

# **Keal NaNoWriMo 2008**

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## The Monks' Secret

As Keal looked at Jamor he was not himself entirely sure what had changed since he had last been up in the monastery. He had vague memories of walking through a forest and living at the monastery. Most of them seemed impassive images, like drawings in a book, with no emotions attached to them. Others were more lively such as the quick flickers of blood and gore that often came to him, especially at night when he was alone.

He knew that Jamor had had some influence on his time at the monastery and that he needed to talk to him about the arrangements that had to be made.

"Please take a seat," Jamor said. "Would you care for something to drink?"

Despite Jamor's calm exterior Keal could feel that he was clearly nervous. In an attempt at making Jamor more at ease Keal took off his mask and sat down in one of the chairs.

"I wouldn't mind a drink," he said, "we have some things to go through tonight and I think you might need something to strengthen you."

From the cabinet Jamor took out an unopened bottle and pulled out the cork. He sat down in the other chair and hesitated shortly before picking up the book and placing it on the table between them. When Keal noticed the book he gave a small nod.

"Yes," he said, "I thought you might have been drawn to that book tonight."

"How?"

At Jamor's question Keal sighed and slumped forward a little losing the sharpness of his features in the process.

"I'm not entirely sure, Jamor. That's one of the things we have to talk about."

Jamor poured some wine into the glasses and watched Keal drain most of his before he continued.

"Something seemed to have happened quite recently that has played tricks on my mind and memory. I don't feel particularly disoriented or confused as such, but there are just holes here and there. It seems like someone has hand picked parts of my memory and simply removed it without much finesse?"

"In what way? Do you mean that you know there should be memories?"

For a while Keal said nothing as he tried to put words to his thoughts.

"It's a bit like when you try to learn a new chant or rhyme. In the beginning you know that you've read all the words, but some of them just disappear. You have no doubts that they're there and that you've read and seen them. They're just... gone."

"Strange," Jamor said. "And interesting."

Silence once more filled the room as they both nursed their drinks in their hands. Keal took in the room and his eyes were caught by the book Jamor had just looked in. He picked

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it up and traced his fingers over the cover. It was a finely crafted book, he thought, and then frowned. In his life he had not seen many books and never really had thought too much about how they were made. So sitting with the book in his hands still felt somewhat strange to him. And yet it did not. It was as if some part of him knew more than he was aware of. As if he had, a very long time ago, worked with book binding, or maybe studied a lot of books intensely, and now that was slowly coming back to him.

Looking back at Jamor he flicked the book open and randomly flicked through the pages until he came to the end. There was no real purpose to this, it just felt right to feel the texture of the parchment against his fingers. As he closed the book his eyes caught on a small mark at the bottom of the back cover.

“This mark,” he said, “do you know what it means?”

Jamor looked over with a puzzled look on his face.

“What mark? The one there at the bottom?”

Keal shifted the book around so the spine was facing toward Jamor who took another look at the cover.

“Isn’t it just a smudge? I’ve seen it a few times, but... oh...”

His eyes went wide with surprise and Keal gave a short laugh.

“Sometimes,” Keal said, “things are best hidden in plain sight, eh?”

The mark was a square encompassing a triangle. One of the triangle’s point was pointing towards the spine of the book, but the mark was indeed smudged around the edges so it was not clearly visible until the light hit it at the right angle. Slowly Keal turned the book around watching how the shadows played with the mark until the book was rotated the right way with its bottom toward him. Then the mark was nearly invisible and he turned the book over again until he could once more see the mark clearly.

“Cleverly done,” he said. “You never noticed this before?”

“Never,” Jamor said and shook his head, “though I think I do recognise it. Let me just take a look in some of the notes I keep.”

Before Jamor could get up Keal reached out and put a hand on his arm.

“There is no need to look in your notes.”

He put down the book, leaned back and folded his hands over his stomach. Then he continued.

“As I said my memory seems flawed, Jamor. This mark is one example of that. I cannot tell you how I came to know about it or even what it means, precisely. What I do know is that it is somehow important, a way of someone telling me that this book holds something of great value to me. Something I need to...”

For a while he sat still, silently gazing at nothing.

“Something I need to do some task that I am not yet aware of what is.”

“That does not sound well, Keal. In an eerie way it reminds me far too much of how the Supreme has communicated with His prophets throughout the ages.”

Keal gave him a sideway glance and snickered.

“The Supreme. Pffff!”

With a gasp Jamor made a protective sign and breathed a small prayer of forgiveness for Keal.

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“Do not speak so of the Supreme!” he said, his training as a monk overcoming his wariness of Keal’s sudden reappearance.

The look Keal gave him could have frozen water.

“Do you know what’s worse than being afraid of the gods?” Keal said, “It’s knowing for a fact that the gods not only exist but have no idea what actually goes on in the world.”

“But. . .” Jamor began before Keal waved a hand to silence him.

“Jamor, you believe in the gods. Or in your Supreme, at least. Somehow, over the past year or two, I have gone from fearing the gods because they might exist and punish me and everyone else to simply knowing they are there. Beyond believing and worshipping there is only the flat knowledge that yes, the gods exist very much in the same way that this flask exists.”

He picked up the bottle and poured another drink for himself then tipped the bottle towards Jamor who shook his head and covered his glass with a hand.

“I’ve a feeling I need a clear head for this,” he said.

With a nod Keal put the bottle back down.

“This is another of the tricks my mind is playing on me these days. I’ve no idea exactly how it came about, but trust me. The gods are very much there and they are in many ways just as confused about everything as we are. It is as if they have been thrust upon this world rather than creating it like the scripts tell us. Anyway, however they came to be they are definitely powerful and they are definitely playing their own games of power using both us and themselves to gain knowledge and position. That much, at least, was quite evident from. . .”

His voice trailed off as he felt a shiver down his spine. This was one of the moments he had come to hate. The feeling of suddenly and clearly remembering something that was so important that he should never have been able to forget it. And at the same time it was so gruesome a memory that he could easily imagine himself going through hell and back if it meant he would lose the memory forever.

“Sorry,” he said, “mind playing tricks again. Where was I?”

“The gods’ power games.”

The look on Jamor’s face made it quite clear to Keal that he was indeed interested in this, but that he did not entirely believe what he heard.

“Yes, the gods and their little games. Those games becomes far too obvious when you actually sit down and speak with the gods.”

“You mean like in prayers and through communion?”

“No. I mean ‘sit down’ in the most literal sense. It’s far too clear to see how they try to maneuver each other around. At least, it’s clear if you take a brief step back and just listen to them for a while.”

Jamor looked startled.

“What? But that is not how you speak with the gods.”

As soon as he had said this Jamor covered his mouth with his hand and muttered another prayer of apology.

“Supreme’s blessings. There is only one true god. The rest are old remnants of a less enlightened time. Forgive me, o Supreme One, for doubting you.”

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Keal rolled his eyes and emptied his drink.

“You do realise prayers like that are less likely to be heard, or answered, than what you say, or pray for, inside you? See, that’s another thing about the gods that I really could live without knowing. They really have the capacity for being everywhere at all times. Fortunately, most of them are actually too lazy to use that power much.”

“Keal, this is getting preposterous. While I can accept and respect your newfound belief in the old gods rather than the Supreme you really are getting too far fetched now. Yes, there are things that are kept hidden similar to how we keep Corrim hidden. But talking with the gods? Lazy gods, even? Seriously, Keal, that is just plain silliness. Why don’t we find a bed for you and continue this talk tomorrow when you have slept and regained your senses?”

“Perhaps that might be best. Or perhaps it might not.”

“What do you mean?”

“These flashes of memories. Vague and distant images of listening to gods speaking. Not remembering exactly how they looked or what exactly they said. Yet still knowing without a doubt that they were gods and they were treating the world like their game board.”

He sighed and leaned forward, his shoulders hunching over before he stood up. He felt very tired, a combination of the mental strain of the conversation and the relaxing quality of the alcohol.

“Yes, perhaps it would be best to wait until tomorrow,” he said.

Jamor stood up and took Keal’s arm.

“Let’s find a room with a soft bed for you, Keal. You really look like you’re about to fall over with fatigue.”

Together they walked across the monastery’s courtyard and found a small, empty room with a bed, a small desk and a stool. Despite its simple, even crude, appearance Keal could not help but feel a little bit at home again.

“Will you be alright on your own?” Jamor said.

“Sure. And you were right. I am about to drop. We’ll talk more in the morning, eh?”

With a silent nod Jamor left Keal alone and softly closed the door. As quietly and discreetly as he could he slid the safety bolt in place to make sure Keal could not get out without making enough noise to wake up half the monastery.

