite being a bit sceptical about how it could possibly hold the way to inner peace he could still understand why the monk seemed to treasure it so dearly. Perhaps that understanding was what nearly caused him to stumble as Arek continued talking.

“It’s a shame no one actually knows what it all means,” he said. “The stories tell us that once there existed a great library nearby that monks would journey to and study the ancient texts left in the care of another order. No one has gone there in ages or rather, those who have have never been able to find the library and with time it seems that we simply forgot the meaning of the words.”

A heavy sigh escaped Arek’s lips.

“But why am I confusing you with all this nonsense. You said you had travelled with one from our order? Well, let’s try and find out who it was. While we’ve lost some knowledge we still haven’t slipped entirely back to the animal state and we should be able to find someone who can give a reasonably usable description of the monks who have journeyed out into the world. That we do seem to keep far better records of than other things.”

The laughter in Arek’s voice caused Keal to think that there was some kind joke lost on him in the last bit. They had come nearly all the way to the monastery and as they got close he could see that it must indeed be built on top of some kind of fortress. What had looked like a sturdy stone foundation turned out to be both tall and thick walls made of some strange form of hard pressed earth or perhaps burned clay of some kind. Noticing Keal’s gaze the monk sadly told him that the construction of those walls was also something that had been lost to time. They had been able to expand on the basic foundation with either stone walls or wood buildings like the formidable gate house, but the actual walls themselves they could not reproduce. Before entering Arek pulled Keal over to the side of the wall so he could feel it. The wall felt like stone yet with the same slightly porous finish that he had felt on freshly baked clay pots that had not yet been painted or glazed. He stood there for a while letting his fingers move back and forth over the strange material. For some reason he found it oddly calming to do so and he had to catch himself as his mind began to wander off seemingly to have a mind of its own that he was not aware of. When he removed his hand from the wall it very nearly felt as if some kind of connection between him and the wall had been broken. He was just about to ask Arek about this when he

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decided against it as he was not even sure if he had felt the connection or not. Somehow it already felt like it had only been something that existed inside his own head. There had been no tingling sensation in his fingers at the touch and neither had there been a lack of it when he removed his hand. Giving a mental shrug he decided to put this to the back of his mind and took a few quick strides as he noticed that Arek had started moving towards the gates and was already a few paces away.

When he caught up with him the monk once more took his arm and gently led him through the gates and into a small building just inside the walls. Before entering Keal managed to get a glimpse at what lay inside the monastery and what he saw amazed him so much that he stopped dead in his tracks nearly pulling Arek off balance. In the middle was a large, empty courtyard that could easily hold the entire procession he'd seen outside, and probably at least twice that many people. The entire courtyard was done with coloured tiles that seemed to form some kind of pattern that was spiralling out from the center and ending in paths leading off to the entrance of several buildings set against the wall. There was at least half a dozen large buildings and many more that were the size of small houses and looked like they could easily be the home of a large family. At intervals along the wall slim, well kept, cone shaped trees stood their thin leaves green despite the cold environment. At the very center of the courtyard a large square was marked by a wooden railing(?) that had been painted in the same sanguine red as almost all the woodwork Keal could see.

From the corners of the buildings intricate charms and lamps were hanging, the faint breeze rocking them gently back and forth. Inside the gates, where Keal was walking he could see similar charms and was fascinated with the way several threads of all colours had been interwoven in such a way that more than a single pattern could be discovered in their layout. The mere sight of this rooted Keal to the spot and took his breath away. Even though he could remember how things had looked back in Porbuyat even that large city was no match for the monastery when it came to beauty and perfection. Where the city had been impressive in its size and complexity the monastery's simplicity and the care with which it had been built made it far more impressive and left Keal wondering why no one had used this way of building houses.

After he had stood there for a while Arek discreetly tugged at his arm.

"Food, Keal," he said, "food in your stomach will make this sight seem both far more impressive and far less. Trust me, you're not the only one who's been gawping when they first entered, nor will you be the last. And there are in fact several of our brethren that sometimes can be found standing quietly in a corner just looking at our home with a small smile on their face."

The monk's voice brought Keal out of his reverie and he slowly closed his open mouth and turned to enter the building Arek was pointing at. Out of the corner of his eyes he spotted some movement across the courtyard, but it had disappeared before he had gotten more than a glimpse of what appeared to be a well nurished child. He turned completely back to the courtyard hoping to get another glance. It struck him that all the monks in the procession had been adults so, judging by what Metobaph had told him, there should be a

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lot of children somewhere inside the monastery.

“Come on,” Arek said, “there’ll be plenty of time for that later on.”

“Okay. I just thought I saw someone. Metobaph told me there’d be children here and I thought I saw one across the courtyard. Guess there’ll also be plenty of time to see them as well.”

Keal turned to enter the building and was surprised to see Arek staring at him with wide eyes and an open mouth. The monk blinked a few times before muttering something in the strange language. Though Keal did not understand it he had the distinct impression that it was some kind of curse and Arek’s voice had indeed lost all traces of friendliness when he grabbed Keal’s arm.

“Who? Who told you there’d be children here?” Arek demanded.

“Metobaph. He’s the old man who led me here.”

Seeing Arek’s confusion Keal decided to try explaining a little.

“A few weeks ago I met him down in the forest by a small stream. We started talking and eventually he let me join him. As we talked he told me more and more about this place and it sounded like a wonderful place. I don’t have anywhere else to call home and no family so he allowed me to follow him here.”

Keal hoped this was not too far from the truth that it would get him into trouble later. His heart sank, however, when he saw Arek’s face go very pale, almost white.

“Are you okay?” he asked.

Without replying Arek pulled Keal into the building and with remarkable strength pushed him down in a simple chair. The monk sat down opposite to Keal and, still pale, just looked at him for a moment while he gathered his thoughts. After he had calmed down a bit he spoke quickly and commanding to Keal.

“Please just sit here. I’ll go make sure you get some food and then I’d like to hear everything about your journey here. You see, Metobaph is, shall we say, very special to us.”

Arek left Keal alone with his thoughts in the small room and went outside before Keal could reply. As he crossed the courtyard a lot of thoughts raced through his mind from who Keal really was to why Metobaph had chosen to guide the boy here. More than anything he wanted to run straight out the gate to find Jamor to get his guidance in what might become a very difficult situation. From the way Keal had casually mentioned Metobaph it was very clear that the boy had no idea who Metobaph really was and what it meant that “the old man” had chosen to manifest in this world. There was no doubt in Arek’s mind that Keal had spoken the truth when he had told about how he had simply met a stranger in the forest and, all things considered, Arek did not think Keal had really had a choice regarding whether he would have journeyed on with Metobaph or not.

Just as he was about to change direction and really do run out to find Jamor he stopped himself. Metobaph had not sent anyone to the monastery for decades, maybe more than a century. In the more than thirty years Arek that had passed since his initiation he could

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not remember even hearing about anyone who had been sent here like this. He should at the very least take a quick look at the records of who had arrived in the past years to see if there were any who had given similarly strange accounts of how they had found the monastery. Normally, the monk would take in children some of their journeying brethren had found abandoned to their own fates, not unlike what had happened to Keal. But usually the children would be so young that they had little other choice than to perish and the journeying monk would accompany them all the way to the monastery and begin their basic tuition on the way. It seemed like Keal had not been given more than a brief glimpse at what the monastery was and nothing what so ever about what the order of the Supreme really did and worked towards. In a way, Arek reflected, this made sense as Keal was old enough that he might have decided against going at some point and it would not do to have an uninitiated roaming the realms with too much knowledge.

While he had been thinking he had made his way to the archives and stopped briefly before one of the two icons hanging on either side of the doorway to the large room filled with shelf after shelf of records of everything that had happened here for several centuries. The icon on the left portrayed a fierce looking woman whose eyes burned with passion. Arek gave a brief prayer to the Lady asking for a little of her strength and determination to see the right thing to do about Keal. Then he turned to the icon of the Lord on the right side of the doorway and simply asking a short question.

“What,” Arek asked, “have you done this time, old man?”

With the words still hanging in the air he briskly strode into the archives startling the ancient clerk who seemed to have lived in this vaulted room all her life. Sparing no time for explanations Arek simply asked for information about the last time the Lord had sent anyone to the monastery, who it had been and what had happened in the years after that. The clerk coughed with a confused look on her face but quickly shuffled off down one of the long rows of shelves with an impatient Arek right behind her. It was all he could do to not letting his impatience take over as he paced back and forth while the clerk slowly, all too slowly for Arek’s blood pressure, made her way through first one then another thick, leather bound volume.

“Yes,” she mumbled, “yes. There’s one here who look to be the last. Oh no!”

At her outcry Arek whirled on the spot to look at her. His eyes wandered from her shocked face down her arm to the finger pointing at a page in the book. He leaned in closer to look at what she had found. The page held a long list of who had joined the monastery in what appeared to be a very busy year when it came to initiations. The dates on both this and the opposing page were all from the middle of the same year so Arek could only wonder at just how many boys and girls had joined throughout that year. All this he took in in the split second between his looking at the page for the first time and when he realised which name the old woman was pointing at. His entire being shook as he recognised the name and all the stories of what horrors had followed leapt to his mind and only many the willforce of years of training kept him from sitting down / kept his knees from buckling.

“It cannot be,” he whispered.

## **When Gods Walk The Earth**

The procession moved on down the path towards the sacred grounds where the ceremonial celebration of the coming of Lord Metobaph. Jamor cast a single look back at the receding forms of Arek and the boy as they made their way towards the monastery. In the pit of his stomach he could feel that something was wrong though he could not pin point what it was. Perhaps it was simply the result of being pulled out of the trance they had all entered before the procession started. Even after this many years he still felt a bit dazed when his normal vision returned changing the world around him from that glowing forms of the spirit world to that of the physical world. He sighed as he listened to the sounds of the monks around him and mentally prepared himself to reenter the trance and continue the celebration ritual. The landscape and people around him wavered eerily in front of his eyes as they clouded over and gradually the greenclad shapes turned into bright beacons, reflections of the strength of their souls. As the last remnants of the dull rocks changed to the dark light of the most ancient of life forms, mountains, his mind pushed away the thoughts of the boy and stored them for later inspection.

For hours the ritual went on with the monks performing several reenactments of the works of Lord Metobaph from his levelling of the mountains to make room for the monatory to the way he had thwarted the young, mortal race of Humans as they sought to conquer the nature around them. Though Jamor knew he was supposed to feel equally elated by, yet detached from, every single part of the ritual he could not help take special pleasure in the part that signified how Lord Metobaph, the right hand of the Supreme, had created the Human race to begin with. This direct link between all the monks' living beings and their origins always seemed to made the very air around them crackle with living energy. With the sun baking down directly from above the monks were all spread out kneeling in several concentric circles with Jamor standing up in the middle. His head throbbed from the force of the energy the monks were directing towards the representation of their beliefs and he felt larger than ever before as he threw back his head and looked straight up at the sun. Seen through the spirit world there was no sight as impressive as the sun's spirit. What would have burned normal eyes to blindness in the physical world now seemed to pour even warmer and more powerful energy not into Jamor's eyes, but into his entire being and that of the monks around him. The longer he kept his mind's eye open to the power of the sun the more he felt himself swell.

When he felt he was about to burst his mind carefully touched the link to those around him and he felt the sun's energy being channeled through him into every single monk. The power he felt was truly awesome and he took great care to spread it out among the monks based on how he could sense their ability to control it. Too much energy poured into a single being could easily incinerate it and, in addition to that person's gruesome death, it could very easily cause an interruption so great that everyone else would suffer the same fate.

Power flowed through his body and mind as he raised his arms and reached as high into the air as he could. It seemed to him as if the tips of his fingers could almost reach the

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sun. They were nearing the climax of the ritual and he slowly began to slow the energy waves flowing into him. All around him he could sense more than see his brethren as they too came close to bursting from the power they had absorbed. Using the link that existed between them he used the very last energy he received from the sun to sent out a final wave of energy through the others. To their senses it was the equivalent of a flaring ring that started in Jamor and spread out as a glowing band touching each circle of monks as it widened towards the edge of the processions.

Anyone looking at them in the physical realm would see each circle of monks jump to their feet and spread their hands to the sky forming an impressive waveform from the man in the middle to the last circle of monks. Soon after the central monk curled up in a ball and fell to his knees pulling his head down so his forehead touched the ground. Around him all the monks fell backwards from him until they all lay on the ground, still with the arms stretched out over their heads and the back of their hands touching the ground.

Jamor felt the faint, spiritual echo of his brethren around him as his mind and vision once more returned to the physical world. Then, slowly and steadily, the monks in the outer ring rose to their feet and began to pull out of the circle to form the sides of the procession back to the monastery. One by one each ring did the same until Jamor was at the point of two human triangles just like he had been as they left the monastery and they were ready to return as a mirrored image of themselves as they had left the monastery. Or almost a mirrored image. Jamor could feel the vacancy behind him where Arek should have stood. Arek's place during the ceremony should have been outside the circles themselves as he was the Keeper of the Gates, responsible for holding the door between the physical and spiritual worlds closed. This position was more metaphorical than real so it had not caused any great disturbance that he had chosen to accompany the boy back to the monastery. Jamor silently berated himself for letting his thoughts slip as the ceremony still needed an uninterrupted finish. Once more he pushed all thoughts of the young boy to the back of his head.

That was when he felt something he had never felt before. Something was not quite right. At the climax of the ritual all the power should have been grounded and returned to the world around them through the ancient rocks they were standing on. Now it seemed like there were remnants of the power lingering in the air around them. Quickly he looked around him and saw that several of the others were also glancing around with everything from incomprehension to confusion to outright fear showing in their eyes. His mind raced as he tried to replay as much of the ritual as he could remember in search of something that had gone wrong. Nothing. Nothing had gone wrong. And yet he could feel the tension of the monks around him as if they were still linked as they had been during the ritual. The tension grew rapidly and he realised that if he did not do something very fast the entire procession was likely to collapse so he took a deep breath and began letting out a deep, rumbling sound powered by his beliefs in the Supreme and his hopes for the future. As he felt the sound resonate in his body he gently shaped it into a strong note not unlike that of a great horn.

Slowly some of the other monks began doing the same and soon the same music that had

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sounded through the valley as the procession left the monastery could be heard again. When Jamor was satisfied that the monks kept the notes flowing he shifted his voice to the previous chanting and this, too, was quickly taken up by other monks. With order restored Jamor touched his hands to the shoulders of the two monks at his sides and slightly ahead of him. They in turn did the same and soon all the monks at the front of each column in the procession felt the hand of a fellow monk on his or her shoulder and when the outermost monks were linked to each other through the others' touch they started moving back towards the monastery at a slow pace, their voices echoing off the sides of the valley.

When they reached the gates to the courtyard the outer columns stopped to let the inner columns advance ahead of them. In this way the procession folded in on itself until Jamor was in the lead with the four monks that had walked at his sides behind him walking in pairs. Behind them came the next two columns and so on until at last the two monks at the very end of the outermost columns walked beneath the arch of the gatehouse. The monks passed the courtyard until Jamor stood in front of the large temple that lay straight across from the gates. Behind him the procession once more fanned out into a large triangle spreading backwards and to the sides. As always he remained alert and kept an ear open trying to both hear and feel how the monks were falling into place behind him. There was usually a little shuffling as his brethren created the formation that symbolised the way they helped lift each other towards the tip of the triangle, the symbol for the Supreme, in this case personified by Jamor. Within him he could still feel the lingering energy and he could not help wonder if the other monks felt something similar. Perhaps that was the reason there was none of the shuffling into place today. Or maybe his thoughts about the energy just distracted him so he did not hear the shuffling. Either way he was pleased with how quickly the monks behind him seemed to have fallen into place and gradually, starting at the back, had ceased their chanting until only he himself was left voicing these incomprehensible words that had been passed down through the ages.

The last word in the final prayer to the Supreme left his words and the courtyard fell completely silent as Jamor gathered a few deep breaths and prepared to turn around and thank the others for their devotion to the Supreme. That was when it struck him as if he had been slapped in the face. Until today he had not known that the last words he recited had been a prayer to the Supreme. Unwillingly he started trembling as he let those words sift through his mind and realised that he understood them. Taking another deep breath he straightened even more than he already was before, in a break from tradition, he knelt down before the temple and spoke the last prayer again in a high, clear voice. This time it felt completely different. While he realised he must have understood the words as he had set them just before kneeling he was now conscious of the way each word made sense, how the words served as a link to the energy inside him and how, at the very end of the prayer, that energy contracted inside him making both his body and mind firmer and stronger.

He stood up again and turned to face his brothers and sisters. The closest four looked at him with far more respect in their eyes than what he had ever seen while at the same time appearing confused as if they did not understand what had happened and why he had spoken that additional prayer. He wondered whether they had been able to understand the words or not and made a mental note to invite them to discuss the morning's events later

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in the day. Before that, however, there was the matter of finishing the ritual according to tradition. If the four highest ranking monks, next to himself and Arek, had not understood the words he had spoken it seemed unlikely any of the other monks had. In a strong voice he thanked the monks for their attention and ensured them that with this level of dedication to the Supreme they had all grown not only throughout this ritual but also during the hard work each of them put in every single day. Then he dismissed them while motioning the four at the front to follow him into the temple.

Once the other monks had scattered and gone off to find their midday meal and normal duties all five of them entered the temple in respectful silence. Just inside the temple doors Jamor stopped as he was surprised to find Arek kneeling in the middle of the temple with his forehead touching the floor and his arms stretched out toward the altar at the far end of the room. Not wanting to disturb his old friend's prayers he silently motioned for the others to follow him outside again. Back in the courtyard he once more thanked them for their help in the ritual and asked them to come see him after the evening meal. He did not give them any specific reason for the meeting, but they seemed to have guessed that he wanted to discuss what had happened. While they might not have understood precisely what had been going on they had sensed that something out of the ordinary had happened. That much was clear from the serious faces and solemn confirmations that they would meet him immediately after the evening meal.

Standing at the doors to the temple he watched them walk off and he let out a long sigh. This particular ritual was always hard on both mind and body and with what had happened he felt even more in need of rest than usual. Yet at the same time he could still feel the energy burning within him as a new source of power for him. He sat down on the steps to the temple and tried to look inside himself in search for what the energy could be, what it could mean. The answer to those questions eluded him and he eventually opened his eyes again to find that Arek was now sitting next to him with a worried look on his face.

"We need to talk," Arek said, "I fear that something has happened this morning that might very well change everything we think we know."

"You felt it too, then?"

"Felt it?"

The worried frown on Arek's face turned into a puzzled look.

"I didn't feel anything. It's about Keal, the boy who came here."

From inside his robes Arek dug out a paper scroll and unrolled it so Jamor could read it. On the paper was a copy of the name and date he had found in the archives along with a handful of notes about some of the events that had happened shortly afterwards.

"The Lady and Lord protect us," Jamor whispered.

"I remember hearing about some of those things a long time ago," Arek said, "but had not thought much about how they were related to each other before now. I'm still not sure what it means. There are a lot of books from those days I have not had time to read

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through yet. So far, though, it seems like Keal may very well be the cause of either good fortune for the entire world or something truly horrible.”