“I’m sorry, Keal,” he whispered, “but you are too close to the truth for your own good. Rest easy, my child, and may the morning bring fresh memories to replace your troubled thoughts and put you at ease.”

Inside the room Keal had indeed settled down, but not on the bed. After sitting on it for a few moments he took one look at the thin mattress and pillow and laid down on his back on the floor. As he drifted off to sleep he briefly wondered when he had changed to prefer a hard floor to a bed. He could no longer remember if it had been like this back when he lived with Fredic or if it had started during his time on the road or perhaps even at the monastery. Something was nagging at him, trying to tell him why this was important. His last thought before falling asleep was a curse on the gods for messing around with his mind.

Jamor waited outside Keal’s door until he had not heard any noise for a while. Then he headed back outside. Once he was out in the courtyard again he looked up at the clear night sky with a pained look on his face. With brisk steps he walked halfway across the

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courtyard and then suddenly stopped. For several moments he stood still in the crisp night air. Only a little wind could be seen to move the cloth flags that hung on poles around the edge of the courtyard. The stars were clearly visible as the sky was clear of clouds.

The entire monastery was a picture of tranquility, yet in the middle stood Jamor looking very much like he belonged someplace else entirely. First his hands began to shake, then his arms and before long he sagged to the ground weeping with trembling sobs. He held his arms out in front of him and, with tears streaming down his cheeks, looked at how his skin slowly pulled tight over his flesh and bones. His face became a mask of pain as the skin on his face also began to turn dry and hard.

From around the monastery low screams of agony began to arise and several monks and acolytes started pouring out into the courtyard. Some of them made it all the way to the middle where Jamor was kneeling, some collapsed with pain on the cold stones, some did not even make it out the door. Slowly the courtyard became filled with robed figures who twisted in pain.

Only one person managed to keep on his feet. Supporting himself with a piece of board Arek painfully limped toward Jamor. His progress was made even more difficult as he had to step around the people in his path. It took him several minutes to reach Jamor and when he did he too collapsed on the ground. He was barely able to speak.

“What happened?” he said.

“Keal,” Jamor said, “he came back.”

Arek’s eyes went wide and for a brief moment pure surprise, not pain, was painted on his face.

“No! That cannot be! How? When?”

With a shudder Jamor lifted his head and looked back at the building Keal was in. Its door was the only one that was still closed as Jamor had chosen to put Keal in a building with no used dormitories.

“Not long ago,” Jamor said. “He came to my room, his mind all mangled.”

A spasm of pain raced through Jamor and he doubled over and rolled onto his side. Both his and Arek’s skin was by now so tight it was nearly impossible for them to move. Large cracks began to form down their arms and the skin began to lose its softness like clay hardening in the sun. Arek started coughing, the shocks causing his skin to split in places and thick, crimson blood started oozing from several places. Jamor appeared not to notice this and continued.

“It’s the Prophecy. It’s starting. The Supreme shall walk on the Earth, the Dead shall be set Free and the man of a Thousand Lives shall bring forth Chaos.”

Those last words came out as a lisping whisper from a face that stretched, turning into a snout, with skin that cracked up into thousands of individual scales. A pair of reptile eyes held no trace of the pain that had so recently made movement nearly impossible. Two arms that were no longer wrapped around the glittering chest reached forward and steel hard claws made scratches in the stones on the ground. Slowly and stumbling the new born Dragon rose on all four and looked around. Its head made a few large jerks as its muscles and nerves became accustomed to its new form.

In its eyes the monastery no longer looked impressive. It was merely piles of rock that it could scatter with its claws or tail. Across its back leathery wings slowly detached from its body and spread out. With a low, rumbling grunt it pushed off with its front legs and raised

itself on its hind legs beating its wings slowly back and forth. Standing several meters tall it took in the scene in the courtyard.

Around it other, smaller, Dragons struggled for control of their bodies. Some were still entangled in their robes, their minds still clinging on the the memory of their Human lives and therefore unable to control their movements. A few of them never got to terms with their new existense and died a slow and agonising death on the stones. By far the majority of the monks and acolytes had remained in near Human forms, their minds and bodies destroyed by the shock of the transformation.

The Dragons who were able to move began eating the bodies around them. Ravenous hunger filled every last one of them and small fights broke out now and then over the remains of their brothers. Soon the courtyard was a mess of bones, blood and torn robes. In one corner a small Dragon was choking on a leg bone while hissing and snapping at two others who were circling it, waiting for a chance to tear it apart and feast upon it.

In the midst of the carnage Jamor the Dragon sat majestically without letting itself succumb to the hunger. When one of the other Dragons came too close it shifted its head and roared until it was left alone. Beside Jamor lay the broken body of Arek who had not survived the tranformation. None of the Dragons dared touch it for fear of the looming form of Jamor and before long Arek's was the only body left untouched.

Blood, gore and bones were splattered all over the courtyard and the Dragons who by now started to form up in a circle around Jamor. Once they had shuffled into place and sat fairly quietly on their hindlegs Jamor reached down and picked up Arek's body and gulped it down in a single mouthful. It then let out yet another mighty roar aimed at the sky and looked around at the others.

Just as it opened its mouth to address them a shadow blocked out several of the brightly shining stars. Jamor looked up with a sneer and smoke curling out its nostrils only to shrink back as a he saw the shadow was another Dragon, this one at least three times Jamor's size. Instinctively Jamor fell back on all four legs and crouched down as the Dragon settled next to him scattering the smaller Dragons all over the place.

"Ah, yes," the Dragon said, "hullo there. Ahm. Let's see. Oh, introductions. Of course. Hi everyone. My name is Tosco. Now... this might seem strange to you, ahem... My, my... now isn't that a bit of a mess?"

## **Awakening**

A shiver ran through Keal's body and woke him up. He shook his head in an attempt to dislodge the dream that still lingered in his mind. It had been a very vivid dream about a monastery, dragons, caves and strange beings. He wondered if the dream had been spawned by Metobaph's talks of the monastery they were headed towards.

Another shiver ran through him as strange memories of a lot of blood made a final struggle to stay with him, but finally he managed to return himself to the real world and push the dream images away. Or at least almost push them away. Something kept nagging at him. Something did not quite feel right. For a few moments he tried to bring it out and when he found he could not he just gave a mental shrug and let it go.

The mountains around him looked desolate and bleak in the early morning light. Still shivering, though now from the cold mountain air, he got up and started packing up his blanket. That was when it struck him. Metobaph was not there. And neither were his

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things. Quickly Keal stood up and looked around searching for the old man, but to no avail. He was all alone in the mountains. No trace of neither Metobaph nor anyone else.

Keal sat back down and with a small stick poked a little to the last embers left from last night's fire wondering whether he was losing his mind or if someone was playing a really cruel trick on him.

"Bastard gods," he said.

Using a few sticks they had not burned the night before he built up the fire to try and get a little heat back into his body. From his pack he took a little food and ate a sparing breakfast as the sun slowly rose from the horizon. Shortly after he had finished eating the sticks burned out and with no fire to heat him he started rubbing his arms and body to get the blood flowing.

He stood up again and spat on the last glowing embers. A hissing noise could be heard as his spit evaporated and a small cloud of steam rose from the fire place. And spread and spread covering the small camp site in swirling, grey mist. It quickly curled out from the embers in wave like ripples along the ground, rising as well as expanding.

Before Keal could recoil from the cloud it had engulfed him and he found himself completely losing sight of the mountains. He crouched down and started fumbling around for his bag only to find that it, along with the rocky ground, was no longer there. Where his hands should have felt small rocks across the mountain side he felt a strange, smooth substance. At one point in one of the cities Keal had touched blank polished marble. What he ran his fingers over now was even smoother.

As he realised that he was once more caught up in one of a series of strange events, or perhaps yet another dream, he stopped searching for his bag and slowly rose to his feet. He tried to make out any kind of shape in the mist, but he could hardly see his own hands before him when he raised them to his face.

Minutes passed and Keal felt how the mist began to somehow become more solid and press against him. He could still move about and he kept moving to be able to keep track of whether this changed. With the thickness of the mist came also warmth as if he was slowly being wrapped up in a large, thick blanket. The claminess of the cold mountain air disappeared completely and apart from the mist slightly hindering his movements he began to feel quite comfortable.

From somewhere behind him he heard footsteps so he turned towards them. This made the footsteps move around so they were once more behind him just as if someone was sneaking up on him. Keal experimented with turning slowly or fast and everytime he did the footsteps simply swung around to match his speed and stay behind him. And they kept coming closer and closer. At first Keal had thought they were only a few meters away, but the more time passed the more he began to get the impression that they came from very far away and that something, perhaps the mist, were playing tricks with the sounds.

As suddenly as they had appeared they stopped leaving Keal with the eerie feeling of being both alone and watched. He glanced around a few more times without being able to see anything through the mist so eventually he decided to do the only thing he felt he could, to speak.

"Who's there?" he said.

The second he'd said it he cursed silently at how stupid and feeble it had sounded. He cleared his throat and tried again, this time in a somewhat stronger voice.

"Show yourself or get the hell away from me!"

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This caused a quiet, but seemingly good natured, little laugh to drift through the mist.

“Now that,” a voice said, “is more like it.”

Keal felt he could recognise the voice, but again the mist played tricks with the sounds so he could not be entirely sure.

In the mist a vague shadow now became visible though it always stayed just at the edge of Keal’s vision. He strained his ears trying to hear something, anything, and caught the soft whisper of cloth. Crouching slightly he quietly shifted his head this way and that keeping his eyes open for more shadows and his ears open for more sounds. When he felt sure there was only one presence he called out again.

“Who are you?” Keal said.

It took a few moments before the voice replied and when it did it came from right next to Keal causing him to jump quickly and turn toward it. Within arm’s reach he could barely make out a cloaked figure and images of scaly lizard men returned to his mind. The voice he heard was nothing like the lisping, slithering serpentine voices that rang out in the back of his head.

“Just an old man out to stretch his legs.”

The voice was now clearly recognisable to Keal and he relaxed a bit as he realised it was Metobaph. He did not feel completely at ease since he could not yet clearly see his traveling companion. Even if it did turn out to be Metobaph Keal was certain he would still not feel at ease. The thought struck him that it was still a dream and that he would wake up any time soon.

He took a step closer to the shadow and felt the mist thinning a little around Metobaph’s form.

“So,” Keal said, “is this real or not?”

Metobaph chuckled to himself but before he could begin his answer Keal cut him off.

“And don’t give me any of your usual ramblings about what’s real and what’s not and that, to some, everything is an illusion.”

“Ah, I see you did pay attention after all,” Metobaph said. “I wonder if you paid attention to everything you were taught. Not just by me but by the others.”

“Other? The monks?”

“Yes, the . . . monks. Though I think the most important of their lessons were the ones that were neither voiced nor mentioned.”

Keal shot him a sidelong glance. It definitely sounded like the Metobaph he had come to know through the weeks (note: months?) of traveling through the great forests towards the monastery in the mountains. A small part of Keal felt the calming presence of recognition. He was still wary of Metobaph and the mist, but at least now he knew who was playing with him.

Just as he was about to ask something of Metobaph he froze. Why, he thought, did I wonder about someone playing with me as if I was a piece in a game?

He frowned and looked at Metobaph again with more scrutiny, trying to dig out something lurking at the back of his mind. It was beginning to annoy him endlessly that there were so many things he seemed almost able to remember. He gave up with a scratch of his neck.

“What is going on, Meto? Did I really wake up alone in the mountains? And what of the monastery? I have half memories of being there? Of something being very wrong?”

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His voice had taken on a strained note. Metobaph sighed and sat down cross legged gesturing for Keal to do the same. As they sat down the mist cleared even more around them and Keal saw that the floor was indeed made of marble. It was laid out in a pattern of black and white triangles so finely crafted that no cracks were visible between each colour.

“I know,” Metobaph said, “that you have a lot of questions, Keal. Some I can answer, some I cannot. And some I will not because the most important part of the answer to those questions lies within discovering it for yourself.”

Keal shrugged his shoulders trying to figure out where to begin.

“The last couple of weeks,” he said. “Did we really travel from the forests up to the mountains?”

“That we did,” Metobaph answered. “And we did indeed also arrive at the mountains.”

“I remember meeting the monks, but you had disappeared. The monks seemed... I don't know. Either shocked or frightened when I mentioned you. Why?”

Another chuckle escaped from Metobaph.

“Ah, I cannot answer for the monks. Why were they shocked or frightened? That I do not know. Perhaps it has something to do with them thinking of me as the personification of their god?”

This was, despite being phrased as a question, the most direct and blunt thing Keal had ever heard the old man say. He picked a little at a loose thread in his sleeve while turning it over in his head. Even though it had been so directly formulated it still did not make an ounce of sense. He told Metobaph so.

“Ah,” Metobaph said, “‘an ounce of sense’?”

Keal nodded.

“How much sense is required before you find it enough? An ounce? Two? Perhaps a whole pound?”

Keal stopped nodding and simply looked at Metobaph not feeling up to another discourse on the way the universe was constructed and how certain phrases might in some bizarre and twisted way actually make sense. There it was again. Sense. Senses. Sensation. Keal almost did not notice that Metobaph continued talking.

“Never mind that for now,” Metobaph said. “Yes, when I was at the monastery all those years ago I did become the center, I guess you could say, of it. Lots of people both from the monastery and scholars from abroad would travel there to ask me questions and they paid more and more notice to each little detail in how I answered them.”

He sighed and got a distant look in his eyes.

“I remember one time when I made the mistake of writing an answer to a letter that had been carried from far away. One tiny, little misspelling and the recipient of the answer got it all wrong. When I heard of it next many years had passed and apparently he had founded an entire new school of thought based on me not paying attention to what I wrote.”

As Metobaph spoke the mist began to swirl slightly in response to what he talked about. He continued for quite some time depicting how the monks had become split in two factions: one that believed he was a prophet, one that believed he was a god. Or at least an avatar. What he had believed, namely that he was merely a man who had been given too much time to think, had obviously meant nothing for they had simply ignored anything he said if

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it was not cryptic and strange and twisted. If he simply said “leave me alone” they would go to great lengths to pretend he had said nothing.

The mist became curly and took on a red tint as he continued, his voice beginning to tremble slightly. This caught Keal’s attention because he had never known Metobaph to lose control and now it almost sounded like he was angry.

“One day,” Metobaph said, “it became too much. I got fed up with them blindly following the stupidest things I said while ignoring plain and simple statements. So in a fit of rage, childish though it was, I decided to put it to the test and see just how far I could push them.”

He trailed off and the mist swirled slightly slower and changed colour from red to a deep blue. A single tear formed in Metobaph’s eye and ran down his cheek.

“What happened?” Keal said.

Keal had lost all thought of his own worries as he had listened to Metobaph’s story.

“Something that never should have happened.”

The mist flickered crimson red for the briefest of moments before settling back to an even deeper blue, almost black.

“Yes, I wanted to show them how foolishly they did cling to my words and took the too literally. So one day I played a little trick on them. We had a small garden where I often sat and meditated. While most of the others were asleep early in the morning I went out there with a small wood figure I had carved during the night. I also brought a solid piece of wood which I placed in front of me on the ground. In my sleeve I hid the figurine.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation Keal could not help smiling slightly as he guessed what was coming next.

“Before long,” Metobaph said, “one of the monks spotted me in the garden with the piece of wood before me. He quickly spread the word and soon there was a whole crowd sitting cross legged around me waiting for me to open my eyes.”

“How did you see them if your eyes were closed?”

“Oh, they were not entirely closed. Suffice it to say that in addition to actual meditation I also became very good at simply sitting still with just a tiny crack between my eye lids. Quite useful when you wait for annoying monks to get bored and go away.

“But on with the story. When the monks began to be restless I figured it would be time to start the show so I began mumbling a chant. Nothing that contained words, merely whatever noises I could come up with. This had worked quite nicely in the past since if no one can understand what you’re saying then at least they can’t misinterpret it. Or so I thought.”

While he spoke Metobaph had begun moving his hands back and forth in front of him, slightly above the floor.

“I moved my hands over the piece of woods like this and made sure everyone’s attention was on my hands. Then I quickly opened my eyes and threw my heads back hoping they would follow my gaze. I’m guessing they did because none of them ever said anything about me switching the piece of wood for the figurine in my sleeve.”

He sighed and sat with his hands spread in front of him for a while.

“What kind of figurine was it?” Keal said.

Metobaph looked at him and then closed his eyes hard.

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“I had carved a dragon thinking it would be suitably dramatic and too far fetched for any of them to believe it. Dragons were, at the time, considered a bad thing in our order. A thing of the past, something only savages would even dare mention.”

“So you hoped they would think you a savage? Cast you out?”

“Something like that, yes. Truth be told I had not thought too far out in the future. I just wanted some piece and quiet even if it meant having to leave the monastery and go out in the normal world.”

Keal nodded as he thought back to his time with Fredic and how much he had longed for any kind of change.