Jamor took the piece of paper from Arek’s hands and read through it again. All thoughts about the morning’s ritual had vanished from his mind.

“If I remember the teachings correctly it can swing either way. But why did you think to look at these things?”

It took a few moments before the visibly shaken Arek answered.

“Because Keal told me that the old man who had led him here was called Metobaph.”

Everything around Jamor seemed to pause for several seconds as he tried to convince himself that he had misheard the other monk’s words. Desperately, he attempted to convince himself that Arek was just trying to pull one of the jokes they had laughed so much over when they were younger. This could not be true, he thought. Then he sighed and rolled up the paper before handing it back.

“So they walk the realms again?”

Arek just nodded and put the paper back inside his robes.

“And all we can do,” he said, “is to walk with them the best we can.”

“Where’s the boy?”

“Out for a short walk in the back end of the valley with a full stomach. He can’t have had much to eat lately judging from the way he gorged himself. Anyways, I figured it might be an idea to let him take a look around and, besides, it might not have been the best thing if he had been here when the procession returned. I was afraid of what might have happened.”

Jamor nodded and snapped his fingers as he once more remembered the strange events.

“Come with me,” he said, “there’s something else we need to discuss. In private.”

He led the way to his study in the building next to the main temple and waved his hand at one of the two arm chairs near the fireplace gesturing for Arek to sit down. Before sitting down himself he went to a small cabinet and retrieved two cups and filled them with a golden liquid from a tall carafe. Passing one to Arek he sat down heavily in the free chair and gave a sigh of pleasure as he felt the strong, but sweet, mead flow inside him. Slowly and from the beginning he began recounting his experiences from the morning’s ritual. Arek listened intently without interrupting though question after question leapt into his mind. Once Jamor had finished talking they both sat in silence for a while as they emptied their glasses.

“I think a refill is in order,” Arek said.

Instead of bringing the glasses to the cabinet he simply brought the carafe and put it on the small, round table between the two chairs after refilling first Jamor’s then his own glass. He sat back down and pursed his lips as he attempted to formulate some of the many questions he had.

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“Do you think any of the others felt the same as you did?”

“Not sure. Perhaps the Four Corners did though they mainly seemed puzzled about why I had repeated the last prayer. I’ll be meeting them after the evening meal to talk this through and would appreciate it if you joined us.”

“Of course, of course. Do you still remember the words of the prayer? And can you translate it word by word?”

“No, that’s the strange thing. Until I sat down and described it to you know I hadn’t realised that I still don’t understand the language. But when the words flowed through me they held a new meaning. I can still remember it and, put simply, it was a prayer to the Supreme thanking him for the life he’s given us.”

“Intriguing. Remember what old Varen used to tell us? That the meaning of our prayers was not to be found in the actual words but in the thoughts and feelings inside us as we recited the ancient rhymes.”

“Yes,” Jamor said.

Both of them smiled softly at the memory of the previous Tip of the Triangle. Old Varen had been leading the monastery for what seemed an eternity ranging from at least a decade before Jamor and Arek had been initiated until his death a few years ago. While they could both easily have looked up precisely how long Jamor’s predecessor had been the Tip neither of them had. It did not seem relevant and, unconsciously if not consciously, they both wanted, needed, to let the illusion remain that Varen had been there since the founding of the monastery. They both knew, of course, that there had been many others and throughout their years in the monastery the signs of age had gradually begin to show on Varen’s face until, at the very end, he had looked like a normal old man with wrinkles and grey hair. It was an old fact that the members of the order retained their ageless faces almost their entire adult life so the aging of Varen was proof that he had been very old indeed.

“Yes,” Jamor repeated, “Varen did say that. And as we’ve discussed many times he was right. At least, he was right that we do not have to understand the words to revere and respect the Supreme. But now I can’t help wondering what the rest of the words mean. Ah! Curse my blasted memory. Why can’t I just remember those blasted words?!”

Arek let his friend rant like this for a few minutes before stopping him with soft look and another refill. They let the topic of the ancient language alone and instead moved on to talk about the energy and power Jamor had felt flowing through his body. Though he could still feel it, or at least a lingering echo, it seemed to have waned along with his understanding of the language. Together they went through a series of mental exercises in the hope that it could somehow bring back at least some of what Jamor had felt. Suddenly they heard the deep ringing of the bell as it summoned all the monks to the evening prayer and the following meal.

“Keal!” Arek said.

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He slapped himself on the forehead as he realised he had completely forgotten all about the boy as they had talked.

“I hope he managed to find his way back. If not it will probably be okay as I told him that if he heard the bell again he should head back so he would be here in time for dinner.”

Jumping up from the chair he hastily said goodbye to Jamor and went off in search for the boy.

When Arek had left his study room Jamor put away the carafe and glasses and took a few moments to gather himself and his thoughts before attending the evening prayer. Briefly he considered asking one of the Four Corners to do it for him but decided against it. They had already sensed that something was out of place today and if that had left them nervous it would not make them less so if he did not say the prayer himself. As he walked out the door he settled his face in a solemn mask suitable for the worship of the Supreme and sent a warm thought after Arek. Sometimes he could not help but feel that between the two of them Arek was the fortunate one. He did have many obligations as the Keeper of the Gates and somehow always seem to be busy with at least one of them. Yet despite that he always had time for a lot of other things that Jamor no longer felt he could do. Their order took great pride in teaching that the person leading the monastery was not to be held above the others, but even so he could not help himself. To him the responsibility he had accepted prevented him from taking a day off from time to time simply to work in the fields or talk to the younger monks about things that was outside, and sometimes even went beyond, their curriculum. Arek had the freedom to do this because most of his duties were practical matters rather than the formal rituals Jamor did every day.

If he had seen himself in a mirror he would have been surprised at how his gentle smile that spoiled his solemn mask made him seem far more like the head of an entire monastery than serene piety could ever have. It was not until he stood facing his brethren and felt the warmth they radiated back at him that he realised he was smiling. By then he found he actually preferred it like that and went on to complete the prayer feeling again the energy stirring deep inside him, even if he still did not understand the words.

At the end of the prayer Jamor noticed that Arek and the boy Keal slipped quietly in the door behind the monks. For a moment he wondered why Arek would bring him here rather than show him the children’s dining hall, but then it dawned on him that Keal was probably older than some of the youngest monks in the room. This was confirmed when, as the evening meal started and the atmosphere grew less formal, Arek introduced Keal to him. Now that he had a good chance to measure Keal he found that the young man’s small, wiry stature made him seem younger than he really was. His eyes gave away his age, though, as they were wary and keen unlike a child’s that would either have been frightened or naïvely curious. The difference between his stature and eyes made Jamor make a mental note to take at least a few moments to meditate on the difference between age and age some time soon.

“Greeting, Keal,” he said, “first, let me apologise for the curt reception you got this morning. As you could no doubt see we were not really expecting guests so your arrival took us a bit off balance.”

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The voice that answered his greeting was cautious and confident, but also warm and honest.

“Thank you, sir. Arek already explained that. If I had realised what I was interrupting I would have waited. I just hadn’t realised that the monastery was right around the corner from where I, we, camped last night and the beautiful sunrise made it impossible to resist coming nearer.”

The smile on Jamor’s face turned warmer than it already was as he remember how his arrival at the monastery had been. Keal was fortunate to have gotten his first glimpse of it at the dawn of this particular day, not like Jamor who had arrived in the dusk on a grey, rainy day.

“Now, I understand you’ve come here seeking to live here, hm?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Very good. Normally people are a bit younger when they first come here, but I’m sure we can figure out how to make things good for you. I can honestly say that we will at the very least do our best to welcome you.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Ah, one important thing. Please don’t say ‘sir’. It’s our intention to avoid the hierarchies that have caused so many problems in the world.”

“Yes, sir. I mean. Yes. Uhm, if I may? What should I call you then?”

Jamor smiled at this.

“Jamor would be a good choice. Or, if you prefer, you can always refer to any of the monks as brother and any of the children as little brother.”

Keal scratched his shoulder and glanced around the room with a hint of nervousness in his eyes.

“What about the women? Shouldn’t they be called sisters?”

“Well, I don’t think anyone would mind if you did. To us the term brother is just not so much related to our gender as it is to how we see each others as equals.”

“Oh.”

With an approving look in his eyes Jamor waited while Keal was thinking about this for a few moments. It was very clear to him that this young man was not just a random stranger who had stumbled upon the monastery. Perhaps he was influenced by the day’s events, he thought, but it was almost as if he could literally feel how Keal was working things through in his mind. How he processed everything he had seen and heard and put it together. Nodding slowly he padded Keal’s shoulder and asked him to sit and enjoy the meal. There would be plenty of time later for sorting out where to start his education and how everything worked at the monastery. Together they shared the meal while talking a bit about where Keal had been and how it had been like to grow up in the tribe. Jamor and Arek carefully avoided talking about Metobaph as much as they could, Keal avoided talking about his meeting with Jinx and the more horrible things that had happened in his life.

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After the meal Keal was asked to follow a woman named Nica who would find a place for him to sleep and take care of getting him introduced to life at the monastery over the next few days. She greeted Keal with a warm smile and surprised him by lifting his pack as if it weighed nothing at all. The women back in the tribe had not been weak, far from it. But none of them would ever have picked up a pack, especially Keal's. Still, he had had far worse surprises in his life so far so he simply thanked her as she gave no indication whatsoever of being offended he did not try to stop her.

Before Nica shepherded him out of the dining hall by Nica, Keal noticed that Jamor, Arek and four serious looking monks headed off together out a side door. He would have liked to talk more to the two monks. It seemed to him that there had been something they were not telling him and his instincts from his childhood made him try to guard himself, not because of any specific thing they had said. More because there seemed to be far more than what was immediately clear to the eye.

He kicked himself mentally for being so suspicious so soon. These were not just random people on the road who might want to rob him of anything he had. If they had wanted to do so they could all too easily have done it already so he figured that, for now at least, he would trust them and allow himself to relax a little. The thought of sleeping in a real bed after eating a large, warm dinner felt very tempting and when Nica showed him his room he felt like he could fall asleep on his feet and not wake up for several days.

Apparently he was not as good at hiding his fatigue as he thought for Nica quietly let him know that after his long trek here he should take a few days to get properly rested and that noone would make any demands of him just yet. No sooner had she left him alone in the small room before he pulled off his clothes, crawled under the covers and promptly fell asleep.

Outside the door Nica waited patiently for a few minutes before sending a silent prayer to the Supreme asking for a long, well deserved sleep for Keal. She touched the door with her fingertips as her last thought went out to Keal and was startled to feel a slight, tingling sensation. It lasted only for a split second and as soon as it had started it stopped again. Folding her arms inside her robes she walked slowly away wondering if it was the young man or her who was most fatigued.

On her way back to her own quarters she met Arek who was out on one of his nightly walk in the courtyard. Nica had never fully understood these walks Arek took. He would wander through the courtyard seemingly at random, yet there seemed to be some kind of pattern to his route that felt just out of reach to her. The old monk's evening walks were widely known throughout the monks as a harmless personality quirk and it was not until a few years ago that she had noticed that Arek was not simply distant from the rest of the world in a vacant, day dreaming manner. He was, she had observed, completely focussed on something he, and only he, knew what was.

As she had so often done before she paused for a while and stood under the protruding roof of one of the monks' sleeping quarters patiently waiting to see where Arek would go next. To her surprise his route this evening brought him meandering towards where she stood and she quickly looked around. She was the only one here, apart from Arek, and she

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was sure she had walked as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing those who used the quiet hours of the night to meditate. Even so he must obviously have heard her or he would not be walking towards her, she thought.

Closer and closer Arek's steps took him until he was finally standing right next to her. His last steps had taken him a bit to the side so he was not facing the building, but stood beside her. That was when she noticed that his eyes had turned completely misty just like all their eyes did during the celebration to the Supreme. As far as she knew that was the only time their eyes did this and it was generally believed that it was because the monks' combined devotion together with the specific day made the Supreme be as close to them as possible. Not even a rumour had she heard about a monk who's eyes had been changed like this outside the ceremony. And yet here was one standing right next to her.

She held her breath for fear of disturbing him and dared not move a muscle lest she wake him from his trance. For a few moments he stood gazing at her with those empty eyes. Then he turned slowly to face the courtyard and spoke in a quiet voice that seemed to reach Nica's being rather than her ears. The effect of Arek's voice and words caused her to finally give in to the feeling of fear and foreboding that swirled around her heart like a cold mist.

"Things will never be the same," Arek said, "never, never, never..."

Nica did not hear how long the old monk kept repeating that word. She fled into the building behind her hoping to escape the voice that carried more than just words to her. When she finally calmed down a bit she noticed that she had retreated all the way to the farthest end of the dormitory and was curled up in a corner leaning against the wall with her hands over her ears. She could no longer hear the eerie voice and began crying softly as gentle hands helped her to a bed and stroked her head as she slipped off into a dreamless sleep.

When she woke up she found herself alone in the dormitory and gasped as she realised the sun was high in the sky. Hastily she got her robes in order and ran out to start doing her daily duties. Then she remembered that she was supposed to take care of Keal and that, in turn, brought the memories from the night before fresh to her mind. Feeling dizzy she stood for a while with her hand on the wall for support while she forced her breathing to remain calm and controlled. She soon felt better and set off in search of someone who might have been there and helped her to her bed, or perhaps she might even steal a few moments of Arek's time. As luck would have it she did find Arek first, but just as she was about to ask him about the tingling sensation she had felt at the door and about what he had talked about in the courtyard she felt her mouth go completely dry and, for the first time since she had joined the monastery, she felt that there was something she could not bring herself to ask. The feeling was so frightening that she had had to mumble some vague excuse to Arek and hurry off to gather her wits again, something that took the rest of the morning.

After the midday meal, which she skipped, she decided to keep things to herself and try to find out more about them by spending as much time with Keal as possible. She was sure he was not just another child to seek out the monastery. What she had felt after showing him his room and the strange meeting with Arek made her feel certain that the young man

held secrets none of them, perhaps not even himself, knew about. She was determined to do her best to uncover them and, if need be, protect Keal from them.

## **Going For A Walk**

For the next several days Keal did not do much other than sleeping, eating and being introduced to all the different things happening at the monastery. In the morning and in the evening all the monks would gather for prayers and meals. So would the children and as he learned more about the monastery he realised that there were not as many children as he had first thought. There were perhaps two or three dozen of all ages from two or three to thirteen or fourteen. The ones who stayed on until they were older than that had all been initiated and become actual monks. Once in a while one of the children would choose to leave the monastery rather than be initiated and as far as Keal could figure out the monks held no grudges against them. Instead of becoming monks and living and working up in the mountains those children would, hopefully, use the things they had learned through their years of training to help create better lives for both their fellow people and themselves.

That last part was something Keal was very intrigued by as he had so far seen the monks as reclusive people who would, on the rare occasions they did interact with the rest of the world, be humble and full of self sacrifice. After speaking with several of them he got the impression that while they did strive to help others they almost never did so if it meant they would have to pay a too high price, either physically, mentally or emotionally. Instead they would do their best to turn any situation into something that everyone benefitted from. Something about this made an enormous amount of sense to someone like Keal who had spent the better part of his life being subdued and not having any way of improving his situation. He knew from hard experience that there was nothing glorious about doing thing only for the benefit of others.

All too quickly the days turned into weeks as Keal started dividing his time between being taught by the monks and working on various tasks for the monastery. There was always something that needed to be fixed, or a field where an extra set of hands could be of use and so on. None of the monks tried to conceal the fact that they were shuffling him between as many jobs as possible to get an idea of what he could already do and what he had no talent for. At first he was somewhat put off at this because of his ingrown fear of being punished if he made a mistake. With time he slowly changed his attitude and rather than being overcautious to avoid making mistakes he attacked his assigned tasks wholeheartedly and did his best to keep working in what he felt was the right direction until he had either accomplished it. Or made such a mess of things that either he or the monks had to put a stop to it.

One of the larger mistakes he had made was the morning he was put in charge of making the gruel for the monks' morning meal. He was not working on this alone as preparing food for the more than eighty monks could not realistically be done by one person. He and four of the children had simply been pointed at the large pots and the ingredients and were then left on their own. It had seemed like they had plenty of time to prepare the food,

## 1 *Young Keal*

but Keal had horribly underestimated how much longer it took to get the water to boil. After some difficulties getting the right amount of rice and, especially, salt for such a large portion he had eventually served not quite cooked, over salted gruel to the monks. Much to his surprise none of them had berated him and once the initial coughing because of the salty gruel had died out most of them had simply taken it with high spirits. A few of them had smilingly told him about what a mess they had made this and other things when they had been younger. One even laughed loudly as he told Keal about how the gruel he had once made had been more black than white and how that had earned him a terribly long lecture on black and white, right and wrong, light and darkness and so on with everything being described by making patterns in the burned food.

More weeks went by and things became a little more settled. His physical work was mainly split between working in the fields, which all the monks took turns doing, and being apprenticed to one of the monks who worked as carpenters. Keal had never thought much about it but a small city that could easily house a few hundred people was always in need of repairs. The foundation was solid stone and while it did require some maintenance it was nothing compared to what the woodwork required. And since no trees were growing near the monastery everything had to be backbreakingly transported up through the mountains. Since he was not a monk he never accompanied those who went down to the hills and bartered with one of the small villages that lay nearby. Sometimes, Keal was told, the monks would mainly barter for the right to chop down trees for themselves. At other times, if the villagers had wood to spare, they would buy finished planks from them. When he thought back on how his own trek through the mountains had been he was grateful he was not on these trips. The trip through the mountains had been hard enough without having to carry lumber or planks.

One day, as he and the carpenter monk was carving a new flagpole to replace one that had broken in a strong wind, they talked about how valuable the wood they had in their hands really was to them. The monk taught him to respect the wood and those who carried it to the monastery by using a technique Keal had noticed that all of them seemed to use. Instead of directly telling him he should be grateful for the hard work of others the monk simply asked guiding questions such as which pieces of wood Keal would use for which projects, whether this little piece could be turned into other than firewood and so on. Since Keal was still new to carpentry most of his attention was on the physical part of his work and so he simply answered the monk's question without thinking too hard about it. This suited him very well as he had earlier noticed that this way of answering questions often led to him speaking his mind rather than guessing at what the right answer might be. It also gave him a lot of things to think about in his breaks or in the evening when he let the day's discussions play out in his head.

Another thing that surprised him was that he also enjoyed learning to read and write and do simple calculations properly. He had learned the basics from Fredic since the old man had, reluctantly, relied on Keal to bring various books and jars for him or run off to buy small things from time to time. It was not out of kindness or an interest in the boy's future that Fredic had taught him, it was simply to make his own life a little easier and he had gone to great lengths to tell Keal how stupid he had been and how he would never amount

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to anything in this world when there were more intelligent pigs than him.

The monks took a different approach and simply started with what Keal already knew and moved on from there. When they found out he did know a little about adding numbers they moved on to multiplication by having him return to the kitchen and cook up another portion of gruel, only this time they gave him the right proportions for one person and told him for figure out how much he needed for twenty. Through exercises like this he had slowly begun to figure out that instead of simply adding a single ration of rice twenty times he could add it ten times to a separate bowl and then take that same amount again in one large scoop. After this his teachers had gone on to show him how to do these calculations more formally in the sand or on wax tablets. And from there they had moved on to even more complicated topics such as geometry where his carpentry skills had been applied and, indeed, improved by his theoretical knowledge.

Throughout all of this he still slept in his own room, an arrangement he had found out simply came from the monks not being able to figure out where else he should sleep. The children's quarters seemed like a poor choice as his lessons often stretched far into the night and the monks' quarters were completely out of the question as he was not a monk. Being thus kept apart from both the monks and the children Keal often felt like he did not really belong at the monastery. Everyone treated him far better than he had ever been treated before, yet none of them seemed to truly accept him as one of their own.

From time to time he would mention this to Nica who seemed to have become his unofficial mentor even after the first couple of days. She had really gone to great lengths to make his introduction to the monastery as pleasant and warm as possible. The first few days she had held back to allow him time to rest, but whenever he had found himself wondering about something she had always been nearby and ready to answer his questions. Of course, there were things, particularly about what happened at the meetings held only for monks, that she avoided answering. Upon reflection of this Keal found that he could not expect everything to be answered at once and with simple answers. And to be honest, he thought, it really did not mean all that much to him. There was plenty of other things to keep him busy.

With every day following a steady pattern the weeks eventually turned to months and soon the winter had passed and the air began to feel warmer as the sun stood higher and higher on the sky. His mornings and afternoons were still spent working while talking to at least one of the other monks and his evenings were crammed full of lessons. He had been glad to feel that the monks were pleased with his progress, not simply because he wanted to repay them for the kindness and openness they had shown him but also because he could really feel the progress himself. The more he learned the more he wanted to expand that knowledge and delve further and further into this world of books and thinking that he had never known before.

On a warm spring day he and Nica took the afternoon off from the daily duties to take a walk in the valley. In addition to pointing out where the monks were attempting to start a small forest of their own she also wanted, quite simply, to show him how relaxing and beautiful their home could be.

## 1 *Young Keal*

“There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask you,” Keal said.

Nica nodded and kept walking while waiting for his question.

“I was thinking about the children here. It’s been more than half a year since I came here and yet I’ve not really spent any time with them more than the occasional sharing of a task. Why is that?”

When Nica did not immediately answer he quickly stopped her from giving him the one answer he was beginning to be tired of.

“And don’t ask me why I think that is,” he said.

At this Nica smiled and stopped to sit down on a boulder. She gestured for Keal to sit next to her so he did.

“Well, you did put us in an unfamiliar situation. You know that you are far older by the children who have not yet been initiated. And those monks who are younger than you, well, as you know you have spent time with them. You must understand that the children here have had a very different childhood than yours. It’s not that we can decide which was better, yours or theirs. But, and I probably should not tell you this, there is a very specific plan for how we teach the children. Almost nothing we teach them or ask them to do are random. Everything must follow the pattern that will open them to the Supreme in the best way possible.”

“And the tasks you’ve given me?”

“Ah,” Nica said, “yes. Your tasks have been chosen, erm, according to a pattern that I don’t think any of us really know. In the beginning we simply wanted to get to know both you and your skills. That’s why it took some time before we placed you with one of the carpenters. The same goes for not only your lessons but also the discussions we’ve had far too late in the evening.”

Keal smiled as he remembered how he had spent many nights in the company of some of the monks, or just alone with Nica, talking about everything. The monks had seemed as interested in simple details from his life with the tribe as he had been in theirs.

“Yes,” he said, “I guess that makes sense. Does it make sense that I sometimes feel I know more about the rest of the world than you do?”

“It makes a lot of sense. Only very few of us ever leave the monastery and those who do rarely, if ever, actually live in the outside world. Most just travel the roads talking a little with those we meet. In this way you’re truly unique. Oh, don’t look so surprised. Remember, you’re talking to a, what was it, a bunch of withered old farts who wouldn’t know what a pig was if it sliced itself right on our plates?”

At the memory of how frustrated he had been one of the first evenings when the monks kept battering him with questions about mundane things Keal’s cheeks turned crimson. He mumbled some unheard apology, but Nica only laughed heartily.

“Don’t worry,” she said, “the only thing that got hurt, I think, was brother Rhic’s ego. She’s always taken our duties to the Supreme extremely serious so she probably had a hard

## 1 *Young Keal*

time dealing with how you can so easily tell the stories about all the other gods.”

“Yeah, well. . .”

For a few moments Keal sat and stared the mountains. They were bathed in golden sunlight and the small flowers and heather growing on their sides had turned the lower slopes a rich green rather than the dull grey they had been during winter.

As he looked around his eyes spotted movement some way from where they were sitting. It appeared to be a single figure walking slowly and labourishly down the side of the mountain. This struck Keal as odd since he had so far not heard about any of the monks working or travelling in that direction. Turning his head he saw that Nica’s attention was elsewhere and, feeling curious, he decided to keep an eye on the figure while they kept talking. The topic of the other gods was always interesting to Keal not only because of his meeting with Jinx, but also because they had been a fundamental part of his life before joining the monastery.

“Yes,” he said, “the gods and the stories about them is something that seems to upset a lot of the other monks. Not you, though. Why is that? Surely you share the same belief as the others that the gods are, at best, spirits?”

“True. I do not see the gods in the same way I see the Supreme. Or even the Lady and the Lord, for that matter. That doesn’t mean I don’t respect them, though. Remember, and Jamor might make me eat my robes for saying this, that the important part is to believe in something. And it makes a lot of sense that those gods, false though I believe them to be, have come about. You see, when you look at each of them they possess some semblance to aspects of human nature and”

Nica stopped in midsentence which did not really surprise Keal. All the monks would get sidetracked from time to time. He always put it down to their minds being ahead of their mouths and had become used to it. Something felt strange this time, though. Usually Nica would at least continue or catch herself when she got sidetracked. This time she just kept still.

For a few more moments Keal kept his eyes on the figure on the mountain side, memorising its precise location, then he turned his head and looked at Nica.

“Nica?” he asked.

The monk was sitting very still with a puzzled look on her face.

“Nica?”

There was still no reply so Keal reached out to touch her shoulder and quickly pulled his hand away. It felt like Nica was made of something colder than ice. He rubbed his fingertips trying to get rid of the stinging sensation from where they had touched her, and to distract his mind from a series of frightening thoughts that had unwillingly leapt to his mind. With a jerk he leapt to his feet and took a few steps away from the stone they had been sitting on.

Images of two mutilated bodies in the back of a wagon danced before his eyes and details he had never before thought about stood out as clear as anything he had ever seen. With

## 1 *Young Keal*

his hands clasped to the sides of his head he fell to his knees. The images no longer stayed in his mind but spilled out on the rocks around him until pile upon pile of bloodied flesh surrounded him. He screamed, unable to close his eyes or block out the thoughts and images from his mind.

In front of his face his breath turned to mist and he started shivering as the air around him grew unnaturally cold. Everything except the blood faded away until he felt himself alone in a world consisting of nothing but him and blood and faces twisted with agony and pain.

Stumbling to his feet he tried to get away from the horrors surrounding him. First one step, then another. Then he slipped in the greasy blood and fell hard on his side. Once more he got up and managed to get a little bit further only to fall again, this time in the middle of all the blood. Horrified he lifted his hands before his face only to find that the blood was nowhere to be seen. It was still all around him and he could feel how it must cling to his body and clothes. But when he looked down at himself it was not there. He scuttled backwards, away from the blood, until his back hit something solid.

Relieved he let his head lean back only to feel that it was now resting against someone's knees. Terrified as he was he could not stop himself from looking up at the figure standing behind him. As he did so a gentle voice came to him as falling leaves before the autumn winds.

"I'm sorry, Keal," Jinx said. "I'm really sorry. But it is time."

With a sharp scream Keal recognised the figure he had seen on the mountains while talking with Nica. The clothes, the slow pace, the face that kept changing. It felt as if his worst nightmares had been brought back to life and as the God of Misfortune reached down towards him he felt everything go pitch black around him.

The next thing he remembered was Nica gently slapping his face with a worried look on her face.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "You fainted."

He tried to sit up but found that he was still too disoriented so he leaned back. The rocks felt strangely soft under his head and he reached up making sure that they were in fact rocks. Right at that moment he would not have been surprised to find that he was somewhere else or that his head was in Jinx's lap.

"Keal? Keal!"

Another gently slap brought him a bit closer to returning to the real world. He coughed a few times and cleared his throat to try and speak.

"Nica?"

"Oh, Keal. You had me worried for a while. Are you okay?"

Her slaps turned to gentle strokes as she cradled his head in her arms.

"What happened? One minute you were sitting next to me, the next you toppled backwards and shook all over. No, lie still. Let me check your head for injuries."

## 1 *Young Keal*

With adept fingers Nica prodded and poked Keal's skull, neck and shoulders until she was satisfied the sharp rocks he had fallen on had not caused any serious damage. There were a few bruises and he would probably be sore in the morning, but he was not bleeding which was a good sign.

"What happened?" she asked again.

This time Keal managed to push himself up in a sitting position. His head was still spinning and he seriously considered leaning back again, but decided against it. It felt better to move a little and get the blood flowing. He felt oddly sore in his entire body as if he had been working hard in the fields for several days without rest.

"I don't know," he said. "It was... strange. Ah, my head is spinning."

Nica supported him while he took several deep breaths with his head between his knees. After a few moments colour began returning to his face and she relaxed a little as she could see him calm down visibly.

"I don't know," he repeated. "We were sitting here talking when I noticed someone walking over there in the mountains. Then everything turned weird. You were frozen and, and... there was blood everywhere. And then..."

He stopped himself just as he was about to mention Jinx. Apart from Metobaph he had not told any of the monks about his encounter with the god and he was suddenly very afraid of what might happen if he told them that not only had he seen the god now he had also seen it before.

Nica seemed to sense that he did not want to talk about what had happened and simply sat there supporting him and rubbing his arms and back to get the blood flowing through his body again. The sun and her rubbing eventually stopped Keal's shiverings and his breathing became calm again and she began to relax a little as well.

"Let's get you back to the monastery," she said. "We can just take it slowly if you need to."

"No, it's okay. I feel better now."

With a grunt Keal pushed himself to his feet and took a few steps away from Nica. She got up and went to his side putting her arm around his shoulders, but he shrugged it off and started walking back towards the monastery without her.

She called out to him worried that he was not completely well yet. There was no answer so she hurried after him. When she caught up with him his eyes were distant and he seemed to only notice her when she actually took hold of his arm. He did not talk to her, though, he just pulled his arm out of her hand and quickened his pace.

In all the time Nica had known Keal she had never felt a single shred of hostility or violence in him. The way he behaved now, the look in his eyes, his quick, determined pace. They scared her. It was as if he was a completely different person all of a sudden. She tried calling his name again, but still he did not answer.

## 1 *Young Keal*

As he walked back towards the monastery Keal ran through a lot of things in his mind. For the second time he had been visited by Jinx. The first time she had, he firmly believed, caused Fredic's death. That cursed god would not have the pleasure of harming Nica if he had anything to say about it. There was only one thing he could think of that he could do. He had to leave the monastery as soon as possible. Tonight, today. As soon as he had picked up the few things he would need to make it safely down from the mountains.

Again he heard Nica's voice and again he ignored it. Why couldn't she just leave him alone, he thought. He could still feel the shock of the encounter. It was making him stumble and a couple of times he nearly fell. As he came to the last rise leading up to the monastery he lost his footing and twisted his ankle as one of the rocks rolled under his foot. Cursing loudly he sat down on a boulder to rub his ankle a little and shot a weary look at Nica who was still following him.

"Keal, calm down," she said. "Let me help you get back to the monastery. Is your ankle alright?"

Sighing heavily Keal gave in and figured that since he would not get very far on his own now he might as well take whatever help he could get. It seemed strange, he thought, that he was once more seeing things as him against the world. Had his months at the monastery really not changed anything?

"Okay," he said, "I think I twisted my ankle."

Nica bent to have a look at his foot and saw that both it and the ankle was beginning to swell up. She adeptly rubbed the foot a bit before retying Keal's boots as tight as she could to keep the swelling down and to let the boot offer him better support while they made their way back to the monastery.

"Thanks," Keal said. "And I'm sorry about walking off. It's just that something came back from my earlier life. And it's not a good thing."

Seeing the pain in his eyes Nica decided to let it go for now and simply propped him up on her shoulder and did her best to support him. He was a fair bit larger than her but long hours working in the fields had given the sinewy woman more than enough strength to at least keep him steady. As soon as they came back to the monastery she waved one of the young boys over and asked him to fetch some warm water and bandages. Then she got Keal to his own room and sat him down on his bed.

"Let's get these boots off. It'll hurt a bit, but trust me, you don't want to keep them on much longer."

Keal nodded and braced himself. When Nica began loosening the string keeping his boot shut he immediately felt a throbbing in most of his lower leg. With a sharp nod he let her know that he was ready. The pain that followed was mercifully brief. It felt like someone had poured hot lead down into his foot and it took all his strength to not cry out. The pain subsided quickly, though, and when the boy showed up with the warm water and bandages it was back to a throbbing sensation as long as Nica did not touch the foot.

Gently she cleaned his foot a little and wrapped the bandaged around his ankle.

## 1 *Young Keal*

“Too tight?”

“Yeah, but I guess that’s the point, right?”

A little humour had crept into his voice again and Nica smiled when she heard it.

“Just lie back and let your foot rest. I’ll go make sure you’re not expected anywhere this afternoon or evening.”

“Thanks, Nica.”

“Don’t thank me yet. I haven’t forgotten your seisure when we were out and I will return later today to talk about it. Now, rest!”

Without waiting for an answer she strode out the door and headed off in search for Jamor or Arek. She knew Keal would not be required to attend anything this afternoon since she had been the only one scheduled for his tuitions today. What had happened with Keal had frightened her quite a bit and she wanted to talk to one of those two about it, not anyone else.

Before long she managed to find both monks together just outside the monastery. Apparently she and Keal were not the only ones taking advantage of the warm spring weather. After checking that no one was within earshot of them she told them in short, precise words what had happened on the trip.

“I’m worried about him,” she said. “It really seemed to shake him at his core. And I don’t know what to do about it. It’s obvious that he didn’t want to talk about it, yet I can’t help feeling that it’s important, and most likely helpful to him, that he gets it off his chest. I fear he’s carrying a very heavy burden in his heart.”

As she spoke Jamor and Arek had looked at each other with growing concern in their eyes. Jamor sighed heavily.

“It’s beginning,” he said.

“What’s beginning?” Nica said.

“I can’t be sure, neither of us can. Walk with us for a while. You say Keal is resting in his room with a twisted ankle? Good, then he’s unlikely to go off anytime soon.”

Nica was not sure what the two older monks were hinting at so she decided to keep quiet hoping to learn more as they walked. With a glance back at the monastery to see if anyone took notice of them leaving Arek started walking down the path towards the mountain trail Keal had come from when he had arrived at the monastery. Once they were away from the monastery and almost down by the fields he started explaining to Nica what he had found out about Keal.

“As you know he claims that one of our journeying monks led him here. What you probably don’t know is that it wasn’t a monk. When he first arrived he spoke freely about everything, well, almost everything that had happened on his journey here. In particular, he gave us a very accurate description of the monk along with his name. At first we didn’t believe him, but from the other things he told us it did make sense. In some strange way.”

## 1 *Young Keal*

“What? Who was the monk? I’ve never heard him mention any of this.”

“No? I must say I’m a bit impressed, then. We did ask him to not mention the monk if he could avoid it without outright lying. That he’s managed to keep so much from you, especially you, means he’s far from the innocent young man some might take him for.”

“You’re beginning to scare me,” Nica said.

“As well you should be,” Jamor said. “To cut a long story short: Keal was brought here by Metobaph himself. Yes, the Lord, the Supreme’s direct vessel here in this world, decided to send Keal to our monastery.”

“What?”

Nica did not believe her own ears. She knew the old stories about how the Supreme had, from time to time, selected people to work towards some greater, unseen and unknown goal. And there had, far in the past, been people who had seen either the Lord or the Lady who served the Supreme by walking the physical realms. Her immediate reaction was that someone must have learned the name Metobaph and used it to manipulate first Keal and then the monks at the monastery.

“No,” she said, “that can’t be true. It would mean...I don’t know what it would mean, actually. Is it good or bad?”

“Well,” Jamor said, “generally it must be considered good when the Supreme guides a new brother to us. In this case, however, things are somewhat unclear. Arek?”

“When Keal arrived here,” Arek said, “I went to check the archives because some of the things he had told me seemed to ring a bell or two. As it turns out the last time anyone was came here directly lead by the Lord Metobaph the monastery was nearly destroyed when the winters turned longer and colder for over a decade. But that’s not the biggest worry.”

They had reached the place where Keal had first seen the monastery. Arek turned and looked back at the monastery.

“This must be where he first saw the monastery and where Metobaph left him. Keal claimed that he had made camp just around this corner and when he had gone to sleep the ‘monk’ had still been with him.

We frankly didn’t know what to make of the situation so we told Keal that Metobaph had indeed been a monk but that his opinions had made him somewhat unpopular among the other monks so he was in a form of unofficial exile.”

“And Keal bought that?”

“Don’t know. At the time he seemed to accept this explanation. It’s difficult to say if he actually believes it. He’s a most interesting young man, so young yet with so many thoughts and an uncanny ability to put things together to see the greater picture. No matter what he does he always seems to go just one step further than those teaching him.”

“We can all agree,” Jamor put in somewhat grumpily, “that Keal is a gifted man. It doesn’t help us decide what to do. Quite the opposite, in fact. The more gifted he is the greater the risk that he’ll sooner or later discover that we’re hiding something from him. And it’s not

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just the fact that our god most likely brought him here. Our secrets within the monastery may also be at risk. That, to me, is unacceptable.”

“But what should we do?” both Nica and Arek asked.

“Nica, you said he had mentioned seeing someone in the mountains today?”

“Yes. He didn’t give many details, just mentioned that there had been someone. I saw nothing myself either before or after his seizure.”

“Perhaps Lord Metobaph, or maybe the Lady, chose to show himself to Keal again?” Arek asked.

“Possible, possible. I should very much like to know more about what he saw today. And if it’s the first time he’s had something like this happen to him. Do you think you can get this out of him tonight?”

“Maybe,” Nica said. “Though I think he’s just as likely to clam up and retreat within himself.”

“Whatever he does we need to find out about this. Soon. The long winters were not the only bad things that happened. I take it you remember the stories of the Time of Testing?”

Nica nodded.

“What has that got to do with this?” she asked.

“The Time of Testing was, and I know this is not widely known, what happened during those ten years after Lord Metobaph sent someone to our monastery the last time.”