“The monks were, at first, quite appaled at the sight of the dragon figurine which was good. I could see doubt in some of their eyes and hope began to spread inside me that maybe, just maybe, they would finally begin to think a little for themselves. But such was not my luck. One of the younger monks, Jamor to be precise, claimed to have heard me mention the old language word for dragons and claimed it was a sign. A sign that the base wood, a symbol of the physical world, should transcend and reveal its inner nature.”

“What? What do you mean transcend?”

“Become something more than what is,” Metobaph said, “a bit like when you finish some daunting task and somehow feel changed after. Unfortunately Jamor and several of the monks took it, as always, far too serious and far too literal.”

“At first they didn’t really do much. Some discussed what had happened, but mostly things just went by as normal and before long I began to feel so disheartened that I considered just leaving in the dead of night.”

“That,” Keal said, “does not sound like a bad idea.”

“Looking back, no. But when you’re in the middle of it, well, it is far too easy to stay in a bad situation than to do something about it. That is, by the by, a good thing to remember, young Keal.”

Keal made a face. Apparently Metobaph never let go of a chance to slip in a lesson or two.

“Then one day something really horrible happened. I’m not sure how, but Jamor got his hands on an ancient tome. Perhaps it had been hiding away in a dark corner of our library, perhaps someone brought it home from a trip. Old descriptions of how dragons once really did exist and soared in the sky. Long story short, he began to study it in secret until he one day deciphered an ancient ritual to summon dragons.”

He raised one hand to cut off Keal’s protests.

“No, I did not know about this and neither, I think, did the senior monks at the time. Not until Jamor and some of his friends actually performed the ritual. One day they simply gathered in the courtyard and went through a series of strange motions and chants. Some considered stopping them, but back then we were allowed some leeway when it came to ways of meditating and while we were puzzled by the display it seemed more like a dance than a sinister ritual so no one thought to stop it.

“All day long they danced until they finally gathered in a circle in the middle of the courtyard. None of us had been prepared for what happened next: absolutely nothing.”

“Nothing?”

Surprise and a certain degree of disappointment were clearly visible on Keal’s face.

“Yes, nothing.”

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“So no dragons came?”

“None.”

“And Jamor and the others? Was Arek among them?”

“They were, perhaps, the most disappointed of all. And yes, Arek and Jamor were as close then as they have ever been.”

“But... then what? Did they get angry with you because they thought you had mentioned dragons and none came?”

“Oh, no. Not even that could make them angry or even displeased. The whole thing was simply forgotten. The monks who had danced walked around with very embarrassed looks for a while and then things settled down again.”

“And what about you?”

“Patience, Keal, patience. But yes, what about me?”

The mist cleared to a pure white colour of tranquility.

“I left the monastery in the dead of night. Not so much because of the dance. It just became too much, all of it, and I felt like taking a nice, long walk. So I did. And kept walking for a few years. Or decades. Oh, get that silly look off your face! I took breaks for eating and sleeping, of course.

“For years I drifted back and forth between the towns in the forest and along the ocean. I did not have a goal or a purpose, but simply enjoyed the feeling of going one step at a time without having the monks around. Those years, I think, taught me the most important things I have ever learned. Far more important than what I learned, or tried to teach, at the monastery. Simple things like how to keep warm at night. Or how to tell stories to children.”

With a smile on his face Metobaph sat gazing at the mist which by now had turned a warm, pulsing orange. Keal wondered if he should interrupt the old man’s moment but decided against it. Though he had indeed seen Metobaph being tranquil many times he had never, he realised, seen him at peace.

With the tips of his fingers he traced the triangles on the floor. The tiles had been so neatly made that he could not feel where one ended and the next began.

“They’re not real,” Metobaph said, “this place only exists in your mind. Like so much else.”

“Like the dragons?”

“Oh, no!”

Metobaph returned from wherever he had drifted off to and the mist turned crimson again.

“Oh, the dragons were far too real. The book Jamor had found was accurate. Teaching from a long forgotten era before the Time of Trees when the forests started to grow and invade the human settlements.”

“Real dragons?”

Keal looked very sceptical. To him dragons were mythological creatures. Though, now that he thought about it, he figured that with everything else that had happened there was not much reason why dragons could not also be real.

“As I walked in the forests,” Metobaph said, “I almost completely forgot all about the monastery. Until a time when I had drifted back closer to the mountains. A farmer told

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me a rumour about some local priests who had begun to demand tribute from the nearby villages. The villagers had at first refused to pay the tribute, but then one of their villages had been completely sacked and burned to ashes in the middle of the night.

“Those few who survived had all gone mad. They muttered and raved about huge winged creatures dropping out of the sky spewing fire and eating people.”

“So Jamor and the other monks had succeeded in summoning dragons?”

“Worse. They had misinterpreted the text. It was not about summoning dragons, but about becoming dragons. The monks who had been in the dance had, I later discovered, awakened some ancient powers that had been long forgotten. All manner of bad things started happening after that. Far worse things than letting loose a few dragons.”

“Worse than dragons? What? Next you’ll tell me that the gods really are real and that they were also created by Jamor and the book?”

“It’s not far from the truth. Though they were not so much created as woken up. As far as I can figure out it is all connected. After I left the monastery the monks kept working on the Dragon Dance as it became known. In time they got everyone at the monastery persuaded to participate and finally they must have made some progress. They awakened the dragon and, along with them, the dragons’ masters: the old gods.”

Slowly Metobaph rose to his feet beckoning Keal to do the same. Around them the mist began to become more solid again and the light seemed to fade away from it.

“Ah, not much time left, it seems. I shall make this quick. All the gods exist, in one form or another. They do so because the people of all the worlds have created them unconsciously throughout time. The trick to know is that this makes us the gods’ masters rather than the other way around. Sadly, though, the majority of people do not realise this, some even refuse to believe it when they are told about it. If you set your mind to it, however, you will be able to lessen the gods’ power over you.”

“What do you mean?” Keal said. “You just say ‘you are not my god’ and they can’t do anything?”

This did not make a lot of sense to Keal and while Metobaph had given him a lot of useful knowledge when they traveled together this was beginning to be far too much for him to really believe.

“To some extent, yes. The problem is that since the gods draw their power from people’s beliefs you will be pitting your belief, or perhaps lack thereof, against more or less the rest of the world. This makes it an arduous task, but never the less a possible one. You may not be able to make the gods disappear, but you can, shall we say, elude their attention. This is a useful trick to learn.”

A thought suddenly struck Keal. Since the gods had been around for as long as people could remember they could not have been awakened recently. At least not within the life span of one man, even one as old as Metobaph.

“And how come you know all this? When exactly were the gods awakened? And how can you possibly have been alive that long?”

A small smile crept onto Metobaph’s face. By now the mist was again making it nearly impossible for Keal to see anything so he took a step toward Metobaph.

“Wait,” Keal said, “how old are you? Who are you?”

“All in good time, Keal. We shall meet again.”

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Just before Metobaph faded away completely in the mist he winked at Keal. Cursing heavily Keal reached out to where Metobaph had been only to find that the mist was now constricting his body so he could hardly move. He fought against it trying to move in any direction, afraid that if he stopped he would be crushed by the unearthly pressure of the swirling mist.

Despite all his efforts the mist eventually pinned him completely and he felt like his entire body was being crushed. He was no longer able to see if the light in the mist was fading or if it was him that was losing consciousness. As it became completely dark he figured it must be the mist that went black since he could still think. The sensation of pressure slowly disappeared, though at the same time so did the feeling of his body. His arms, legs, head. He could no longer feel them.

The words he had heard from Metobaph echoed in his mind and he felt like he was drifting through a vast black void. There was nothing around him. He, himself, was nothing. And yet he was all there was as the entire universe became wrapped up inside him.

A sharp pain ripped Keal back into the real world. As he opened his eyes bright spots danced in front of him and he had trouble making out the rocky ground even though it was right in front of his eyes. The pain came from his forehead and as it gradually went from a sharp, stabbing pain to a dull, throbbing ache he noticed small drops of blood hitting the ground. He was lying fully stretched out across the rocks. With a grunt he pulled his legs up under him and sat up. That made his head hurt, but he fought against the pain and began probing his head with his fingers.

Across his forehead was a long gash, probably made by one of the sharp edged rocks he could see before him. He took a few deep breaths and his vision began to clear up. With slow movements he looked around and saw that he was back at his camp site in the mountains. Next to him were his things and he reached out and ripped a scrap of cloth from one of his spare shirts. This he pressed against his head to stop the bleeding.