A gasp of surprise escaped Nica’s lips. She had heard the gruesome stories about how every single hour of every single day had turned into tests of the monks’ obedience to the Supreme. And she had heard of the horrors that befell those who had not lived up to the Supreme’s expectations. Or rather, the expectations of the Dark One, as he was later known, that had assumed leadership of the monastery by claiming he had been sent by the Supreme.

“You mean to say that Keal might be the second coming of the Dark One?”

“He might. Or perhaps he might not. Remember that the Dark One could only enforce his reign of terror because the monks were convinced he had the Supreme’s support. Unfortunately, they didn’t believe this at first so the Dark One first got his power by sheer force.”

“True,” Arek said, “but when going over the records again a few months back I managed to discover that the monks had at first ridiculed the Dark One and set him to do the lowliest tasks. The leader of the monastery back then was reputedly(?) a vain man who could not believe that anyone but him could have been in direct contact with the Supreme, the Lord or the Lady.”

“What?” Jamor said, “Why didn’t you tell me this sooner?”

Arek gave an apologetic smile and shrugged.

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“Slipped my mind. Sorry. Anyways, The story goes something like this: young boy shows up claiming the Supreme sent him, the monks laugh at him, the young boy nearly destroys the entire order and the monastery.”

“Sounds to me,” Nica said acidly, “that they got their just reward.”

“Yes, yes,” Arek said, “I suppose you could say that. Unfortunately, it seemed that the Dark One’s destruction did not stop at the monastery. It hit all the lands around here. All sorts of catastrophes, famines, forest fires and what not ravaged the lands until the Dark One one day vanished.”

“Is there any chance of avoiding a similar fate for all of us?” Nica asked.

“I really don’t know,” Arek said.

“No, I don’t think we could avoid another Dark One if that is what the Supreme really has sent to us,” Jamor said, “however, I don’t think it will do us one bit of good to idolise Keal. Which leaves us with few other options. Personally, I would definitely prefer if it was possible to simply let him live here and treat him like we treat anyone else. But something tells me it will not be as simple as that.”

“You’re probably right about that,” Arek said. “But what will happen if we tell him that we’ve known all along who the monk he met in the forest really was?”

“Hard to tell,” Nica said. “Though I think Keal would probably be upset that we’ve hidden this from him for so long he is, as you both agree, a keen and intelligent young man so I believe he will be able to at least understand why we didn’t say anything. What he’ll decide after that I don’t know. But I think, no matter how uncomfortable it will be, that we should simply tell him and let him know that neither of us have any idea about how to continue from here.”

“Wise words,” Jamor said. “I’ll think about it first, though. Why don’t you go back and try to talk a little with Keal about the events this morning? Then Arek and I will spend the evening in prayer hoping for guidance from the Supreme. After the evening meal we can, all three of us I think, talk to Keal.”

The two other monks nodded. None of them liked what they had to do, least of all Nica who did not like the idea of spending a few hours with Keal without being able to tell him what she had just learned. She could see no other way right now so with a bowed head she started walking back to the monastery leaving Jamor and Arek at the start of the mountain trail.

For a while they stood looking at her back while she slowly made her way back. Once Jamor was sure she was far enough away his face turned serious.

“There is another matter,” he said, “that is not found in any of our records.”

“I know.”

Arek’s voice was hardly more than a whisper.

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“Again,” Jamor said, “I would prefer it if we could wave our hands and make it go away. This is just too big. And if we tell Keal any of the things we have discussed here he’s bound to start asking questions.”

“And it’s just a matter of time before he asks questions that will take him to our most hidden, and dangerous, secrets.”

“Do we have a choice?”

“No, not really. Looks like it’s not exactly the Supreme we’ll be talking to this afternoon.”

In silence the two monks started walking back towards the monastery and a difficult and dangerous task they did not look forward to.

### **Secrets in the Night**

At the evening meal Nica was worried when she noticed that neither Jamor nor Arek was present. It was not uncommon for monks to lose track of time when they were caught up their prayers. Tonight was not about losing themselves in the glory of the Supreme, she was sure they both knew that, and as the meal passed without them she grew more and more nervous. Despite their attempts to conceal it she had guessed that they had not told her everything they knew about the horrible events they were all afraid Keal might start.

As quickly as possible she left the dining hall and hurried over to Jamor’s study chamber to see if they were there. Just as she was about to knock the door opened and Arek took a startled step backwards.

“Oh,” he said, “it’s you. Quick, come inside.”

Nearly knocking her off her feet he pulled her inside by her arm and shoved her into a chair. His manner was far more rough than anything she had ever seen and as she looked at his face she saw that it was set in a grim expression.

“Arek, close the door,” Jamor said. “And Nica, what we are about to tell you you must never retell to anyone. Not even my own successor once that day comes. Do you understand?”

In light of their harsh manner and voices Nica found she was incapable of doing anything than nod. That was not good enough for Jamor.

“Swear it. Swear it upon your very life before the Supreme!”

Nica lifted her hands and crossed her forearms before her chest.

“Before the Supreme, before the Lady, before the Lord. I swear to not reveal the secrets soon to be revealed to me before anyone. Upon my life I swear this.”

With a sharp nod Jamor showed his approval of her vow and gently touched her shoulder.

“We apologise for this harshness. You will soon learn that it is necessary. But not here, please come with us.”

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Together they walked from Jamor's study to one of the smaller food stores that were used for well preserved food that could be drawn upon in case of a failed harvest or other hard times. The room was empty which was hardly surprising at this time of day. Nica wondered why they were here, but she dared not speak since both Arek and Jamor had been completely silent on their way here.

Jamor led them to the back after closing and, Nica was astonished to see, bolting the door from the inside. He then pulled out a couple of jars and shifted something behind where they had sat on the shelf. From the wall she heard a grating sound and she stepped back as she saw that the entire shelf came loose and a small gap opened between it and the wall. Arek and Jamor both took hold of the shelf and strained as they pulled the massive door open enough for them to slip through.

Once inside Nica saw that there was, behind the shelf, a small repos at the top of a slim stairway leading down into darkness. From a holder on the wall Jamor took a torch and lit it with one of the lamp in the store room. Then he and Arek calmly started to descent the steps.

For a few moments Nica stood at the top of the stairs, uncertainty flowing through her. One part of her wanted to return to the temple and pray to the Supreme that she would forget everything that had happened this day. Another, far larger, part of her wanted to take that first step down and see what she would find. Somewhere deep inside her she knew she had already taken the choice and that it was just a matter of time before she followed the two other monks. Yet something still kept her back. Some strange feeling that she was hovering at a treshold. She forced herself to take that feeling and store it away deep inside her, for she knew her life would never be the same and her years at the monastery had taught her the value of remembering, as detailed as possible, moments such as this. All too soon the moment passed and she stepped forward hastily to catch up with the others.

The stairs led them down below the monastery. Nica tried to keep track of how far down they went but at some point it became impossible for her. She was sure that they must be at least two or three stories down and still more or less below the store room. At last they came to the end of the stairs and stood in a small antechamber with a single door leading to some secret room. There was a square hole in the door with bars in it. Through it the light of the torch fell on what to Nica looked like some kind of small study chamber. She was leaning closer to the to get a better look when Jamor's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

Before she could say anything both monks gestured to her to keep silent. Then Arek produced an ancient looking key from a chain around his neck and used it to unlock the door. When he put it away Nica nearly gasped with surprised when she recognised that the key was in fact the traditional symbol of the monastery's gate keeper. Until now she had never even thought that it could be more than just a symbol. Now she suspected that perhaps the gate Arek was keeping safe was not the one they could shut against the world, it was possible that it was a gate inside the monastery itself, physically as well as spiritually hiding secrets not shared freely even among the monks of the order.

Slowly and carefully Jamor opened the door and looked inside. Nica was curious and also

a little frightened. Her two brothers were wary as if they were expecting trouble of some kind. Even so they soon opened the door all the way and entered the small study. As the light spread through the room two tables and several bookshelves became visible. On the tables pieces of paper and scrolls were scattered in the way of someone working long and hard on some problem. Not all the book shelves were full, but there were still enough books that Nica would have needed several weeks, if not months, to get through them all. None of them seemed familiar and with wonder she noticed that some of them had tiny, golden inscriptions on their spines.

In all her life she had only seen one book that had something similar to this. It was one of the most priced books in the monastery library, an ancient, battered tome said to predate the Time of Destruction where almost all knowledge had been forgotten. As far as she knew no one had been able to translate it as it was written in an unknown language. Some of the monks theorised that it was the language of the Supreme, the same they used in their prayers. Yet nothing of the strange letters in the book looked like anything anyone had seen.

Some of the books in the room had the same kind of markings. Others had more familiar looking letters and she managed to catch a few titles before Jamor briskly walked through a doorway she had not noticed at first. The titles had been simple enough: "How To Carve Wood", "Trees Of The Forest" and "Geometry". She wondered why anyone would create such marvelous books, who had obviously been expensive and difficult to make, to describe such mundane topics/subjects.

She pushed the thoughts of the books aside and followed Jamor through the doorway. Arek kept back a little, clearly uncomfortable.

"Corrim?" Jamor said. "Corrim? You have visitors."

From somewhere deep in the darkness came a hissing answer that made Nica's skin crawl. The sound felt more like an actual sentence than merely the hissing of some man or beast. At the same time, though, it also seemed to somehow rumble through the subterranean chamber.

"Corrim? We come humbly in search of answers. Please. We fear events are about to happen that will undo much of our work here."

Again came the hissing sounds.

"Corrim, please."

Jamor's voice was pleading and there was a hint of fear in it. He spread out his arms wide and bowed his head sinking into a kneeling position.

"Please. We may have, already within the walls, a new Dark One."

At this the hissing stopped and a shape slowly came into the light from Jamor's torch. It was shorter than all three monks and even despite the robe that completely covered it it was visibly slimmer than them as well. With short, broken steps it walked closer to Jamor. The cowl of its robe shifted as it first looked down at the kneeling monk and then at Nica. With a heavy, lisping voice it spoke and this time the monks could understand its words.

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“So, humans,” it said, “what have you done this time to bring around another era of terror?”

The disdain in the creature’s voice was impossible to miss. Whatever was hiding behind the cowl of the robe could not be human and it was clear that it was anything but pleased with the monks’ visit. Slowly it stepped forward until it was right in front of Jamor. The old monk visibly steeled himself before replying.

“That we do not know, ancient one, what we do know is that last fall a young man came to the monastery. He was, according to his own words, sent by a monk named Metobaph. At first we were worried about this, but felt it best to see how things would go and things went well for a long time. Until today when brother Nica experienced something strange.”

He gestured back at Nica who felt her heart miss a beat. She was still recovering from the shock of being in the presence of something she knew could not be human and having its attention on her made her very nervous. The creature shuffled closer, uncaringly pushing Jamor out of the way with a gloved hand. As it came close to her Nica noticed a strange smell not unlike that of wet metal. For several seconds she stood quite still before realising that it might be expecting her to say something. She had no idea about how to address it so she simply began a stumbling summary of what had happened on her walk with Keal earlier in the day. As she spoke her voice grew calmer and more steady as she found out that the creature neither interrupted her nor seemed annoyed at what she told it.

When she was finished she felt she owed Keal to let the creature know what her personal opinion of him was.

“I know Keal is a troubled young man,” she said, “and that we cannot fault him. In his childhood there was much violence and pain and it is quite simply remarkable that he has turned into such a pleasant and intelligent man. Not for one second do I believe that he would consciously do anything to harm any of us.”

“Yesssss,” the creature hissed, “but you are forgetting one important thing. Keal has already killed another man, though he might not realise it. So his consciousness is not what we should worry about. No, it is what happens in his sleep and when he simply acts that we should fear.”

Not only Nica had been startled by the creature’s claim that Keal had killed someone. Both Jamor and Arek seemed unaware of this and silence filled the room for a while until Arek broke it.

“Who?” he said, “Who did he kill? From the things he’s told us I cannot think of anyone he might have actually killed. His parents died when he was young and the man who had him as a slave also died, but Keal seemed truthful when he told me that the man, Fredic, had suffered an accident.”

“Precisely,” the creature hissed. “Precisely. Accidents. Yes, that makes sense. He would see them as such. His parents’ death might have been, that one is still open for discussion, but Fredic was not an accident. Oh, no. Keal did that. Or at least, he made sure it happened.”

“But how?”

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The words escaped from Nica's mouth before she could stop them.

"Easy. He called upon the gods to help him."

Again silence filled the room as the three monks looked back and forth between each other. It was common knowledge for them that a lot of people still worshipped the many gods that had surfaced through various cults and circles over the past several hundred years. But the idea that they actually existed was ridiculous to them. They knew for a fact that the Supreme and his helpers, the Lady and the Lord, were real. They had never doubted that, just like they had never doubted that the Supreme was the only god. Or, Nica realised with a shiver, just like she had never doubted that humans was the only sentient beings that lived in this world. She narrowed her eyes trying to see through the darkness of the creature's cowl. It might, after all, only be someone in disguise. It obviously noticed her interest for it turned towards her again and spoke slowly.

"Are you sure you want me to satisfy your curiosity, human?"

The way it protracted the last word made Nica even more nervous. After swallowing a few times she straightened her back, lifted her head and answered it in an unwavering voice.

"Yes," she said.

A gasping, wheezing hissing escaped the creature and it took Nica a few moments to realise that it was laughing. Fury battled with fear inside her as she felt herself insulted that it would laugh at her like this. She was just about to say something when it spoke, this time to Jamor.

"You did well, monk, in bringing her here. She is the first in more than a hundred years who actually have the sense to believe in her own words. Just look at the anger in her eyes. Nothing conquers fear and uncertainty like anger. Yes, her I can use. Leave us and do not return. Brother Nica will remain here, with me while I teach her what she needs to know to lessen, perhaps even avoid, the coming horrors."

The two monks stood watching Nica for a while, Jamor with grim determination on his face, Arek with a look of concern. Soon, and without a single word, they both left her and went back out leaving her in the darkness with the robed creature. Once they had closed and locked the door back to the stairway the creature spoke again.

"Ah, finally they left with that blasted light."

Its voice had changed noticeably and even though Nica had been rooted to the spot, frightened at the prospect of not only being left alone down here but being left alone in pitch black darkness. When Jamor had started to leave with the torch she had desperately wanted to grab it out of his hand, yet she had not dared to for fear of angering him or, worse, the creature. It seemed very determined and sure of itself and who was she but a lowly monk who, obviously, had no idea of what was really happening?

She pushed the thought from her and berated herself for abandoning the self certainty that had apparently made the creature choose her. While she was still not pleased with the situation she imagined she'd be far more displeased with what might happen if the creature decided she was not worth teaching after all. And, she wondered, there must be something

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quite valuable to be learned here if the creature guarded its knowledge to such a degree that not even Jamor had been good enough for it.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“Behind you,” the creature said.

The hissing voice had changed again and for a split second Nica was reminded of how her tutors had sounded when they had tried teaching her to read when she was a child. A smile came to her lips as she thought about how horrible a student she must have been. Stubborn, temperamental, impatience. Sometimes it seemed a wonder she had not simply been kicked out of the monastery. She put it down to the incredible patience of the monks and their determination to do as much as they could for the children they took in. Later in life she had done her best to take not only their teachings but also their patience to heart. With a deep breath she told herself that she was no longer the teacher, she was, once more, the student. And this time, she vowed, she would not act like she had when she was a child.

“Very good,” the creature said, “you are learning already. Very good.”

“You asked me to stay and learn and I shall do my best.”

“No, no, no, no, no. That will not do. For this to work there is something very fundamental you must realise, human. You did not have a choice. I did not ask you. You did not accept to stay. You had no choice.”

Nica said nothing since the creature was right.

“As for you doing your best. Trust me, you also do not have a choice there. Come with me.”

The faint shuffling of the creature’s robe was the only sound Nica had to go by and with stumbling steps she tried to follow it through the darkness. Her first few steps were uncertain and she felt her way slowly with her toes before taking each steps. Fortunately the floor was level and she soon started taking slightly longer steps trying to catch up with the sounds disappearing deeper and deeper into the darkness.

Suddenly she hit her shin hard against a sharp object and she let out a grunt. Ahead of her she could feel, with her feet and legs, something that resembled a low chair. Carefully she navigated around it biting down hard on the curse she had been about to let out. The sharp pain turned to a slow throbbing and she started moving toward the creature when she had found a way around the obstacle. She now no longer tried to walk normally, but again started feeling her way with her feet and it gave her a small measure of satisfaction when she did not hurt herself when she came to what seemed like a table. Instead of walking directly into it she just bumper her thigh against it and had soon found her way around it.

“Good. You learn.”

Nica’s head twisted around to where the voice had come from. While she had been walking around the obstacles the creature must have moved around silently and was now behind her somewhere. She turned and was just about to start walking again when she remembered the table that was now in front of her. Nimbly she stepped around it only to hit her shin,

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again, against the low object she had walked into before. This time she could not stop her cursing before it flowed through the room.

Somewhere in the darkness the creature laughed again.

Corrim checked himself and stopped laughing as, once more, the human walked into a piece of furniture. He began to wonder if he had made the right choice when he had insisted she stay behind. It did not matter much, he thought, if Keal was really touched by the gods there was not time to wait for someone else. And the fact that this woman was close to him and had witnessed the events on the mountain side was important. In the past he had often found that skills and abilities often were less important than intuition and compassion. She had shown both in the way she had handled Keal after his seizure.

He winced as another curse rang out through the room. This still seemed strange to him. He knew why it was necessary and he felt no inclination to stop before Nica had learned today's lesson. Yet he did not take pleasure in hurting her and he hoped it would soon be over. His yellow snake eyes made it possible for him to see in the darkness far better than he could see in the light so he had no problems walking around the room setting small traps for Nica to walk into. The woman seemed particularly frustrated when things no longer were where they had been mere moments before.

A quiet laugh escaped him again as he admitted to himself that that part of it he did enjoy. Humans were always so sure they knew how things really were yet here she was getting frustrated and angry simply because an object as mundane as a chair was moved less than a meter when she was not looking.

His eyes narrowed as he saw the woman's face shift. Finally, he thought, finally she was about to figure out what was going on. They had been playing this little game for more than an hour now and Corrim was beginning to wonder if the woman's sheer stubbornness would make her continue indefinitely. Now, however, she simply felt the chair with her hands and pulled it with her toward where the table had been. For a while Corrim considered moving the table out of the way, but he was curious to see what she was doing. When she had found the table she pulled the chair around and simply sat down with a straight back and her hands resting on the table.

Several minutes passed with her sitting at the table while Corrim slowly walked around making sure his movements could be heard. Once or twice her ears twitched as he let his clawed feet scrape against the stone floor. But she never moved from her place and finally he was satisfied so he, making no sound whatsoever, placed himself in another chair directly opposite the woman and assumed the same position as her. Then he simply waited.

It was Nica who broke the silence first. She cleared her voice and spoke in a calm voice that made Corrim nod respectfully.

"You are still here," she said. "I can smell you and feel your presence even if I cannot see you."

There. That was what Corrim had waited for. He had been right after all. The woman did not call out to him or ask where he was. She simply stated how things were rather than

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putting herself in a submissive position. Once more he let go of the temptation to continue the game. It was one thing to prove a point, something far different to be disrespectful and humiliate her. She did need to understand the seriousness of things, but there were limits to what he wanted to subject her to out of fear that she might turn hostile. There was no time for hostility between them.

With slow, careful movements Corrim pulled off his gloves to reveal his orange scaled claws and pulled back the hood of his robe. He slowly felt the crest rising from the back of his scaly head and, when he was satisfied it was once more rising proudly he slit his long nails down over his protruding snout. His claws could easily leave bloody streaks on a human's skin. The hard scales that covered his entire body protected him from this and he enjoyed scratching himself. Nica winced slightly at the rasping sound this claws made and he let his lips lower from their pulled back position of his pleased smile. There was no point in scaring the woman by letting his pointed, serrated teeth be the first she saw.

Speaking as quietly as possible he said her name to let her know he was very close to her.

"Why can you not see, Nica?" he said.

"Because of the darkness."

"If darkness prevents vision, why can I see?"

Nica thought about this for a while before answering hesitantly.

"Because you are not human?" she asked.

"So darkness has nothing to do with being able to see? It is because of who we are?"

"Yes," she said.

"Then what is darkness?"

"Darkness is. . ."

Nica found that she could not finish that sentence. She thought about answering that darkness is the opposite of light, or perhaps its absence. But if it was then how could Corrim see? After the long, shuffling walk in the dark she found that her mind felt like it had been turned off. Wiped blank.

"Take your time," Corrim said.

It took a few more minutes for Nica to come to what she felt was the best answer she could see.

"Darkness is what prevents us from seeing," she said.

"A wise answer. Precisely the kind of answer your fellow monks would like. It holds what seems like a lot of wisdom without really saying anything."

"But. . ."

"But nothing. That the answer does not really tell us anything new does not make it untrue. Darkness is indeed that which prevents us from seeing. Think about it a while more and tell me what you make of that answer."

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Nica sighed as she began to suspect where Jamor had learned to hold arguments from. Not wanting to get drawn into a circular discussion she did not wait long before she answered.

“It tells us that we don’t know what darkness is. And, in turn, that we probably also don’t know what ‘seeing’ is since we don’t know what prevents us from doing it.”

“In short?”

“It tells us nothing.”

Corrim kept silent.

“Though,” Nica said, “it does tell us that we lack knowledge. That we need to look elsewhere for the real answer.”

“Very good. Now tell me, if you do not know what prevents you from seeing then how can it be that you cannot see?”

“Simple. The fables tell us that the mythical ostrich would stick its head in a bush believing that what it could not see could not harm it. That is not how things work. Therefore, darkness can prevent me from seeing even though I don’t know what darkness is.”

“What should the ostrich have done instead? What should you do to avoid the darkness?”

“Not stick my head in a bush?”

Corrim’s claws bit into the table as he curled his claws in frustration. Things had been going well until Nica got confused. Perhaps he had been wrong. He did not want to give up, and he knew he could not simply give her the answers as they themselves were irrelevant. What was important was how she got to them. Backtracking a little he tried to guide her in the direction he wanted her to think.

“Are you in darkness?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What can you do about it?”

“Nothing. I have no light, no tinderbox, no torch.”

“Are those the only lights you know?”

“Yes. That is, no. There’s the light of the Supreme that burns ever bright inside me.”

“Pah!” Corrim said. “Don’t fall back on meaningless quotes from romantic books written by other humans. Tell me what lights you know.”

Nica recoiled as the hissing voice became full of scorn and impatience. The rasping, grating sound was also there again. It unsettled her as it began to plant images in her head about what kind of creature she might be facing. The stories told of all manner of fantastic creatures that were said to have once roamed the world. She had never truly believed in them, of course, as they were not to be taken literally. The fables only used animals or mythological creatures to enhance and emphasise the different personalities of the characters in the stories.

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Forcing her mind back to the discussion she searched herself for other lights. It was clear that Corrim was not simply asking for physical lights such as lamps or torches. And quoting the holy scripts seemed to have made it downright angry. She thought long and hard about it until the answer was suddenly, and ironically, she thought, as clear as daylight.

“There is the light inside me. Inside my being, my belief, my self.”

His reptile eyes narrowed and Corrim’s lips curled back in a predatory sneer as he saw the change not only in Nica’s face, but in her entire body and being.

“And,” he said, “why can you not see if such light is burning inside you?”

“I...I...”

Nica’s voice trailed off as she began to see shapes in front of her. At first it just seemed like some parts of the darkness had more substance than others. Then, slowly, actual shapes began to become discernible. Right in front of her she could begin to make out the shape of Corrim, then she could see her hands against the table. It felt like someone was slowly turning up the light in the room though she could see no light sources. She tried moving her hands a little and was surprised to find that she could indeed follow their movements. She was even more surprised when she realised that they cast no shadows on the table or each other.

Corrim let himself sink back in the chair hoping to seem less imposing. He could see that Nica was moving her hands and arms in front of her, looking in wonder at them and turning them over a few times. To him nothing changed. The lighting in the room was still the same and if another human had been present he was sure it would not have been able to see anything. It gave him no small amount of pleasure that Nica had come to the conclusion so quickly. True, he admitted to himself, he had prodded her a little in the right direction and perhaps he had prodded a bit harder than he should have. It was, however, still Nica herself that had given the answers and drawn the conclusions. If she had not she would not have been able to see anything. There were still no lights in the room so her human eyes would still remain unseeing. That was precisely as it should be. Corrim had wanted her to open the eyes inside her and let go of her physical limitation. The first step on the way.

It was just a matter of time before Nica remembered that she was not alone. By then her arms were almost clearly visible and their grey shapes had begun to hold a little colour. Curiously enough, she could not see the green colour of her robe, instead it simply seemed dark. Not really black or dark grey. Just dark. Her hands were completely different. They had been the first actual shapes she could see and now it was almost as if they were giving off light of their own, as if they were shining.

Slowly it began to dawn on her that she must now be able to see what Corrim looked like and the thought scared her. For a few very long minutes she kept her hands still while her eyes rested on them and more and more details became visible. Out of the corner of her eye the rest of the room started to become visible as well.

When she could contain herself no longer she finally lifted her eyes and was more surprised that she did not gasp than she was by the sight that met her.

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The creature in front of her looked like something straight out of one of the old stories, a cross between a human and a snake with something resembling a bird's beak protruding from the middle of its face. It blinked its eyes once while she was looking and the movement drew her eyes to them. It had, she thought, the most intelligent eyes she had ever seen. They were not human, yet there was definitely something sentient about them. She had on a few occasions had the same feeling when looking into an animal's eyes, though only fleetingly. These eyes remained intelligent and alert, the slim, upright ovals of their pupils never seemed to leave her own eyes.

Letting her gaze move from the eyes down along its face she noticed that its beak was not a beak after all. It seemed more like a scaled muzzle.

"Who are you?" she asked. "What are you?"

Her voice was nothing more than a breathless whisper. In fascinated terror she saw its mouth open to reveal several dozen long wicked looking teeth. It was all too easy for her to imagine how those teeth could rip into her throat and tear it to pieces. Frightened though she was there was not any real fear in her. Something about the eyes made this gruesome monster seem far less monstrous than it should be. Perhaps, she wondered, it was because she had spoken to it, because she knew it was an intelligent being.

"What am I?" Corrim said. "That question is less important now than another."

"Who am I?" she said.

"Yes. That is more important than who I am, or even what I am. But there is an even more important question."

Nica kept silent, still overwhelmed by the evening's events.

"Who can you become?" Corrim asked.

With a swiftness that to Nica seemed like a striking snake Corrim reached forward and grasped her hands gently in his claws. The feeling of his scales against her skin was strangely comforting. She breathed a deep sigh and lowered her eyes to examine his claws. Turning them slowly with her own hands she took in every little detail of their strangeness.

"What is on your mind?" he asked.

"Everything," she said. "Nothing."

"Good answer."

Nica looked up at Corrim's face again and noticed that his lips did not part in a sneer but a smile. Again it struck her that if she had merely seen this strange creature rather than speak with it she might have felt frightened by its appearance. As it were there was nothing intimidating about the way Corrim simply sat there smiling at her with her hands in his claws.

"Come," he said, "your training is about to begin. What you have seen and learned today is only the beginning."

## **Sneaking Around**

After a few hours had passed Keal noticed that his foot was feeling far better. With a curious look he poked it a little to see if it still hurt. It did not. It was still a bit sore, but by and large it felt like there was nothing wrong with it. He undid the bandages even though he knew Nica would skin him, verbally if not physically, once she found out. Standing up he tested it carefully and was pleased to find that it could easily hold his weight.

If he had thought about it he would have realised how surprising it really was. He had always had a way of healing fairly quickly. Back in the tribe this had served him well with the almost daily beatings from Fredic. And since no one had taken an interest in him he had never found out just how long even small injuries and bruises normally took to disappear. It had happened a few times that a well placed blow from Fredic had broken Keal's nose, but it had never taken more than at most a few days before it had healed with hardly anything to give away how severe the injury had been. To Keal this was just how the world worked.

A while before he got out of bed he had heard the bell that summoned the monks and children to the evening prayer and meal so he knew that he was unlikely to get anything to eat unless he found it himself or Nica brought it for him later. The thought of her not only helping him back but also having to nurse him was a little too much for his pride. And for his guilty conscience for the care she had shown earlier. He had not really been able to understand why she was making such a fuss over a twisted ankle when it would be better in just a few hours, but it had seemed important to her so he had chosen not to say anything.

Placing a hand on his rumbling stomach he decided to go out and try and find some food. Since he was supposed to either be in his room or in one of the two dining halls he considered how to set about finding dinner. By far the easiest would be to sneak into the kitchen and see if there were any leftovers from the monks' evening meal. That carried the risk of one of the monks still being in the kitchen and while the monks were generally helpful and pleasant they did frown upon taking things from the kitchen. Especially when he should have been somewhere else entirely.

As quietly as he could he put his boots back on and snuck out of his room. He made his way towards the kitchen while keeping as close to the walls as possible. A few times people he had come across when he thought he was alone had remarked upon his habit of avoiding open spaces as much as he could when walking around the monastery. He had never really been able to give them any good reasons for this. It just felt like the right way to do it. One time he had brought up this subject in his talks with Nica and together they had reasoned that it was probably another habit, Nica had called it a bad habit, he had acquired back in the tribe.

The monastery always felt a little eerie when the monks were at prayer or dinner. At night it was not so bad since Keal knew they would simply be sleeping somewhere. The thought of all of them gathered in the same room talking, eating, praying or meditating somehow felt more imposing to him. It was as if they might appear out of thin air with no

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warning. Sleeping monks, at least, would not all wake up at the same time. He sometimes wondered if he was still influenced by the strange sight of the procession that had been his first impression of the monks when he arrived. With a shrug he stopped thinking about this as his stomach once more complained about its lack of food.

When he got closer to the kitchen he slowed his pace and started listening for signs of anyone being in the kitchen. Before he got all the way to the door he could hear that there were at least two monks there. They were obviously in the middle of a very scholarly discussion regarding how to best butter a loaf of bread. Keal shook his head as he recognised the voice of the corpulent brother Talep. He smiled to himself as he could imagine Talep spending many hours and many loaves of bread on such an important topic.

For a few moments he listened to Talep talk about this and other culinary topics. It soon became evident that he was not likely to go anywhere anytime soon so Keal decided to try his luck in one of the store rooms. Even though Keal knew it was not really a good thing to sneak around and steal things from the stores he still had not gotten used to being in a place where people actually cared about him. It simply came natural to him to take what he needed if he could get away with it. Once or twice he had tried to convince himself that there was no need to do this, but he just had not been able to make himself believe it.

Just as he was about to enter one of the store rooms next to the kitchen he heard the bell ring out again signalling the end of the prayer. This meant, he knew, that it would not be long before someone would need to take something out of this store room and into the kitchen. He quickly moved around a corner and headed for one of the rooms where long term provisions were kept. The food there was not fresh and far less interesting than, say, the freshly baked bread he could still smell from the kitchens.

Quickly and quietly he opened the door and slipped inside. The room was almost completely dark, but Keal had been there before and knew where he could find some salted meat and the trail biscuits he had found out were being made at the monastery. He gathered the things he needed and wrapped them in the front of his shirt before heading back outside.

Suddenly he froze as he heard someone at the door. He glanced around and jumped behind a barrel hoping that whoever was coming into the room would not see him. As quietly as possible he slowly unwrapped the food from his shirt and pushed it back behind a crate next to the barrel. If he was about to be discovered here he preferred to not have his hands full of food.

His surprise at hearing the voices of Nica, Jamor and Arek was great. Of all the people that might come down here those were the last he could think of. Especially the two men. His surprise turned to worry as he heard one of them bolt the door from the inside. He had seen the bolts before and were puzzled about why they were there, but he had always dismissed it without too much thought. Now that they were actually being used he suddenly became afraid that they knew he was hiding there and had some severe punishment in store for him.

None of the three monks said anything which only made Keal feel even more uncomfortable. He was afraid they would find him if he made even the tiniest sound. Suddenly he heard a

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scraping sound. It was not very loud, but it was loud enough that he dared shift a little so he could see what was going on.

What he saw made him gasp and he quickly pulled his head back behind the barrel hoping they had not heard him. One of the shelves he had rummaged around in mere moments ago had swung out from the wall seemingly to reveal some kind of passage behind it.

In that moment all of Keal's fears came back to him. Thoughts of Jinx, the rotten corpses, of everything bad that had happened in his life came back to him all at once. With a shiver he forced himself to bite his jaws together to avoid screaming and eventually the thoughts left him. While he was still wondering what to do he heard the scraping sound again and then everything went quiet.

For what seemed like hours he sat completely still just waiting for one of the monks to pull the barrel he was hiding behind away and reveal his presence. Nothing happened and he forced himself to acknowledge that it had most likely not been hours, but at most a minute, that had passed. He once more glanced around the barrel and saw that the shelf was once more back against the wall. The three monks were nowhere to be seen so he got up and looked around.

The door back to the monastery was indeed bolted. He briefly toyed with the idea of simply unbolting it and going back to his room. Curiosity got the better of him in the end and he went back to the shelf and tried to figure out how it could be opened. Searching his memory he tried to recall how the jars on the shelf had been placed when he had looked at them. He closed his eyes and forced a mental image of the shelf into his head then he opened his eyes and tried to see the differences between what was in his head and what was before his eyes.

There. Two of the jars had been moved. Not a lot, not enough to be noticed unless someone specifically looked for it. Keal was getting excited. Quickly he pushed the jars aside and looked closer at the shelf. At first he could see nothing out of the ordinary. Then he noticed a knot hole at the back side of the shelf. He put a finger through the hole and poked around and nearly knocked one of the jars to the floor when the entire shelf suddenly shifted. Double checking with his finger he memorised the position of the small latch on the back of the shelf.

He took a step back and very slowly opened the secret door enough to let him slip through. Once inside he saw the staircase and was momentarily disheartened. He did not feel comfortable walking down the stairs in the darkness and even if he had had some way of lighting one of the torches that hung on the wall he would not have done so. The light might have given him away to the monks ahead of him.

For a few seconds he scanned the layout of the staircase as well as he could until he felt confident he had a good idea about how wide and tall the steps were. That would make it easier for him to make his way down once he had closed the door and blocked off what little light the slim opening let in.

As he pulled the shelf back into place he suddenly realised that the latch was not accessible from where he stood. It must have been set into a part of the wall next to the actual

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doorway and now he had no way of closing the shelf completely. He cursed himself, but rather than going outside again he simply decided that he would have to close it as best he could and hope for the best.

Then he began to make his way down, slowly and carefully, one step at a time until he came almost all the way down to the bottom. Somewhere below him he could hear a door being unlocked and opened and he knew he could not be far behind the others even with the time he had taken to find and open the secret door. Even more alert now he crept forward until he began to see the light of their torch being faintly reflected on the walls.

He crouched down as he came to the last turn before the bottom and peeked out. An open door led into what appeared to be a study chamber. Through the opening he could see Arek walk through another door taking the torch with him. Keal quickly looked around and easily found a good place to hide. He checked that Arek did not seem to be returning to the room with the torch and then he tip toed across the room and crawled under one of the desks. A chair was standing in front of it giving him even better cover.

When he was settled in he realised that from his hiding place he could not see into the next room. Peering through the flickering shadows cast by the torchlight through door he tried to find a better place to hide. None was available so he settled for simply listening to what was going on. At least for now.

From within the next room Keal could hear a strange hissing voice. It seemed like the monks were talking with some beast in there, but he could not make out the words. Slowly he crept closer to the open door making sure he stayed along the wall and out of sight of anyone in the room.

Though the room was dark the light from the torch carried by Jamor made it possible for him to avoid bumping into the furniture in the small study. He cast another look around making sure he knew where to hide if the monks should suddenly turn back and walk out to the staircase again.

When he was right next to the door he was finally able to make out what was being said in the room and he inched closer trying to cast a glance inside to make out who, or what, the three monks were meeting. Almost as soon as his head came around the corner he quickly pulled it back. Just inside the door stood Arek, fortunately with his back turned. He accepted that he would not be able to see what went on and settled for simply listening and so he got the story about the Dark One and the monks' fear that he would perform some horrific things that would cause a lot of people harm.

This in itself was very unsettling and put his meetings with Jinx and Metobaph in a completely different light. Judging by how the monks spoke it sounded like Metobaph himself had been some kind of god which only made Keal sneer even more than he already did. Of course, he thought, it makes sense that the one person who was simply nice to me had some hidden motive. Learning these things made him feel even more alone than he had been back in the tribe. There, at least, it had been clear to him what his place was without anyone tricking him into believing otherwise. The beatings Fredic had given him suddenly felt like warm memories inside him simply through their simplicity.

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He pushed those thoughts from him when he told himself that the beatings had not been pleasant and that Fredic had actually cared even less than the gods seemed to. They were all abusing him in some way, Fredic openly, the gods secretly.

A part of him wanted nothing more than to walk into the room revealing himself and letting them know that he wanted nothing more to do with them or their gods. That was when he heard Nica's voice very clearly when she told Corrim that she did not believe Keal would ever harm anyone. For some reason this hit Keal in the pit of his stomach. From time to time he had received praise when he did things well and when he was quick to learn new things. But never before had anyone actually defended him like this. At least not that he was aware of. Over the past months Keal had come to know Nica well and his past experiences had meant that he had quickly been able to sense her moods. Sometimes she was patient because she wanted him to learn something, at other times she was patient because someone seemed to have told her to be so. And at other times she was simply distracted by other thoughts and went through the motions of their lessons in a distant way. This time, he was certain that she spoke directly from her heart and it touched him far more than he was prepared to admit to himself.