After a while he started to feel a bit better and he used his finger tips to find out how bad the wound was. Fortunately it turned out to be shallow. The massive amount of blood had simply been because it was high up on his forehead, one end of it disappearing up into his hair.

While still pressing the cloth against his head he stood up and took a look around. Everything was as it had been before the mist had settled. There were still embers in the fire pit, his blanket was wrapped up neatly next to his sack and there were no signs of anyone being there or having been there.

He closed his eyes firmly and pinched the bridge of his nose. There were still memories of the mist and the talk with Metobaph lingering in his mind. They felt odd, he mused, as if they could have been both real and a dream. He could remember some of it quite clearly, the smoothness of the floor, the pressure from the mist. Other things were more vague. Metobaph had spoken of the gods. There was something important that Keal could not bring to mind. Something about the gods' power and how they could influence people. It would not come back to him so he shook his head trying to clear the dreamy memories from it. And he instantly regretted it as the pain flared up again forcing him to sit down to avoid passing out.

It took a few minutes before he felt ready to try and get up again. Apparently the hit had hurt his head a bit more than he had first thought. Looking around he pondered where he should head next. From what he could remember he was quite certain he did not want to be anywhere near the monastery, if it was indeed still there. And had ever been real.

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But on the other hand he was not too keen on returning back down to the forests. He had begun to like the quietness of the mountains, or more specifically, of not being around too many people.

He carefully packed his things together and double checked that everything was as they should be. Nothing was missing. Apart, of course, from Metobaph and all his things. With the cloth he checked that the bleeding had stopped completely and he began to get back on his feet. At first he was a little wobbly, but once he got his sack on his shoulders things began to feel better.

Out of reflex he almost spat on the embers again as he began to cover the fire pit. At the last moment, though, he thought against it not wanting to risk more strange things happening. Instead he simply scattered the embers to make them burn out faster and covered the pit with rocks so the embers would not be blown away by the wind.

He left the camp site and scrambled up on a large boulder to get his bearings. To the North the mountains rose up higher with their snow topped peaks, valleys and plateaus. To the South he could see the large, green forest stretching out towards the glittering ocean far, far away. Here and there plumes of black smoke rose from the trees marking the towns and settlements. In one place several large plumes were clustered almost at the edge of the ocean. Keal had never been there but he guessed that it must be Porbuyat, the largest and busiest town.

So far he had never visited any large towns and the size of Porbuyat, as far as he could make out from the smoke rising from it, was daunting to say the least. With a sigh and a last longing look towards the quiet mountains he jumped down from the boulder and headed back towards the forest.

### Unheard Farewells

Unseen by Keal two shapes kept an eye on him as he turned back from the mountains. One was Metobaph in his usual robe, the other was Jinx, this time in the form of an elderly man with a long grey beard wearing a tattered robe.

“Oh, come now,” Metobaph said. “That looks nothing like me. I’m not that old.”

“Not on the outside, old friend. But on the inside. Remember that you’re different from the rest of us. You started out as a mortal even if it was several hundred years ago.”

Jinx’s brief spell of coherency was broken by the grey beard disappearing in favour of a young man’s clean, shaved face. The god’s clothes swirled into a posh outfit with silk and satin and a lush mane of golden hair grew out to fall down around shoulders and face.

“Your mortal side still lingers on inside you.”

“Whereas your mortal side disappeared so long ago that you no longer have any insight into what goes on in the mortal realms. Or, indeed, what goes on inside the mortals themselves!”

Very briefly Metobaph’s eyes flickered with anger which made Jinx recoil and change shape again, this time to a scared looking child in rags.

“So what? We don’t need full insight into the mortals to know what’s best for them. It’s not like they treat themselves any better!”

Metobaph gave a cynical laugh.

“Ha! So the all powerful gods treat the mortals like the mortals treat themselves. Very... godly of you!”

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“No! I mean,” Jinx said, “that’s not what I meant. We take care of them. Nudge them along when they need help.”

“Right. That’s why everything is such a mess? Did you ever consider the fact that this world actually went on with its business quite well while you and the other were asleep? The problems did not really start until you and your dragons were re-awakened.”

“Almost did not start, almost. Remember that the mortals nearly destroyed themselves.”

“That is a good, though somewhat belaboured, point. And sometimes I wonder if the Big Boom was really such a huge catastrophe as it is made out to be. In many ways it was more an act of balancing on the world’s part. Getting the mortals back in line, so to speak.”

For the briefest of moments Jinx took on the shape of a scaled down oak tree before settling into the form of a young lady.

“Not just the world’s part, old man,” Jinx said, “old and wise as you are some things are still hidden from you.”

Metobaph narrowed his eyes and studied the young, innocent looking face in front of him.

“That they are. Though I have a feeling you just handed me another piece of the puzzle.”

“Ah, dear. No, no. No pieces of the puzzle. Just my mind wandering.”

Jinx flickered back and forth between several shapes before simply vanishing into thin air.

Alone on the mountainside Metobaph kept looking at the by now distant Keal who was slowly making his way over and around rocks and boulders. He had grown a lot and in many ways since they had first met.

“Go in peace while you can, Keal, I have a feeling you will far too soon become the center of the gods’ attention again.” (Re-write at some point - give Metobaph a far more sinister parting line as we will not be seeing him again any time soon)

## New Friends

The last couple of days before Keal reached the edge of the foot hills were hard as he ran out of food and the only edible things he could find were disgustingly tasting, bitter roots and a few early berries. When he finally reached the low lands he was almost too fatigued to stay on his feet, but he managed to set a few traps before he collapsed.

When he woke up a few hours later he had a splitting head ache but was at least rewarded with a small rabbit in one of the snares he had set. It squirmed and twisted when he grabbed it and snapped its neck. The thought of getting some real food again made his stomach go into a knot and he had to fight the pain for a while before he could get up to find fire wood.

While he gathered wood he came across some fruit and more berries and before long he was resting with a full stomach. In the setting sun the thoughts and memories of the strange events in the mountains began to more and more feel like a distant dream. He did not bother to properly wash himself, though he had found a stream nearby, and simply fell asleep where he lay. At some point in the dead of night he woke up freezing and fumbled around to get out his blanket and put some more wood on the fire.

The next morning he was still hungry so he quickly packed up his things and set out to find more food. He started by heading down to the stream to wash his hands and face and drink a little water. Feeling somewhat refreshed by this he stood for a while wondering which

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direction to go. He knew Porbuyat was somewhere to the West and it was his impression that the area around it was fairly populated. As he thought about it he found that he still did not really feel a great desire to be someplace with many people around him. So as the sun slowly rose in front of him he headed East hoping to soon reach one of the old roads through the forest.

It took him a few days to find a road and the one he did come across turned out to be a narrow and fairly unused road heading towards the Southeast. This suited him nicely as it should bring him both away from Porbuyat and closer to the ocean. The forest he went through was rich with food so he had no problems regaining a lot of his strength while still making good progress. Especially after he started walking on the road. It might be a bit overgrown in places but the heavy tarmac still made a clean cut through the trees.

The first week he saw no signs of settlements or other travelers. This puzzled him a little as he was certain he had seen a plume of smoke not that far in this direction when he had been up in the mountains. On the other hand, distances and mountains had a way of not going well together (definitely re-write THIS) so the smoke he had seen might be far away. Gradually, though, he began to see signs that this part of the road was at least used a little from time to time.

As such he did not mind being alone, but it still struck him as odd that the road had not had any branches. That meant that whoever was using the part he had reached now would be going out into somewhere in the forest, leave the road and head out among the trees and then go back the way they came.

He could not figure out what to make of this. It could mean that there were foresters living further ahead or it could mean that something slightly more sinister was going on. The memory of the blood bath in the overturned cart he had seen in the past returned and he shivered as he pushed the images from his mind. To stay on the safe side he decided to stick close to the edge of the road and camp a little distance away. That, he thought, would hopefully give him at least the chance to run away.

The first night after this he hardly slept. Despite his being used to the night sounds of the forest he still jumped at every little noise. Rodents rumaging around in the forest bed, birds being startled, leaves or branches rustling in the wind. As dawn approached he figured he might as well get up and get an early start of the day. And then he abruptly fell asleep.

When he woke up a few hours later he felt somewhat rested and ate the left overs from the night before. He had been lucky to catch a small wild pig a few days ago and now he enjoyed sucking the last of the juicy meat from the bones.

After he had finished he quickly buried the bones and covered the tracks of the camp as best he could. Then he slipped quietly through the trees for almost a mile at a very slow and calm pace while keeping the road within sight. When he felt certain no one was following or flanking him he moved back out on the road and began walking a bit faster.