He was so distracted by this new feeling of someone genuinely caring for him that he only barely managed to crawl underneath one of the tables when Jamor and Arek walked back into the study and headed for the stairs back up to the store room. The two monks brought the torch with them and Keal suddenly felt very alone in the darkness of the cellar. Not far from him there was an unseen creature, Keal had gotten the distinct impression that Corrim was most definitely not human, and he had heard one of the monks lock the door from the outside.

Fearing the worst for not only himself but also Nica he kept completely still as he listened to the sounds from the other room. With growing tension he heard how Corrim made Nica walk around in the room and he winced everytime he heard her stumble into things. As time passed he had to fight harder against the need to get up and stretch his legs. His legs cramped up and his stomach began to complain about the lack of food. He had had nothing to eat since early morning and as far as he could figure out it was close to midnight.

Then, finally, he heard the last conversation between Nica and Corrim. Keal still had no idea what Corrim looked like. He had tried to follow the lesson Nica had been through, but been unable to make himself see in the darkness.

"Come," Corrim said, "your training is about to begin. What you have seen and learned today is only the beginning."

Keal crept farther back under the table hoping they would not see him when they came back into the room. As it turned out he had not needed to. The sound of footsteps grew dimmer as Nica and Corrim walked away from the door into the study. Keal could hear another door being opened, seemingly far away. Then the hissing voice rang out again, this time louder than Keal had heard before.

"You might as well come too, Keal" Corrim said, "or at least do yourself the favour of sitting in a chair. Your legs must be killing you by now."

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A loud thump carried clearly through the darkness as Keal's jerk of surprise brought his head far too close to the underside of the desk he was hiding under. For a few moments he did not move, but simply stayed still hoping that the last few seconds had not really happened. Then he warily crawled out from underneath the table and stood up. He could still not see anything and decided against fumbling through the darkness. It was bad enough that the creature Corrim had known he was there, presumably all along, he did not also want to make a fool of himself by stumbling over something or walking into a wall.

"Keal?" Nica said. "Are you here?"

Something about her voice made it difficult for Keal to make out how she was feeling. Perhaps, he thought, she did not know herself. He immediately dismissed the thought. As long as he had known Nica she had always been very self aware. Not always in actual control of her feelings, but she had at least been aware of how she felt almost all the time. Forcing himself to answer he did his best to make his voice strong and steady. He almost succeeded.

"Yes," he said.

He wanted to say more, to give some kind of acrid(?) remark about how he had known they had not been honest with him. The words stuck in his mouth and he felt glad that it was dark. Then he remembered that Corrim could definitely see without light and from what he had understood so could Nica now. As this realisation hit him he shivered. Suddenly the darkness felt twice as thick and intimidating.

"So, Keal," Corrim said. "I take it you heard what Nica went through? And since you are just still standing there I also take it you did not make as much progress as she did?"

Keal just nodded. Since the creature could obviously see him and he still could not find his voice it seemed like the best thing to do.

"Very well," Corrim continued, "I shall make some light for you."

Even as the creature spoke Keal could see a light from the other room. At first the light was dim and just when his eyes began to get used to it the light suddenly flared into a blinding, bright light. He had to force his eyes shut against it and held his hand up in an attempt to cover his eyes. Even through his eye lids the light seemed to burn his eyes out of his head. Slowly the light faded again until it was at a more comfortable level and Keal could both Nica and the robed figure of Corrim. Judging by Nica's squinting she too had been blinded by the light. As for Corrim, Keal could not see more than just a robed figure holding a glowing stick of some kind in a gloved hand. The creature's hooded robe concealed all its features.

"That better?" Corrim said.

Keal got the distinct impression that Corrim was not only addressing him but also Nica. This was proved correct when Nica nodded and lowered her shoulders slightly. Apparently she had been very tense while concentrating on seeing though it was dark.

With cautious movements Keal walked into the other room. When he came closer Corrim turned around and led both of them toward a door at the back wall. When they reached it

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Corrim stopped and turned his head slightly towards Keal.

“I cannot tell you what will happen from here on,” he said. “But know that you will always have a choice. If you so choose you can stay here. Or you can continue.”

It did not take long for Keal to make up his mind. Since he had discovered that the monks also had secrets and were not leading the simple life they tried to make others believe he had no desire to stay at the monastery.

“I have no desire to stay here. Not in this basement. Not in this fake monastery.”

At the acrid tone of his voice Nica winced. Despite only just learning about this secret chamber and Corrim she felt guilty on behalf of the entire monastery. She knew that Keal had never had anyone to trust before now. And to learn that his trust had been abused/misused must have shattered him. Even if there might have been very good reasons for not telling him, or any of the other monks, about Corrim, Jamor and Arek had kept back information about Metobaph and that, she felt, was indeed a betrayal of Keal’s trust. Carefully she placed her hand on his and spoke quietly.

“I’m sorry, Keal.”

None of the things she could have anticipated Keal would do were close to what he did at that moment. While wary towards Corrim, Keal had not seemed afraid of him or even nervous. So it came as a complete surprise to her that he suddenly pulled away from her with a look of terror on his face. Corrim’s involuntary jerk made it clear that neither had he been prepared for Keal’s reaction.

Through gritted teeth and with an icy voice Keal spoke slowly and menacingly.

“What did you say?”

“I said that I’m sorry, Keal. I’m sorry that your trust in us has been betrayed.”

Keal relaxed a little but still shivered visibly when he briskly(?) reached up and grabbed her chin moving her head from one side to the other.

“Who are you?” he said. “Is this your true face?”

“Keal! What are you doing?”

Nica’s voice came out muffled because of the way his fingers dug into her cheeks. She was just about to reach up and try to force his hand away when Corrim lifted a gloved hand. This made Keal let go of her face, but the boy still looked suspiciously at her.

“I think I know,” Corrim said. “Keal, you can relax. She is not who you fear.”

“How can you be sure? Faces can be deceiving.”

“She is human.”

Though he did not seem completely convinced Keal at least no longer looked afraid of her and Nica relaxed again. Or relaxed as much as she possibly could given the circumstances.

“Why should I trust that? Or you?” Keal said.

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It was obvious that Keal was not about to simply trust the word of anyone. He grabbed hold of Corrim's robe and spun the creature around to face him. As he did so the robe's hood slid back and with a gasp Keal let go and took a step back.

In the light from his glowing stick Corrim's orange, scaly hide glinted eerily. The protruding muzzle and the crest rising after the hood slid off made him seem even more reptile than when Nica had seen him with her newly learned second sight (crappy word/name, change later) She too drew back a little.

"Now," Corrim said, "we have a lot to go through in far too little time. Come. Even as we hesitate the clouds are drawing nearer and our choices slip through our grasps."

With no further delay he walked through the door followed by Nica and lastly by Keal who simply refused to go ahead of Nica. Behind them the door close with a booming sound that echoed through the abandoned chambers.

### Missing Monks

"How many weeks have they been gone now?" Jamor said.

"We're talking months, not weeks," Arek said.

The two monks were once more sitting in Jamor's study wondering what had happened to Keal and Nica. They had now been gone for well over four months and the one time Arek had found the courage to go down in the cellar again he had found that the door at the foot of the staircase had been bolted or blocked from the inside. This had unnerved him as he had gotten the impression that it was them that was supposed to keep the strange creature Corrim locked up.

"I still can't understand how you have managed to keep something like this a secret for so long," Arek said. "And I still think you owe me the long version of how you came to be keeper of this secret. So far all you've told me is that it was handed to you with specific instructions about never revealing it to anyone. And yet now three more people know it, assuming Keal really did enter the cellar."

Jamor winced as Arek touched upon one of the things they feared most. After they had left Nica in the cellar they had returned up the stairs to find that the door to the store room was open even though they were both sure they had closed it before going down the stairs. They had briefly thought about going back down to check that things were well downstairs, but, they had agreed, they probably would not know what "well" meant when it came to Corrim. And, besides, if someone else had entered after them and managed to avoid being detected they were likely to still be hiding. Or, worse, the two monks would risk angering Corrim when they told him someone else might or might not know about the secret cellar. Neither of them had been too interested in that so they had simply closed the secret door securely and went back to check on Keal. When they found him missing, his clothes and other things had still been in his room, they had guessed that it must have been him who had followed them. And when he did not show up they had concocted some elaborate story

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about how Nica and Keal had, as part of Keal's hurried training, gone into a recluse(?) to pray for guidance from the Supreme.

Most of the monks had been suspicious when they heard this and there had been some rumours that Nica had simply taken a liking to her young apprentice. Together they had, according to the rumours, sneaked off in the dead of night to start a life together somewhere far from the monastery. While Jamor and Arek felt certain that the monks did not really believe those rumours they did not do anything to stamp them out. If they had, they might have ended up answering uncomfortable questions. So Nica and Keal's fates generally still remained a mystery to most of the monks. And now, so long after the night they had disappeared, Jamor and Arek found that they probably knew as little as the rest of the monks.

"Well, it hasn't been easy and the way I was told about it made it quite difficult for me to reveal it without risking bringing down the entire monastery. Unlike you I was alone when I first met Corrim. My predecessor as leader of the monastery gave me a sealed letter that simply held the instructions on how to find the staircase down to the cellar and where the key to the door was hidden. But he didn't give it to my until he lay on his deathbed and even then he only gave it to me after making me swear that I would not read the letter until after he had passed."

He shook his head as the memories came floating back to him.

"As you know old Naut died less than a fortnight after I took over in his place. So there I was in charge of the whole place and all of a sudden a secret cellar with a strange creature was dumped in my lap. Anyway, Naut had not left more than the description on how to get down there, so I had no idea what awaited me. The first time I went I didn't meet Corrim. I just found the study with the door to the next room locked. The titles of the books didn't mean much to me so I figured it was just another of Naut's small jokes: to get me all excited about this mysterious secret and then it was only a secret hiding place for him where he could escape the rest of the monastery."

Standing up he went to the small cabinet and refilled their glasses with wine. Arek gladly accepted another glass even though a part of him reminded him that what had previously been a rare event, them drinking wine, was a nearly daily event by now.

"Ah," Jamor said, "that's better. Now, for many years I did not think too much about the secret study. Once in a while I would go down there to escape the routines of running the monastery. As you know it can sometimes be, how shall I put it diplomatically, it can be a bit taxing on the nerves to be responsible for feeding more than fifty people. Especially in those moments where a large part of them will insist that prayers and meditation rather than hard work in the fields is the way to the Supreme. That's all well in spring or early summer, but once you reach the fall without more than a handful of people to take care of the harvest thing get... interesting."

He sipped a little more wine before continuing.

"But I digress. One night when I was relaxing in a chair down in the study it suddenly felt like I was not alone. Just as I was about to get up to see if someone else had found the

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secret door the candles I had lit went out. All at the same time. I take it you can guess that I suddenly felt very much alone and very much like an intruder in someone else's domain. With fumbling(?) fingers I managed to lit one of the candles that was within reach and that's when I saw Corrim sitting calmly in one of the other chairs. Well, I say calmly, but to this day I honestly don't know if he has feelings like the rest of us. Either way, he was just sitting there for a while without saying anything."

As Jamor told his story Arek had inched closer and closer to the edge of his chair in anticipation. It was very clear to him how unsettling such an encounter must have been. He, at least, had not been alone and it had been somewhat comforting that Jamor had seemed to know what was going on and where they were headed. Without saying anything he simply nodded his head to make Jamor continue.

"To this day I have no idea how long we just sat there looking at each other. Eventually he broke the silence and gently explained the very simple rules that governed his study. I was free to come down here and use the room when the door to the next room was locked. If it was open or if Corrim was there I should simply leave. It was strange how he said it. Perhaps it's his voice, that hissing voice of his, but to me it didn't seem as if he was surprised that someone other than Naut came down there. And once the initial shock had settled I didn't feel threatened by him. Oh, he has an air of power around him like I've never felt in another living creature before or after. Make no mistake, I believe that Corrim is very capable of...of..."

Jamor sighed and let his head fall back against the chair. He sat looking up at the ceiling for a while.

"I don't know what he might be capable of. I can't even begin to guess."

Since it seemed like Jamor was about to slip into another silent moment of reminiscence Arek pressed on.

"What did you do, then? After Corrim had told you those rules?"

"For the first time in my life I think I actually did what I was supposed to. I got up and left."

"What? Just like that? You didn't talk to him to learn who he was?"

"No," Jamor said. "When looking back I'm puzzled myself. But in that moment, when Corrim had finished talking it simply didn't occur to me to anything else. I got the chance to talk to him later, though."

"When? Did you go back?"

"Not for a long time. Before we come to that I think I need to point out that when this happened things were not going too well for the monastery in general. And, in hindsight, I was probably too young and inexperienced to be put in the position I was in so my days were filled with trying to figure out what was really going on, what resources we had available, how to plan for the next winter and so on. Naut's decision to appoint me his successor was as much a surprise to me as it was to everyone else. So I spend every day, from before sunrise to after sunset, trying to figure out what to do. This made it pleasantly easy to

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push the thoughts about Corrim to the back of my head and completely ignore the secret study.”

“Yes, I can imagine that,” Arek said.

“Eventually, though, things settled down and I became curious. Corrim had not told me anything apart from the rules when I first met him. I didn’t even know his name. All sorts of ideas and theories started growing in my mind. Could he be the ghost of old Naut? Or was it some form of manifestation of the Supreme or, more likely, the Lady or the Lord?”

“What?”

“I know, I know. It sounds absurd now, but back then it actually seemed likely. But. The thoughts and ideas grew and grew until I could no longer stay away from the cellar. I must have gone down there every day for more than a week hoping to meet the stranger hiding down there. He didn’t show up which dampened my spirits somewhat. I started wondering if I had only imagined the entire meeting. That my mind had played tricks with me through that chaotic period.”

Once more he sank back in the chair and looked around in his own study. The old desk that had been used by generations of monks, the book shelves, the large chairs and various books and scrolls scattered all over the place. His study had never been as tidy as Corrim’s and again it struck him that perhaps that was one of the reasons he had enjoyed walking down there had simply been because it was less messy and, since it was not his study, he always made sure he removed whatever books he had brought and cleaned up after himself.

Glancing over at Arek he could see that the younger monk was impatiently waiting for him to tell him more about Corrim. He sighed and swirled the wine in the glass.

“My visits became less frequent until they returned to how they had been before I met Corrim. Once in a while I would bring a book or some accounts down there in those periods where I could never find peace and quiet elsewhere. I think some of the monks suspected that I must have a secret hiding place somewhere. Most of them probably thought that it was perfectly normal for me to retreat once in a while.”

“But you did meet Corrim again?”

“Yes, though not in the way I had first imagined. One day when I was sitting there reading the door simply opened and as I startled sprang out of the chair he gestured at it and asked me to sit back down. He said he had some things he wanted to tell me now that he had had a time to get to know me. That unsettled me and a whole series of images of him hiding in the other room spying on me spawned in my mind. Somehow I managed to stay fairly calm and so he told me a little more about how he came to live down there and where he had originally come from.”

“And?”

It was clear that Arek was now listening intensely, wanting to learn as much as possible.

“Alas, my friend. That I cannot, and will not, tell you. Not because of any promises I made to Corrim. It’s simply because it’s his tale to tell. And, frankly, I think that not even

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you would believe me if I told just a fraction of what he told me. You'll have to wait for that story until he chooses to tell it to you."

Arek sat back with a disappointed frown on his face.

"Well," he said, "I must admit to being disappointed. Not at you, really. Just at not having my curiosity satisfied. But you're right, I guess."

Several minutes passed while the two monks finished their wine. Then, as so many times in the past months, Arek suddenly got up and simply nodded to Jamor before leaving the study and going back to his own room to sleep. The two monks had been good friends for many years, but the events and secrecy had changed their relationship. There was still no doubt about their friendship. Perhaps it was even deeper than before since the meeting with Corrim had opened up for a lot of things and, to them, it no longer seemed to matter whether formality was kept. Hence Arek's silent leaving on this and other nights. They both knew that they would continue whatever discussion or talk they had been occupied with.

On his way back to his own bed Arek crossed the courtyard and stopped halfway across it. With a touch of sadness he recalled how he had not been on any of his late night prayers since the night Keal and Nica disappeared. Perhaps, he thought, there was some significance in that. Tonight he was once more too tired to even think about entering the state of meditation needed to really get close to the Supreme.

Before entering the building where his sleeping quarters were he took a last look around the courtyard and thought he saw a shadow creeping through the shadows towards Jamor's study. He blinked and peered closer but could see nothing. With a shrug he dismissed it as the result of the strain he had been under and went inside to find his bed and try to get a little sleep.

Back in his study Jamor found it difficult to go to sleep. His nights had been anything but restful since the encounter with Corrim and he had ended up staying awake longer and longer into the night, waiting for his body to be so tired and drained that he would fall asleep without having to worry about the thoughts that were racing around in his head. There was still a little wine left in the carafe so he poured it into his glass hoping it would help him fall asleep.

From one of his book shelves he pulled out a large book and sat down to read. He did not really care what he read in the evening anymore. Most of the time it felt more like his eyes were simply moving over the page without taking in the words. This evening it was the same. He had not even looked at what book it was, he just opened it on a random page and glanced at it without really seeing it. After a moment he turned the page. It took him a few seconds to register that the image before his eyes was actually moving. When he did notice he jerked upright nearly dropping the book on the floor.

On the page a simple drawing slowly became more and more complex until it had far more details than any drawing he had ever seen before. It was still in the same black ink as it had originally been, though, and the way the lines shifted on the page frightened him.

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Once his immediate shock had passed he started taking in the details of the drawing and saw that it showed the monastery. As the drawing changed he felt himself being drawn into it and it seemed like it was him that was slowly walking toward the large building even though his body still remained in the chair in his study. As he came closer he could see a procession of monks leaving the gates. This intrigued him and he watched with a growing sense of interest and anticipation.

When he was very close to the monks both he and they stopped and two figures left the group to, apparently, speak with him. With horrified fascination he realised that the drawing depicted how it must have looked to Keal when he had arrived.

Suddenly the drawing changed again and he no longer felt like he was inside it. The lines morphed back and forth in confusing patterns. From time to time he would get a short glance of a single scene. A prayer, a meal, monks working in the fields. Everything looked like scenes from the daily life in the monastery and he began to wonder what these images meant. Then the drawing shifted again to show a place in the mountains near the monastery. A monk was sitting on something just at the edge of the drawing. Finding his thoughts drawn to Keal again Jamor realised that this must have been from the day where Keal and Nica had been walking in the mountains and Keal had his seizure.

The drawing turned into living images again and Jamor could see how Keal must have glanced around. At some point the image froze or so Jamor thought or a few seconds. Then he noticed that a small part of the drawing was changing ever so slightly. When he concentrated on this part it started to grow until it filled the entire page and Jamor could make out a figure walking through the mountains. The figure seemed, at first, to be a woman in a free flowing dress. Shortly after it changed into a man walking with confident steps. A few more times the figure changed before the lines started to become blurred and unclear.

Jamor pulled back as the page suddenly turned pitch black, erasing the image entirely. In a flash of insight he thought that this must be where Keal had passed out. The ink started to fade away from the page leaving only a few scattered drops here and there and Jamor sipped a little wine. Once the ink had stopped fading he sat completely still for a few minutes not daring to move for fear of disturbing the drawing or the page or the book in some way.

There was no end to the thoughts that started to flow through his head as he sat there. His hand trembled as he gulped down the rest of the wine. What, he thought, had this meant?

One of the thoughts he could not shake was that it had been a message from the Supreme. There was nothing new in it, however, so as much as the living drawing had amazed, intrigued and frightened him he was unable to help himself. He actually felt a little cheated. It was as if he had been given a glimpse of something extraordinary only to have it snatched away again immediately.

When he was just about to close the book and get up he once more saw faint lines on the page and his attention was again on the page.

This time he could see a man walking across the courtyard. No one else was around and

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the lonely figure walked to one of the buildings which Jamor recognised as the one holding the sleeping quarters of the senior monks, including Arek. Briefly the figure stopped in the doorway and look around its gaze seeming to rest on Jamor himself for a split second. After that the figure walked inside and the drawing came alive and again Jamor had the feeling that he was inside it.

Slowly he crept along the walls of the monastery. Without really knowing why he had the distinct feeling that it was night. There were no real shadows in the drawing yet the quiet eeriness of it all just seemed to scream “night” at him.

As he opened the door and slipped into the building where his study was he noticed something strange. Very faintly he could hear his own footsteps and his heart, the heart in his body that was sitting in the chair, beat faster and faster as the footsteps grew louder and louder.

Just as the living drawing showed that he was about to enter his study Jamor gasped as he realised that the footsteps were not coming from the book. They were coming from the hallway and had just stopped right outside his door.

His eyes left the page of the book to stare at his door, but nothing happened. When he looked back into the book he saw that the drawing had changed. There was no sign of the living drawing that had been there only a heartbeat before. Instead he was now looking at a page of text.

With a low, creaking sound the door to his study opened and a shiver went down Jamor’s spine. Despite not wanting to he could not force himself to keep his eyes on the book. On their own his hands closed the books and dropped it to the floor. Slowly he glanced up at the door and the figure standing there. It was a man dressed in dark clothes that clung close to his body. A half mask covered his lower face and the eyes that looked at him from above it seemed to pierce his very soul.

“We,” Keal said, “need to talk.”

## 2 Before The Great Escape

### The Theft

Jayton Fax looked down at the sleeping form of his daughter. She coughed quietly and tossed her head a few times, a sign that the fever was still running through her body. There had been a time when Jayton thought she might actually get over the illness, but as time passed it seemed more and more unlikely.

“Rest easy, sweet Nin,” he said to the sleeping girl.

It had all begun shortly after Nin’s birth when her mother had died from a violent round of fever. Despite its aggressiveness the fever had taken several weeks to kill her, leaving Jayton frustrated and on the verge of giving up. He had spent a large part of his not insignificant fortune on a myriad of doctors, healers and other specialists. None of them had come up with any explanation of what was wrong with his wife, let alone a cure for her.

One of them had managed to improve her health for a short while, but when Jayton discovered that it was mainly due to a hefty dose of hallucinogens he had thrown the self proclaimed “Doctor of All Thing Bodily” out of his home. There had been hell to pay afterwards because the man had raised a fuss over Jayton’s lack of payment. Fortunately, Jayton’s contacts in the city’s council had made it less problematic to get rid of the quack than one could have feared. But it had still taken quite a lot of energy that Jayton quite simply did not have at the time.

Between his ill wife, his one year old daughter and trying to run his business fairly responsibly he had neither time nor energy to do anything for himself. Those of his friends that remained had tried to cheer him up by dragging him out of his house to anything from dog races to quiet dinners. His mind had been elsewhere on these occasions even though his wife was in the gentle hands of one of the healers from the city’s Temple of Lian. The acolytes of the God of Mercy were not as such real healers in the sense that they could perform magic or miracles. Their main function was to ease the suffering of those in pain or suffering from other illness. And they were good at what they did, Jayton thought, in their own way they had most likely done more good for his wife than the doctors had.

He quietly closed the door and went down stairs to his study to check up on the accounts he had received from his assistant earlier today. There really was no need for him to do this as he had more than enough talented young merchants and accountants in his employ. He looked at the books and, for the first time in weeks, decided to actually let the others

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do their job and try to relax a little. He slumped down in one of his cushioned chairs an acquaintance of his had given as a gift when Nin had been born. On a small table next to the door was the stack of account books from his company as well as a stack of business letters he could not let others handle. Closing his eyes and envisioning how annoyed some of his costumers were likely to be if he did not reply as soon as possible he nevertheless ignored the letters and started to doze off.

That was when he heard a quiet knocking at his front door.

Sighing he got out of the chair again went into the hallway to see who came calling this late in the evening. Upon opening the door he saw that it was his warehouse manager. Janes was not normally a tense man so the almost desperate look on his face made Jayton slightly worried. He ushered the old man in offered to take his coat.

“No, sir,” Janes said, “I’m afraid I must be off again soon to see to things. But I thought I should see you personally as soon as possible.”

Jayton tilted his head at this and pursed his lips and motioned for Janes to continue.

“There’s been a break-in at the warehouse. We still don’t know precisely how or who, but it is very clear that it was not simply some vagrants who smashed through a window. Professionals of some sort.”

“Gods’ curses on them!” Jayton swore, “may whoever they are rot in whatever place they like the least!”

“Aye, sir, can’t disagree with you on that.”

“Have you had a chance to make an estimate of what they took and how far back it will set up?”

Upset by the news Jayton was still experienced enough to not let a simple theft cause more of a headache than it should.

“That’s the thing, sir. They got into the other warehouse. . .”

“No. . .”

This news left Jayton breathless. His secondary warehouse was not a warehouse in the strictest sense. It was more like a small storage area hidden in the back of his smaller office near the docks. He did not use it for normal goods so while the space it took up was technically a part of his official business the actual items therein were not. Most of it would be worthless to other people but there were a few special items that could easily fetch a very nice sum to anyone who had the guts to try to sell it. He glanced up the stairs towards Nin’s room.

“Wait here. I’ll be right back,” he said.

Quickly he walked back up the stairs to check on Nin an extra time. Her sleep was still disturbed and a pained look crossed his face at the thought of not being near in case she woke up. The theft required his attention, though, so he did not feel like he had much of a choice.

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Stopping only to let his housekeep know he was going out he quickly put on his coat and hat and stepped outside to follow Janes down to the docks. The chill night caused his cheeks to turn red and coils of mist wound about their legs as they made their way through the city.

“I only noticed the break-in because I had to go back for my walking stick,” said Janes. “Once inside I could feel a draft from upstairs and found one of the windows open and a stack of crates below it. That’s when I . . .”

Jayton’s thoughts drifted as Janes described how he had checked the offices and found the unlocked door to the store room. A nagging suspicion told him that this was not simply someone who had looked for valuable items to sell for profit. He was certain that it went beyond that. That someone had found out about the highly potent, yet also highly illegal, substance he had managed to track down. A close friend of his had discreetly suggested acquiring the extract of a rare root that could be found in a swamp area several weeks’ travel up the river Porb. The same friend had claimed to know people who might be able to get the substance if Jayton decided to try it.

The decision had not been easy and it was only Nin’s worsening condition that had finally made him turn to such sinister solutions. Jayton had done his best to find out as much as possible about the plant and what effects its root juice might cause. The more he had learned the stranger it had seemed to him that the plant, and especially the root extracts, should be illegal. There was not as such anything remarkable about the plant, except perhaps its high nutritional value and the rumours that those who ate it or chewed the roots regularly were prone to live several years longer than average. Some rumours also told about how too much of the plant could cause nausea, seizures and even death. There was no proof of anything any of the rumours claimed. There was also a rarer rumour that said that combined with certain chemicals it was possible to enhance the life lengthening properties of the plant and cure virtually any disease. Most of the people he had talked to about it had not really believed this part since anything so useful would have found a way to become either legal or at least more widely used.

The only hard, physical proof Jayton had found was that the plant was illegal to import into Porbuyat and that the punishment was severe. Anyone caught with the plant were sent to work either in the nearby mines or in the bowels of one of the large, steam powered river boats. For life. This was almost the same as a death sentence as the people in the mines and on the boats had very short life spans and there was no pardon once someone had been found guilty. Jayton shivered in the cold night as he contemplated the worst possible thing that could have happend. If one of the agents working for the city council had gotten word of his interest in the plant and broken into his office to find proof he, and Nin, were as good as dead. It was a clear sign of his increasing desperation that he nevertheless had taken the chance and had asked his friend to get some extracts from the plant for him.

Within a few minutes he and Janes had reached the offices near the docks and were looking at how the thief had entered the building. Whoever it was had been clever enough to avoid both the front and side door, probably anticipating that they would have some kind of alarms on them. It struck Jayton that it most likely was not one of the council’s agents.

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While they did often sneak around in the city they very rarely cared too much about being noticed if they really did have a suspicion something was wrong. So in a sense the way the thief had broken in was good news. What was not good news was that when he went through the shelves in the store room Jayton found that it was indeed the root juice that had been stolen.

“Anything missing?” Janes asked.

He had seen the worried and slightly frightened look on Jayton’s face and found it dis-comforting. Normally his employer seemed to take things calmly until he knew everything about a given situation so his nervousness on the trip from his house to the office and the way his shoulders now sagged forward was very disturbing.

“Yes. A personal item, though. Nothing that should cause problems for the business.”

He put the small, empty box back on the shelf and turned to face Janes.

“Why don’t you just head home and I’ll take a round and make sure everything is locked up again.”

“Are you sure, boss? If there’s anything I can do to help just let me know.”

“Thanks, Janes. I appreciate it, but there’s not much left to do here.”

Janes nodded and quietly retreated back to the street. He did not like it, but his employer was the one to take these decisions so there was not much he felt he could do. With a worried shake of his head he put his hat back on and headed home.

Back in the store room Jayton had sat down in a chair trying to figure out what to do about this. A part of him simply wanted to give up now. What had more or less been his last, desperate hope had been snatched from him. And apparently not by some simple thief out looking for easy money. He wondered who might have gone specifically after the root juice. Perhaps a business competitor or someone from one of the criminal organisations in the city. The former seemed unlikely. If a competitor knew about the root juice and wanted to harm him all he had to do was report it to the council. It was far more likely it was someone from one of the criminal organisations. Despite his best efforts Jayton had not been able to avoid those organisations completely. Fortunately they were neither large nor overly influential. He hoped it was simply someone who had gotten wind of the root juice and wanted it for either profit or personal use. That would be a comfortably simple solution.

For a while he sat in the chair thinking things through. Then he got up and locked the door behind him before moving around the building to check that everything was securely locked. When he was satisfied it was he went outside and headed home.

### **The Break-in**

Hiding in the shadows on top of a building across the street Keal had a good view of what was happening in the house he was planning to break into. Something about this job

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intrigued and amused him. Seemingly, the building was the offices of a local merchant who used one of the backrooms to store a few “personal” items. Some of them should, according to his information, be just that. Simple, personal items with no real value, probably not even to the merchant himself. The man who had contacted him about the break-in had claimed to have knowledge of one or two very valuable items that should also be hidden away here.

As usual Keal had not had any direct contact with the man. One of his fences had setup the whole thing passing a few bits of information back and forth. Essentially, Keal had been told to pick up a small metal tube that had been sealed with wax in both ends. He had also been sternly instructed to not open the tube, not that he had needed any such instructions. It was one of his unspoken rules that he did not care what people were looking for nor how valuable it was as long as he got to decide on his pay based on where, how and from who. This particular client had at first made Keal slightly distrusting because he had not attempted to negotiate his initial offer. It most likely would not have done him any good unless he had come up with important new information about the target that should lower the price. And if such information had existed Keal should have been presented with it from the start so he would most likely have turned down the job on account if essential information had been presented at that point.

Another of his rules was that paranoia is not a problem, it is a way of life.

Across the street he could see an old man exit the building by the main door and lock it firmly behind him. He was wearing a broad rimmed hat so Keal could not make out any distinguishing features apart from a grey beard. The man moved off towards the center of the city and Keal slowly started counting under his breath. Patience, patience, patience. Hard lessons had taught him that patience was indeed a virtue for the professional burglar. Keal made no pretense that what he was doing was anything but simple theft. Some of his colleagues, for lack of a better term, were in the habit of using fancy titles to make what they did seem more glorified than it really was. A common title was the classic Procurer of Things Lost. As he lay in the dark on a very uncomfortable rooftop he could not help smiling cynically when thoughts of what these Procurers might actually have done. Not a lot, by his estimate, since the only other burglars Keal had ever known to pull off succesful heists involving more than the neighbour’s kitten were the kind who preferred to remain completely anonymous and, thus, without fancy titles.

While he waited he double checked his equipment, from the pair of custom made knives in his sleeves to his lock picks. When he was satisfied everything was as it should be he slowly crept to the edge of the roof and swung down into a side alley after making sure it was empty. As soft as a cat’s paws his boots landed on the alley’s dirt and he slid toward the street along the side of the building he had been hiding on.

Everything was quiet in this part of the docks. The ale houses were closer to the actual docks where the dock workers and sailors were closer to their sleeping quarters. This part of the docks was close to the actual city itself and contained mainly small warehouses or offices. It was a tribute to the growth of Porbuyat that it was now so large and rich that there were now houses that were not as living quarters. Of course, Keal reflected, this also

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made his job far easier as he did not have to worry too much about people waking up while he was breaking in.

Slipping unseen across the street proved no major problem as the only people nearby were heading away from Keal towards the city's center. Following the wall around the corner he quickly found the small side door he had been told would be there. Checking it he found its lock to be far below what would seem reasonable for this kind of building. Apparently someone had decided to cut costs. Just as he was about to pick the lock he stopped and froze where he stood. He had felt a too familiar cold running up his spine. Whether it was his sixth sense or common sense did not matter much to him. Experience had taught him that it was far better to err on the side of caution so he skipped the door and crept further along the wall towards the back of the building in search of a third entrance.

Before long he found himself near the front of the building on the other side from the small door. Silently he cursed in the night air and slipped back. While there were no doors he had seen a window on the first floor that he might be able to force open. Sneaking off a bit to find something to stand on and was rewarded by a couple of empty crates left by some lazy workers near a neighbouring warehouse. Climbing up on them he quickly and silently got the window open and slipped inside.

From what he had been told the metal tube he sought would be on the ground floor near the back so he slid slowly through the quiet building. As always he felt his breath and heartbeat must be audible to anyone within several miles, but calmed himself by reminding him that they were not. They only seemed so in the quiet of the night.

His earlier surveillance of the building had given him a good idea of where the stairs were located and it did not take him long to make his way down to the ground floor and from there to the back where he found a securely locked door in the largest office. So far so good. He got out his lock picks and methodically set to work on the locks. One by one they opened with no nasty surprises such as trip wires or jingling bells.

The room behind the door was small. Shelves lined the walls and of them were filled with various boxes of different sizes. Starting at one end he rumaged through the boxes in search for the metal tube. It took far longer than what felt comfortable due to the larger number of boxes. Eventually he finally found the tube and slid it into the small holster he had prepared for it. His client's information about its size had been fairly accurate and the tube fit snugly inside the rolled leather case hanging by his side. On the way out he did not bother locking the door to the small storage room. Whoever ran this place was likely to have both detailed accounts of the room's contents as well as a good enough memory that the theft would soon be discovered.

On his way out he took a brief detour to the side door he had first thought of going through and was not surprised to find that a thin wire stretched from the door to somewhere deep in the building. He decided he did not care precise where the other end ended and quickly made his way back to the window and out into the night. Just as he was about to sneak off down the side alley he heard footsteps approach on the street and stealthily moved up to make sure it was not someone he should be worried about. For a short moment he was indeed worried as he recognised the beard of the old man who had locked up the building

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not long ago. Now the man was unlocking the front door again by the light of a lantern he held in his left hand.

In the dim light Keal still could not make out his features, but there was something about him that seemed somehow familiar. He pushed those thoughts out of his mind and slipped back down the alley not waiting for the man to open the door. With the upstairs window still open and the door to the store room still unlocked it was highly likely that the old man would soon figure out someone had broken in and Keal wanted to be as far away as possible when that happened.

The trip back through the city went without incidents and Keal soon found himself inside the snug confines of his room in one of the city's better boarding houses. He removed the metal tube from the leather case to check that it was still undamaged, slipped it back and put the case away in a drawer. There was no need to hide it as he had no intentions of leaving the room, or falling asleep, before he went out to see his fence some time after midnight.

The night was at its darkest when Keal sat up in his bed. Even though he had been lying completely still he had not been asleep. Instead he had rested his body while his mind ran through the evening's events checking for anything amiss. Satisfied that there had been no loose ends he had then proceeded to consider how he would handle the drop off.

A few minutes after he had returned home there had been a quiet knock on his door and a note had been slipped under it. It had been a message from his fence telling him that the client for this job had expressed an interest in meeting Keal. The fence knew perfectly well that Keal was very keen on staying anonymous so the note came as a bit of a surprise. Included in the note was a brief explanation about how the client was apparently a person of some importance and the fence urged Keal to accept the meeting which was supposed to happen in a small bar called the Smoking Dragon where the fence often ran his business. The choice of a fairly public meeting place both calmed Keal and made him nervous. A place with other people present usually meant that the chances of an ambush or similar setup were fairly small, but it also meant that it could be difficult for Keal to disappear quickly and unnoticed if something did go wrong. And, of course, it also meant that there was not much chance of Keal setting up his own ambush as a preventative measure against a potential double cross from the client.

His mind was still not made up when he got up from his bed and pulled the small leather case with the metal tube inside out of the drawer he had left it in. He opened the case and nodded to himself when he found the tube was still inside. Perhaps there was something good to be had from meeting the client. The whole job had intrigued him both due to the fairly easy and simple nature of it - Keal was not a cheap man to hire - and because the metal tube could not conceal more than perhaps a letter or a small dose of some illegal drug. Whoever had wanted it could not expect to make much money from the deal unless there was something completely wrong. A setup by the city council's agents seemed possible as they would definitely be interested in both whatever was in the tube and getting rid of Keal. While he did not let his name float around in relation to the jobs he had done rumour in the city had begun to spread of an exceptionally talented burglar.

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Slipping the leather case into its holster on his belt he retrieved a similar case from the drawer and tapped it against his chin a few times. Yes, he thought, he would definitely go to the meeting. But he would take certain steps to make sure he was in control of how things went. He still had more than an hour before the meeting and that should give him enough time to round up a few people whose help he could use. Silently opening the door to his room he slipped down the stairs and out into the night with a small smile on his face. As much as he disliked having to take this kind of precautions he had to admit that he found a fair amount of pleasure in turning the tables on whoever thought he would simply turn up for a meeting with a stranger while holding freshly stolen goods.

The mist had cleared a little as the night had passed causing Keal to take a few extra twists and turns as he made his way through the city in search of the ale houses where the people he sought could usually be found at this hour. As the hour passed he managed to find two people who had helped him before on similar tasks. Neither were more than the city's low life though they sometimes seemed to believe they were. This suited Keal just fine as it was precisely this quality he needed tonight.