Over the past two weeks since he had had the strange dream talk with Metobaph he had done a lot of thinking. One thing he had thought about was how he kept ending up in situations where he had to do a lot of thinking. Perhaps, he figured, it was after all time to find somewhere with other people. If for no other reasons than to not be all alone with his thoughts. Or worse, be all alone with strange dreams of gods and dragons.

As the day passed he saw more and more signs of other people. Wheel tracks. A few dropped or discarded items, none of them worth picking up but at least sign that someone had been there not too long ago. It gave him real idea of who they were or what they had been doing. But since one of things he had found had been a bit of bread that had not yet

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been eaten by the animals in the forest it could not have been there for more than at most a day or two.

Sometime in the late afternoon he suddenly heard some noise in the forest that most definitely did not come from an animal. It sounded like some kind of rucuss or perhaps a fight of some kind. Warily he slid into the forest circling around the origin of the noise. As he approached he relaxed a bit. What had sounded like fighting had been replaced with the slow, steady tell tale sounds of someone chopping wood.

A bit further ahead he could begin to see a small clearing and someone moving around in it. Taking great care not to make any sounds, despite the noise from up ahead drowning out the noise of any small twigs he could have snapped, he slowly crept closer. When he was at the edge of the clearing he could get a good look at what happened. At first he did not believe what he saw, then he did a double check and it was indeed merely three men working on chopping down a tree. Two of them were busy chopping with their axes, the other was working on clearing a tree they had already felled.

Before making his presence known Keal wanted to get a good look at the men and, hopefully get a little idea about what they were like. So he looked around and found a fallen tree trunk he could hide comfortably behind. He settled in and started watching the men work.

Two of them looked so alike that Keal guessed they were probably brothers. Both of them had slightly curled, black hair that reached their shoulders and were held back from their face by leather strips around their foreheads. Their clothes were made from undyed leather and they looked, to Keal, to be uncomfortably warm at this time of year. For a while he wondered why they would wear leather. If they were so poor they only had one set of work clothes leather seemed like an expensive choice so Keal figured there might be some other explanation. As he watched them work he began to notice small cuts and bruises on their bare arms. Then he took a closer look at what precisely they were doing and then he nearly cursed at himself for taking so long in figuring out the reason for wearing leather. Whenever an axe hit the tree splinters and pieces of bark flew off in all direction often hitting the men. (Remove the bit about the leather clothing - it doesn't make sense since any splinters that are dangerous enough to warrant leather protection would easily take out their eyes so they should also be wearing goggles or something)

The third man had blond hair that had been cut so short that the light sometimes made him look bald. Standing somewhat shorter than the two brothers only made him look even stockier as he was as heavily muscled as them. Down the right side of his face ran a jagged scar that only narrowly missed his eye. Where it reached his beard there was a line in the beard where no hair grew. This gave him a somewhat gruesome appearance, especially when he strained from the work on hacking branches off with a small axe.

At first it seemed to Keal that the men were working slowly. Then he realised that they kept working almost without breaks or talking. All throughout the afternoon they had worked with slow, strong movements and their axes steadily ate their way further and further into the large tree. As evening approached the men must have worked for several hours without more than a few moments here and there to clear sweat out of their eyes or take a few deep breaths.

Keal's muscles were beginning to cramp up despite his best efforts to move around a little. The men made enough noise that he was not concerned with being heard by them. But the trunk he was crouching behind was not large enough for him to properly stretch his legs at any point and the hours had taken their toll. Fortunately the two brothers stopped their chopping and moved over to the other man who also stopped working. They spoke

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for a while in deep, rumbling voices and were pointing at the half felled tree and at various points in the clearing. Eventually they seemed to reach some kind of agreement and the third man pulled out a long rope that had been hidden from Keal's view.

The men quickly threw the rope over the stumps of some of the lower branches and around the tree trunk. Then the two brothers took either end and walked out to the edges of the clearing. Now Keal noticed that all the branches up to a few meters along the trunk had been cut off, apparently to allow the men to pull down the tree without getting themselves or the rope tangled in the branches. The third man took up one of the axes and started chopping furiously at the tree.

Before Keal saw the tree move he heard a sickeningly creaking sound from the tree. The tree started, ever so slowly, to bend and on the opposite side from the man with the axe pieces of bark began to fly off. The man threw himself quickly to the side and ran over to help pulling at the rope.

Keal watched in silent fascination as the tree's size became truly visible (find a better word than "visible") as it went from being a horizontal giant rising into the sky to being a very broad, heavy tree that came crashing down on him. While he had watched it had not occurred to him to consider where the tree would fall, but now it was suddenly all too obvious that he was right in its path.

Looking up at the canopy and at the trees around him he realised that he would not be able to escape getting crushed by running away or to the sides. For a split second he froze in horror as his only choice became evident to him. Then he sprang into action and took a few steps forward into the clearing before throwing himself forward as far as he could twisting in the air to roll when he landed.

One of the men called out in surprise but his words were drowned out by the crashing noise of the tree falling through the forest. The tree was far too large for the men to do anything but watch as Keal raced from the forest and dodged to the side of where the tree would fall.

The tree and Keal hit the ground at the same time and almost at the same spot. As he rolled along the ground Keal felt more than saw the dirt and branches that were thrown up into the air by the force of the impact. Somewhere at the back of his mind he registered a numbness in his left leg, but he kept moving hoping to get clear of the trunk in case it shifted or rolled as it settled on the ground.

He almost managed to get to his feet. In fact, he managed to get to one foot. Then he tried moving his left leg only to find that it did not respond and he ungraciously fell sideways. At least, he thought, I am falling away from the tree.

On his side in the dirt he suddenly felt the forest go quiet. He experimentally lifted his head a little and looked around to find that the tree was lying still less than a meter from his feet.

"Shit! Are you okay?"

One of the men came jumping over the trunk and landed next to Keal with an expression of shock and concern on his face.

Keal pushed himself into a sitting position and lifted a hand to signal he was okay. The fall had winded him a little and the numbness in his leg was turning into a very nasty pain. He took a few deep breaths before answering.

"I'm good. I'm good."

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“Where the heck did you come from?”

All three men were now standing around Keal looking down on him. They looked more surprised than angry though their voices were deep and ruff sounding.

“I was out on the road when I heard some noises from in here. Auch!”

Keal had accepted the outstretched arm of one the brothers and were trying to get up when he realised that something must be really wrong with his leg. He let go of the arm and fell back down again. Looking down at the leg he was glad to see that there was no sign of blood and it was not twisted at an odd angle. It still hurt like hell, though.

With his fingers he prodded it gently trying to find out what had happened.

“Looks like your thigh took a nasty hit, boy,” one of the brothers said. “Fortunately not the trunk, though. Just one of the lower branches just before you rolled out of the way.”

His left thigh did indeed feel like it was on fire, but as he ran his hands along it he could feel that the bone still seemed intact and the pain was mainly focused on a spot in the middle of it. With the help of the men he got back up on his right leg and gingerly put his left down. Despite hurting it held his weight and as he limped around for a few steps he could feel how the pain was more on the side of the leg than in the middle.

Once it was clear he was fairly unharmed the men began to relax and the two brothers began laughing gently.

“Shit,” one of them said, “that has got to be the most insane thing I’ve seen since Bjorg was actually hit by a tree!”

The excitement of the moment was gradually fading from Keal and he could slowly begin to think clearly again. He blinked a few times and looked around at the men.

“Thanks for the help. And sorry about barging in on you like that. First time I’ve seen a tree chopped down and hadn’t really thought about where it would fall.”

“No worries. Good thing you jumped out of the way. And quick thinking, that, getting clear of the branches as well as the trunk. By the way, I’m Cine and those two are Roald and Lonaer.”

The short haired man pointed to the two brothers who raised their hands in greeting to Keal.

“Good to meet you,” Keal said, “I’m Keal. What are you using the trees for? If you don’t mind me asking?”

A part of his brain kicked in and in a brief moment of paranoia he feared he had gone a step too far. Fredic would have had his hide for a question like that. These men seemed not to mind, quite the opposite in fact. They were almost eager to talk about how they chopped down the trees and cut them up so someone else could pick them up and deliver them to some charcoal burners who lived close by.

The pain in Keal’s leg had subsided to a dull throbbing so when the men began to pack up their gear he offered to help them. After looking at each other for a second they shrugged.

“Sure,” Cine said, “though I should tell you, you know, not to be ungrateful or anything, but we can’t really pay you anything. Just so you know.”

“No worries,” Keal said, “just glad to help. I hate feeling useless.”