With quite a few minutes to spare he arrived outside the meeting place and settled in in the shadows of an alley mouth to wait while the players, the pawns, of his little game arrived. First to arrive was the burly dock worker Sord that Keal had known for ages. The old pile of muscle was one of those semi crazy people who would never really start any trouble themselves, at least not directly, but would happily be absolutely sure that things finished. No matter how deadly. The main reason Keal had discreetly suggested that Sord might want to have a few drinks at his expense here tonight was to make sure that there would be a large, muscular distraction in case things got out of hand. Keal did not as such expect an outright fight, but they were good to have in case things started going horribly wrong.

A few minutes after Sord an odd couple showed up. The great lengths they had gone to to look inconspicuous was somewhat lost simply because they had done it. That was the thing some people, especially from the better parts of society, never understood. People who were at the bottom of the food chain very rarely took much notice of what clothes they wore. And whatever they did wear they usually wore until it fell from their bodies of natural causes. The two middle aged men had apparently taken some fairly high quality clothes, rolled them in the mud and cut a few holes in them in the hope that it would make them fit in with the other patrons who frequented the Smoking Dragon. Judging by the looks the couple were getting from other people in the street Keal was not the only one who had noticed them. Most of them just looked at the two men as if they truly did not understand why they were there, but Keal noticed more than one person who might just be making plans for a small accident that might befall the two men on their way home.

Keal sighed and shook his head. If those two really were the people he would be dealing with he might as well head home right away. It was bad enough to have direct contact with one of his clients. If it turned out that it was a hare brained high class snob who felt like rubbing elbows with a notorious criminal it would be far easier if Keal just went straight up to the watchmen and gave a full account of his activities for the past decade. And a lot less messy.

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There was only a few minutes until he was supposed to meet the client and he began to look for the other person he had talked to earlier in the evening. With any luck Graz would be fashionably late, though not so late that it would look like more than him carefully avoiding anyone following him. That suited Keal just fine and Graz was not so big a slob that it would cause problems. Still, it would be nice if he showed up soon so Keal could slip around to the back entrance and start scanning the crowd for potential bodyguards or other, nastier, surprises. He smiled to himself as Graz, stumbling drunkenly, came round a corner a few houses from Keal. Graz was in almost every way the exact opposite of Sord. Where the latter was big, grumpy and foul mouthed the former was slimly built and swaggered through the street with the bizarrely confident air of good humour that belonged to a man who was either the world's biggest liar or the most powerful man in the world. Or possibly both. Keal had seen Graz get both into and out of the worst bar brawls imaginable through this behaviour. And Keal had also seen him walk away with the same stumbling steps he saw now from those bar brawls he had gotten into. More often than not Graz somehow managed to make it through the fights with barely a scratch. In the beginning Keal had put it down to sheer luck, but as the number of fights he had seen Graz in grew so did his respect for the man's limberness. While Graz was quite often even more drunk than he appeared Keal had noticed that he had the reflexes and agility of a hunting cat. If pressed Graz also had the ferocity of one. All that combined with Graz' penchant for high class clothes, extremely worn and dirty high class clothes, he gave an impression so mixed and selfcontradictory that it was equally likely that he was a talented burglar, a drunken lout or just a jester from a different time and age.

As Keal slid around the ale house Graz made a big show of his entrance. With much bravado he threw open the door earning him murderous looks from both the clientele and bouncers. Most soon shrugged it off as Graz went up to the bar and banged on it.

"A most joyous evening, my good barkeep," he proclaimed, "'tis indeed suited for a flagon of your finest, and most aged wine. Or a tankard of the piss you call ale."

The owner of the Smoking Dragon's angry glare turned into a calculating sneer as Graz slapped a handful of coins on the bar. Keal had specifically instructed Graz to show off as much as possible to see how the client would react. By the time Graz was settled at a table with a pewter mug Keal was watching from where he had slipped in at the back. His gaze scanned the crowd for anyone paying particular attention to Graz. For a brief moment he got eye contact with Sord and gave a small nod to let him know that things were well. Sord did not return the nod but simply took another mouthful of ale and mumbled something to the man next to him who started laughing loudly.

At a table in the center of the room Keal spotted the two misplaced men he had seen earlier. They now seemed even more out of place as they nursed the mugs in front of them looking almost sick at the thought of drinking their contents. A drunkard stumbled over to their table to sit down at the single empty chair. One of the men said something that made the drunkard stare wideeyed at the two men and quickly retreat back to the bar casting a confused and worried glance back over his shoulder. Just as Keal shifter his eyes back to the two men he noticed that one of them put a small single shot pistol back inside his

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sleave. So that was what had scared off the drunk, Keal thought. He mentally gave the two men a nod of approval. Apparently they had not been completely unprepared for where they were going, just ill prepared. If there was one thing the regulars of places like the Smoking Dragon were more afraid of than muscles it was people looking out of place and armed with concealed weapons. Keal let himself smile as he saw the drunk slump down in a chair at another table as far away from the two men as possible. Catching Graz' eyes he motioned toward the table in the middle and Graz let out a loud cheer and started making his way through the crowd passing out greetings and slaps on the shoulder to people he had no idea of who were.

"Ah, what a fine evening this is," Graz roared on, "indeed, a night most auspicious for us fine men of Porbuyat. And unless I'm much mistaken, which never I am, I see an empty chair with my name on it. Tell me, my friends, are you perchance waiting for such esteemed company as only I can offer?"

With this he bowed deep and wavering to the men almost, but not quite, tipping his drink into their laps. For a moment Keal and those closest to the table held their breaths waiting to see what happened. To Keal's surprise one of the two men gave a loud, roaring cheer and threw out his arms as if he was about to hug Graz.

"But of course we are," he said in a voice rivalling Graz'. "My dear cousin and I had neigh on given up hope that this aptly named establishmentique held other connoisseurs of the finest kind."

Graz being Graz he immediately leapt into a verbal battle with the stranger and a tirade of greetings, titulations and salutation flew through the air. Many of the words were longer than the average sentence spoken in the ale house and some of those nearest the table shifted uncomfortably not wanting to be caught up in some kind of trouble they did not understand where came from. Every single person present, perhaps apart from the two men, had been in enough fights to know and accept that sometimes you just happened to be in a brawl. But usually you could rely on some kind of sensible reason for the fight. A woman, a spilled drink, the stepping on someone's toes. Those reasons made perfectly sense to the clientele of the Smoking Dragon. But long, fancy words no one could understand did not.

After a while Graz and the two men seemed to settle down a bit and as Graz called out for another round of ale to the table people around them started to relax again and the slap Graz received for pinching one of the barmaids' bottom even earned a small round of laughter.

Throughout all of this Keal had kept a close eye on everyone in the room trying to spot any reactions that would betray anyone taking too much interest in Graz, the two men or anyone else. His efforts was rewarded when he saw a burly man just inside the door putting something back under his jacket. The burly man relaxed against the wall and he too slowly scanned the crowd. Keal made sure to appear engaged in conversation as the man's gaze came to his part of the room. After a few moments the man left the bar whispering something to one of the bouncers while slipping him a few coins. The bouncer just nodded and kept on standing next to the door looking big and mean.

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Back at the table in the middle the two men and Graz kept on chatting and drinking and Keal began to suspect that they might just be out slumming. Then he noticed that one of them wiped his nose in a pink kerchief with an embroidered “H” in one corner. That was the sign Keal had been asked to look for. Graz did not disappoint Keal but just kept on talking seemingly oblivious to the sign that had been waved in his face. This was just what Keal had told him to do and again he could not help being more than a little impressed at Graz’ ability to act. A few more minutes passed and Keal could see that the two men were again beginning to look a little worried and cast glances around the room, probably trying to see if anyone had noticed the sign.

“Ah, my fine friends,” Graz said loudly, “’twould seem the ol’ bladder is smaller than the drinks served in Pinchtown. I beg your leave to most pardonishly depart from your distinguished company for a few moments on a matter of some, ah, natural urgency.”

At this both men lost all pretense of being other than they were and just looked at Graz with their mouths hanging open. What Graz had done was to give exactly the reply that had been mentioned in the note Keal had received earlier. But Graz had delivered the response to the kerchief sign in an utterly different manner than what the men had expected. While they gathered their wits Graz got up and stumbled through the crowd heading for the door leading to the piss houses (privies) at the back. Before Keal started heading for the backdoor as well he froze for a split second as he noticed the bouncer sticking his head out the front door and making some kind of wave out into the street. Fearing that whoever he was supposed to meet had setup up an ambush outside Keal moved towards the backdoor as quickly as he dared without raising suspicious glances.

When he got outside after what seemed like an eternity he was relieved to see Garz urinating drunkly against the side of one of the outhouses. Keal quickly and silently stepped out of the light spilling out from the ale house and crept closer to Garz. He stopped a few meters away and knelt down behind a barrel while keeping an eye out for anyone approaching.

As he finished his business Garz kept humming a spirited tune. At the end he grunted contentedly and was about to head back inside when the distinct sound of a pistol’s hammer being pulled back could be heard in the quiet night.

“Just leave everything where they are,” a voice said from a shadow close by.

Garz froze and slowly turned his head towards the voice. Speaking softly, yet still with a drunken slur, he calmly lifted his hands to his sides.

“No need for unpleasantries, my friend,” he said, “just taking a quiet piss in the night. I do beg pardon if my choice of tune was not to your liking.”

“Shut up. Place your hands against the wall and spread your legs.”

The voice was razor sharp so Garz did as told without further comments. Glancing back at the ale house’s backdoor Keal saw that the two men had stepped outside and closed the door behind them. One of them stood at the door while the other approached Garz. Ever so slowly Keal slid a knife out of his boot and tensed. Both he and Garz had known there would be some risk to this, but Keal was not about to sit still while someone killed Garz.

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With any luck the two men had not paid notice to his exit and an opportunity to turn the tables on them might present itself.

“This the one you were looking for?” the voice asked.

“It would seem so,” the man said. “Here’s your payment. Leave us. We have business to discuss with this... gentleman.”

Before tossing a small purse into the shadows the man drew the concealed pistol from his sleeve and placed it at the back of Garz’ head.

“We’ll take it from here.”

Even though Keal heard no sounds he got the impression that a presence had left the back yard and he got ready to make his move. With impeccable timing Sord chose that exact moment to open the backdoor causing the second man to turn around. In a single, fluid movement Keal closed the distance between him and the man holding a pistol to Garz’ head. His knife came to rest across the man’s neck.

“Sord, take him down,” Keal said over his shoulder. “And you! Move a muscle and it will be the last thing you do.”

With a satisfied smile Keal heard a pained grunt followed by a thump as Sord knocked the other man down.

“Now,” he said. “Just keep looking at the wall. Looks like we’ve got some talking to do.”

As the man realised how things had suddenly changed he kept quite still, even when Garz moved to the side and took the pistol from his hand.

“Fascinating little piece of work, you’ve got there,” Garz said. “I might just be inclined to do you the favour of taking extra good care of it for you.”

Motioning to Sord to bring the unconscious man Keal led all of them away from the back yard of the ale house. He saw no need to risk being interrupted by either the bouncer or some unsuspecting drunk stumbling out into the dark. Once they were in a small side alley he pushed the man facedown on the ground.

Behind him Garz and Sord kept watch, Sord physically sitting on the unconscious man. Garz winced once as he considered what Sord’s weight must be doing to the poor man’s ribs. Then he looked at the pistol that had recently been pressed against his head and gave the unconscious man’s face a quick kick.

“No need to take chances, eh?” he said.

His voice had changed from a snobbish tone to the cold and contemptous voice of someone who found it far easier to kill people than pick their pockets.

“Speak your piece,” Keal said, “and make it good and quick. I’m in no mood for long stories.”

“Okay, okay,” the man whimpered. “I’ll tell you.”

Keal relaxed his grip a little to give the man air to breathe.

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“We were told by the Head that he needed us to size someone up for him. That’s all he said.”

Unsatisfied by this Keal punched him in the kidneys. The man coughed hard from the pain. As his coughing eased he continued.

“We’ve done it before. Sometime the Head pays us to see if we can beat up someone or trick them into an ambush. It’s his way of making sure he’s not dealing with amateurs.”

“The Head, eh?” Keal sneered. “Who’s he?”

“I don’t know. I swear I don’t know! We just receive messages from him through a street kid. Please, we were just told to use the kerchief as a sign and if we’d gotten the right guy he’d go for a piss.”

His scream of pain turned into a strangled gurgle as he pressed his face deep into the mud. He held it there as the man struggled against his grip then let him up for air and bent down and whispered in his ear.

“Well, you can tell your precious Head that if he wishes to remain connected to whatever body he is crapping on he’s got one more chance. Tell him to be back here, in person and alone, in two hours.”

With a final shove to the man’s back Keal got up and stepped back into a dark shadow to obscure the man’s view of him.

“We’ll keep your ‘cousin’ here. Not that I expect you or this Head to care much about his pathetic life. But you, at least, might care about what he can be... persuaded... to tell us once he wakes up again.”

The man dragged himself to his feet keeping his eyes far from where Keal was standing. He nodded and began limping away with Keal’s eyes drilling holes in his back. Once he was out of the alley Keal looked at the others.

“So,” he said, “care for a little more work?”

They both nodded, Sord with his usual sullen look and Garz with a gleam in his eye that told Keal that there should be no problems getting information out of the other man who was still lying unconscious on the ground.

“Let’s get him out of the way,” Garz said. “There’s an empty house close by where we can keep an eye on him.”

“Good. Sord, stay in the house and make sure he doesn’t get away. I’ve a feeling that this was not the last setup tonight so make sure he doesn’t get away. But don’t kill him yet. If it sounds like trouble either just sit tight or get him out to somewhere else. Either way, Garz and I will meet you down by the docks tomorrow morning or at the house in a few hours.”

With his hand he motioned Garz closer and whispered a few words to him. Garz reached down to his boot and withdrew two small throwing knives, one of which he slipped into Keal’s hand. They looked straight into each other’s eyes while Keal used his eye lids to count down and then they both swiftly turned around and threw the knives at the top of

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the houses at either side of the alley. Even before two grunts of pain could be heard Keal and Garz had dodged against the walls and begun making their way towards the drain pipes to climb up to the roof tops.

“Stop,” a voice said. “No more.”

At the mouth of the shadowy alley a man walked slowly towards them in clear view with his arms held out from his body. It was him that had spoken and it was clear that while he did not seem frightened he did have the wary posture of someone who knew things were likely to get real ugly real fast and who did not want to get caught in whatever might happen.

“I must say that I am not displeased at all,” he said. “I said stop!”

The last command was barked at the roof Keal had been headed for. Looking up Keal could see a quick glimpse of a head pulling back from the edge. He let go of the drain pipe and looked around narrowing his eyes as he saw several shapes moving both at the roof tops and behind the man. A cold shiver ran down his spine as he realised that there must be at least a dozen of them. And they seemed to hold all the advantages. At least he could take a little comfort in the fact that he was still alive. It was very clear to him that if the newcomer, Keal supposed this must be the Head who seemed to be behind this, had wanted him dead he would already be lying in a pool of his own blood. Even so, he still did not want to simply roll over as some kind of sick lap dog so he steeled himself and walked confidently out into the middle of the alley and stood there waiting for the Head to approach. A few steps from Keal the Head stopped and let his gaze run up and down Keal’s worn clothes.

“No,” he repeated, “not displeased at all. But a tad disappointed at your choice of clothes. Surely this is not the best your wardrobe has to offer?”

It was all Keal could do to not rip out the man’s throat right there and then. Even if it meant his own death. Instead he let his eyes slide around between a couple of the men the Head had brought before letting them come to rest at the man he had questioned. This man had been one of those who had appeared behind the Head and he was now standing a bit away with a contemptuous sneer on his face.

Keal shrugged.

“You prefer a blather mouthed Mr Fancy Pants? Well, at least it looks like you’ve got enough of those.”

With this he nodded his head towards the sneering man whose face grew even paler than it already looked in the poorly lit alley. For a moment it looked like he was going to say something, but a raised hand from the Head kept him silent.

“True,” the Head said, “true. Though you talk tough for someone who’s surrounded.”

“So do you,” Keal said. “Want this to turn dirty?”

It came as no big surprise to Keal that the Head did not fall for his bluff. But for just a fraction of a second he had seen the doubt in the other man’s eyes. The doubt that betrayed that he suspected Keal might really have an unknown ace up his sleeve. Keal kept a harsh

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gaze on the Head refusing to move or speak before the other did. He did not need to wait long for the Head soon sighed and relaxed his shoulders. With a few swift commands he dismissed his henchmen and when they were alone in the alley again, apart from Garz and Sord, he spoke to Keal in a far less pompous voice.

“Good point. It was, after all, not a fight I was hoping for tonight. It was a deal. And as I said, I’m not displeased that you avoided Coe and One-Eye’s little ambush. Oh, don’t look so offended. After all, I wasn’t the only one playing tricks tonight. That’s just part of the game, is it not?”

Having no real argument against this Keal just shrugged again.

“So what deal are you looking for?” he asked.

“I take it you’ve guessed that I’m the one called the Head. Which reminds me. You did have a good point about the, what was it, blather mouthed Mr Fancy Pants? He caved far too quickly for my liking.”

The Head waved his hands dismissively.

“Never mind,” he continued, “that’s for another day. Now. Did you acquire the requested object?”

“Maybe. Are you willing to pay?”

“Of course. Though, as you saw, it would be easy to simply take it.”

When Keal narrowed his eyes the Head quickly raised a hand in a consilatory manner.

“But! It’s my experience that it’s far better to keep the option of later cooperation open, so yes, I have your money.”

He slowly pulled out a purse and gave it to Keal who tossed it to Garz. As the purse flew through the air it made a nice, jingling sound. Nodding slightly the Head seemed to believe this was settled but Keal shot him a deadly stare.

“Good,” Keal said. “That’s his part. There’s still two of us left who’s not been paid.”

“What? That was the amount we’d agreed on.”

“You bring your friends, I bring mine. The difference is that while yours are a bunch of whimps mine are not and so they’re worth paying. And seeing as how they’d not have been needed if you’d skipped your silly little play it’s only fair you pay them.”

For a few moments the two men locked gazes and both Garz and Sord tensed in anticipation. The Head’s henchmen could not be far away so it was still all too possible that things might blow up in everyone’s faces. Slowly Garz walked sideways to position himself outside the Head’s view, something that did not go unnoticed by either Keal or the Head himself.

“I suppose you’re right. Just don’t give me cause to regret this.”

He fished another, larger, purse out and held it out to Keal who reached out to take it. Just before his hand touched the purse he paused.

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“This is all the dealing we’ll do tonight. If you think you’re capable of showing up here without your croneys tomorrow at midnight we might finish this. Now get lost, I’m in no mood for more of your cursed games or tricks.”

When the Head had left Keal and the two others looked at each other for a moment before going back inside the Smoking Dragon. If any of them had looked back they might have seen that a part of the shadows at the dead end of the alley moved slightly.

“And so it begins,” someone said quietly to herself.