This was not entirely true as Keal didn’t feel either way about helping or not. But, he figured, he had decided to try and find someplace to spend a little time and that would probably not happen if he did not try and be a little helpful. Together with Lonaer he

## 1 Young Assassin

began to pack up the rope. It was surprisingly light weight, but its length made it difficult to handle. Even for two people.

“Where are you from?” Keal said.

“A small settlement down the road. About an hour’s walk from here at the coast.”

Keal blinked. He had not realised he had come so close to the ocean. Being in the forest had obviously messed up his sense of distance and direction.

“What about yourself?” Roald said.

It took Keal a few moments to sort out how he wanted to answer that question. At some point he had flipped it around in his head and had chosen to postpone it as he could not figure out what would be a suitable story. It probably would not cause problems to mention that he’d run away from the caravan (tribe?) after Fredic died. That would, he hoped, make sense to most people. The trick was to explain what he had done in the years since. A simple “walking in the forest” just did not seem to cut it. And it suddenly struck him that he really did not know a lot about the different settlements and towns. Sure, he knew a few of the names from when he had passed through or near them. It was if he had to give some kind of account of what went on there or what he had been doing that he came up short.

Eventually he decided to slightly twist the truth a little hoping that he could cast his story in a way that it would sound dull enough that the foresters did not ask too many further questions.

“I grew up in one of the tribes that traveled around East of Porbuyat, but I never really saw much of anything since I lived with an old bastard who pretty much treated me as a slave. After he died a few years ago I struck out on my own and have basically been drifting ever since. Was lucky enough to be taken in by some people up near the mountains over the past winter, though. Other than that it’s just been the road, really.”

At this Cine looked impressed.

“You? Alone?” Cine said. “You must be good at hunting, then. If it wasn’t for the state of your clothes, sorry but they really are shabby, I probably wouldn’t have believed you.”

“Yeah,” Keal said. “Can’t say it’s been easy. Growing up with old Fredic did teach me good reflexes, though.”

He tried winking and giving a little laugh as he said this hoping it would make him seem likeable. It seemed to work as Cine roared with laughter.

“Oh, yes,” he said, “I can imagine that. Dodging thrown plates, eh? Haha, well, Keal, let’s just say that it doesn’t sound too far from my own upbringing.”

With the sun setting they followed the road while the foresters readily shared stories from their own childhoods about how they had learned to climb trees to find eggs in bird nests, who had bullied them and so on. At first Keal did not feel comfortable about their easy going, but gradually he began to relax a little. He had never before encountered anyone who were as good natured as these people. Despite their rough exterior, big muscles, wild beards and hair they seemed to be both positive and optimistic about life and the future.

Back in the tribe Keal had only known the futility of his situation, with the monks everything had felt like it had some kind of lesson and now that he thought about it the monks had never really laughed freely.

Shortly before sunset Lonaer pointed out towards the trees and drew Keal’s attention to some light that were visible in the dimming light.

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“That’s our settlement,” he said. “Not much, but it’s warm, it’s home and it’s our home.”

His voice became a lot fuller and richer as he said “our home.” Keal felt a strange sensation in the pit of his stomach. Not nervousness as such, more a kind of excitement at seeing the place the foresters thought of as their home. Having never known the true meaning of home Keal could not envision the feeling of coming home to a loving family, a friendly pet or just your favourite chair.

The four of them left the road by a small path that was not much more than a set of wheel tracks that led to the settlement. At first glance it did not seem like much. A few low cabins made from wood and roofed with grass growing in a layer of dirt. One of the cabins, the smallest, was made from roughly cut stones that seemed to have been more piled together than actually built. Cine pointed to it.

“You’ll love that one,” he said, “that’s our steam cabin. Nothing better when you come home from a hard day in the forest.”

“Steam cabin?”

Keal’s expression must have been one of complete incomprehension for the others laughed heartily.

“Yes, steam. We have a fire pit at the side, see, and use it to boil water and lead the steam into the cabin. That’s why it’s made from stones rather than wood. The wood would either rot or bend before long.”

It still did not make a lot of sense to Keal. There was no arguing with the obvious longing Cine had for the place so Keal decided to just nod and hope he would figure out precisely what the steam cabin was for.

From one of the other cabins a woman emerged. When she opened the door Keal suddenly saw that the cabins were not actually low, they were simply halfway buried in the ground.

“Roald!”

The woman gave a squeal of delight and ran towards them. She briefly glanced at Keal before throwing herself into Roald’s arms and wrapped both her arms and legs tight around him. In return Roald gave her a bear hug and a huge kiss.

“Hi Kari,” Lonaer said, “if you can untangle yourself from my brother there’s someone we’d like you to meet.”

The woman, Kari, kept her arms and legs around Roald but swung her head around to look at Keal. Her expression was a mixture of plain happiness and mild curiosity. She untangled one hand and reached it out to Keal who shook it, feeling a grip almost as strong as Cine’s had been when he helped Keal up earlier.

“Pleased to meet you, ma’am,” Keal said, “I’m Keal.”

Kari giggled and playfully hit Roald on the top of his head.

“Ma’am?” she said, “Roald, my dear, what on earth have you been telling the poor lad? That I’m some old crone with a squeaky voice?”

She laughed and limberly jumped down from Roald and did a mock curtsy.

“Pleasure to meet you too, Keal,” she said.

Everyone but Keal laughed out loud. Seeing his confused expression Cine put a reassuring hand on his shoulder.

“Lighten up, Keal. Kari here just like to make fun of the fancy town dwellers whenever she can. We had a couple of them here a few weeks ago and they were so horribly overdressed

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and overmannered that it was a wonder they didn't fall over with all their bowing and curtesying to each other."

"Ah," Keal said, "yes, I think I know the kind of people you mean."

Actually he had no idea what they were talking about. He figured he would get a chance to find out later and saw no point in pressing them about it.

"Now, Kari," Roald said, "could you be a darling and go tell Ama that we have an extra guest for supper? We'll go put the tools away and clean up."

"Sure."

Kari danced off and disappeared down into one of the huts. Together with the others Keal began to clean the tools they had used in the forest. The axes needed to be sharpened, the rope was checked for flaws and everything was put away in good order in the small shed they used for storing their tools and various other bits and pieces.

Once they were done Cine clapped his hands together and declared, with a wide grin on his face, that now it was time for the steam hut. He sent Keal off to find as much firewood as he could carry from a large stack at the edge of the clearing while he began to start the fire. Lonear and Roald went off to drag bucket after bucket of water from the well and used it to fill up a large, brownish kettle on the side of the stone hut.

"Ahhh," Lonear said, "this is the best part of the day."

"Maybe for you," Roald said, "for me it comes a little later."

He winked at Keal who, again, felt something was entirely lost on him. Despite having been around the tribe when he was young and assuming that he had actually been living with the monks he obviously did not know a lot about how to relate to other people. This saddened him a bit because the way the foresters were joking and having fun, even in the middle of their hard work in the forest, just made them look so happy. At some times Keal had felt content, even relaxed, but he had never really been happy and joyful as these people were. His thoughts must have shown clearly on his face because Cine came over to him.

"Hey, relax. The fire is going and we'll soon have the hut steamed up and nice and warm. Then we'll just sit in there for a while and unwind. You look like you could need that."

"Yeah," Keal said, "I guess I could. Just not used to being around people. Spent most of the time on my own."

"It shows."

Cine slapped Keal on the back.

"But hey, looks like the brothers are ready. Come on, drop your clothes and join us."

Following the others' example Keal quickly got off his clothes and hung them outside the stone hut. Then, slightly embarrassed at all of them being completely naked he went in to the hut and got a big surprise.

The inside of the hut had been covered in clay that had been burned hard to give a smooth, unbroken surface. At the top of the room there was a small hole for letting the steam out a little so new steam could come in from the large boiler outside but apart from that the door was the only opening. What little light came in through the hole did not help a lot, it mainly just gave the steam an eerie, mist like look. It reminded him slightly of the dream he had recently had and he shivered.

"Quick, close the door or you'll let all the steam out."

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Keal could not make out who had said that since the steam was so thick that it was almost impossible to see where the others were. He quickly closed the door and began fumbling around for a place to sit. As his eyes adjusted to the dim light he began to make out shapes in the room. Along two of the walls were benches and he could see the others had made room for him in the corner. Carefully he shuffled over there and sat down. The bench was made of stone and felt very cool against his skin. This came as quite a shock in contrast with the warm clamminess of the steam filled air and he let out a short gasp. Cine laughed at this.

“Don’t worry,” he said, “you’ll soon get used to the stone and your buttocks will warm it up so you’ll be comfortable in no time.”

“This feel strange,” Keal said, “it’s a little hard to breathe. But yeah, it is nice and comfortable.”

He slumped back against the wall and let himself relax a little. Instead of trying to fight the feel of the steam in the heavy air he allowed himself to take slow, steady breaths. The steam was really beginning to heat the hut now and he felt himself get a little light headed. It felt good. Not disorienting as the time he had stolen some of Fredic’s brandy and drunk it. No, this felt very relaxing and he almost fell asleep and did not at first hear that the others had begun to talk about more serious things. They seemed not to mind that he kept quiet so he simply kept sitting there enjoying the warmth of the hut.

With his eyes half closed he heard the two brothers and Cine talk about how much they thought the tree they had chopped down would be worth and whether it would be enough to get a new axe head. He must have drifted off because suddenly he felt a gentle shake of his shoulder.

“Keal?” Cine said, “Keal? It’s your turn to go fill the boiler.”

Keal’s reflexes almost made him jump up and try to strangle Cine, but he managed to catch himself and simply mumbled an apology for falling asleep. Cine told him that in order to get the steam going they needed to refill the boiler and put new wood on the fire once in a while.

“By the way,” Roald said, “say hello to Dorga. He slipped in while you were sleeping.”

A shadow in the mist waved a hand in greeting. Keal returned it and offered Dorga his hand as he made his way to the door.

“Pleased to meet you,” he said.

He stopped at the door and braced himself. While it was not yet cold outside it was bound to be colder than inside the steam hut. After taking a deep breath he quickly walked opened the door and took three long strides to where the boiler and fire wood was. And nearly knocked over a young woman who was standing looking at their clothes.

Both of them stumbled back a step to regain their balance and started apologising to the other. Then Keal remembered that he was naked and, blushing deeply, covered himself as much as he could. The young woman hid a small smile behind her hand and turned around.

“Ah, erm,” Keal said, “sorry?”

The woman giggled and waved her hand first dismissively in the air and then at the clothes hanging by the hut.

“No, no. It’s okay. I was just, erm, caught up in thoughts. You must be Keal? Kari said the others had brought someone.”

“Yeah, that’s me. Erm, the others asked me to fix the water and wood so, eh...”

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His voice trailed off. He was suddenly even more aware of how little time he had actually spend in other people's company. Fortunately the woman seemed to have recovered quicker than him and helpfully moved to the side so he could go behind her to the boiler. He fumbled around with one hand covering himself and the other trying to take care of both wood and water until he gave up and decided he had to rely on the woman keeping her back turned. While he worked she patiently waited a while before speaking again.

"Oh!" she said, "I forgot to tell you. Ama said to tell you lads that you'd best clear out in a few minutes or you'll have to share the steam with her. And I'm Niara, by the way, Cine's sister."

As she spoke Keal caught her sneaking a peek over her shoulder. She quickly looked away again when he saw her looking. When he was sure she really was not looking he quickly got up and inched his way back to the door.

"I'll be sure to tell the others, erm, Niara. And I'll just get back inside."

Cursing himself under his breath he quickly snatched open the door and went inside and passed on the message from Ama. When they heard they let out groans of mock horror and quickly began filing outside. The only one who seemed genuinely annoyed was Dorga who complained about only just having gotten into the steam hut.

"Well," said Lonaer, "you could stay. I'm sure Ama wouldn't mind a little company."

This just made Dorga grumble louder as he stomped outside and began to pull on his clothes.

Keal was relieved to see that there was no sign of Niara, or anyone else for that matter. His clothes were hanging on the peg where he had left them and he started to put them back on. Something made him freeze and tighten. He was not immediately sure what it was so he slowly began to turn around ready for anything.

"Your back. . ." Roald said.

As he turned around Keal saw that the four men were all looking at him with their mouths open. Dorga, a small closely built man with bushy black hair, actually had his hand out, one finger pointing toward Keal. The expressions on their faces were unreadable to Keal. He could not figure out if they were scared, shocked, surprised, angry or just completely blank.

Then he suddenly remembered Fredíc's lashings and the scars they must have left. With an embarrassed look he pulled his shirt over his head.

"Yeah, well," he said, "I told you I grew up in a bad place. That old bastard used to beat and lash me more than he spoke to me."

"That ain't no lashing, boy," Dorga said, "not scars like them."

This caught Keal by surprise. He knew, now that he thought about it, that his back must have been a horrible sight, but he could not figure out what Dorga was talking about. He said as much.

"What do you mean?"

"There's a huge scar, four actually, running almost parallel from your shoulder to your waist. No lash ever did anything like that. I ought to know."

Dorga was still bare breasted and turned around to show his own mesh of scars. A lot of short, straight scars criss crossed his back. One feature they all shared was that none of

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them were parallel. Or even close to parallel. And none of them looked like what the others had seen on Keal's back.

Reluctantly Keal took his shirt off and twisted his head around as far as he could. He could not see the scars, though, so he asked the others to point them out. Lonaer placed four fingers at the start of the scars and slowly traced them down Keal's back.

"They're too jagged to be lashes. It looks more like... a claw or something. But it's far too large for any kind of creature I have ever seen. Not even a large bear could have a span this wide."

The touch made Keal shiver. He twisted around to his left side and tried to look at his lower back. Among the other scars he could just make out the four Lonaer had traced. It was the first time he really noticed them which was hardly surprising since he had to twist really far to see them.

"That's odd," he said, "I've never noticed those before."

"You mean you can't remember them?"

Lonaer was obviously amazed at this. It made sense, Keal thought, since anything leaving scars like that must indeed have been a memorable event.

"No, I've no idea where they came from."

While this was not entirely true it was not entirely false either. He suspected that the scars might have something to do with the monastery, Metobaph and everything else. But he did not know for sure. He quickly pulled his shirt on again and embarrassedly avoided the others' eyes while he fumbled with the rest of his clothes.

Cine put a strong hand on his shoulder.

"Don't worry, Keal," he said, "if you don't remember, you don't remember. Come, it looks like the women are ready for their steam bath. Let's go inside and get ready for dinner."

From one the huts Kari and two other women appeared. Kari once more bounced straight into Roald's arms and they shared a warm embrace for a few moments before she jumped down and turned to Keal.

"This is Keal," she said, "and Keal, these are Niara and Ama. Now get yourselves inside the hut. We wouldn't want anyone stumbling over naked people, now would we?"

Keal's face turned crimson and when his eyes briefly flickered to Niara he saw that so did she. He did not know if Niara had told Kari about what had happened earlier or if Kari had seen it from the hut, but it was quite obvious that she knew. It was also quite obvious that she only thought it was amusing rather than embarrassing or wrong.

The men went back to the hut while the women began to prepare for their steam bath. Once inside the hut Keal stopped for a moment feeling very impressed. Because of all the steam he had not been able to clearly see how large the hut was on the inside and, besides, the steam hut already looked, from the outside, to be a bit smaller than the other huts. The room he was in now seemed to defy the boundaries of the real world. Outside the hut barely reached Keal's shoulders but now that he had taken a few steps down he was in a room with more than enough head space for him to stretch his arms.

The walls of the room were slanted slightly outwards giving the impression that the room was far larger than it really was. Along the walls were padded benches that look wide enough to also be used for sleeping. In one end was a table, in the other a small kitchen area where a large pot was hanging over a fire place. At first Keal thought the fire was either badly kept or would burn real soon, so low were the flames. Then he noticed that it

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was not wood that was burning, it was actual char coal. It had been a very long time since he had seen that and he knew it was a valued thing.

When he asked Cine about it he learned that it was one of the perks of dealing directly with the char coal burners: a part of their payment was in char coal rather than money. This was a far better deal for the foresters since it gave them a very low price on the char coal, practically so low that they could just use the coal instead of wood for their fires. Additionally it had the advantage for the char coal burners that the foresters were always eager to do business with them.

The rest of the furniture in the room was simple. A few shelves for things like plates, mugs and so on. Two chairs on the side of the table that was not against the benches on the wall. A clothes chest in one corner. All of it was made from wood and Keal guessed the foresters themselves had done it.

In the corner an old, wrinkled man sat with a little book in his hands. After Keal had looked around the man stuck out his hand in greeting and mumbled something Keal could not really understand. He shook the man's hand and gave him his name. The man said some more incomprehensible things.

With a bewildered look on his face Keal turned to Cine who gave a small shrug.

"Sometimes old Apa just mumbles," Cine said, "we're not sure why, that's just how it is."

Apa gave a grumpy harumph and quite pointedly buried his nose in his book. This made Cine laugh. After a few moments puzzlement Keal realised that Apa was also laughing, ever so slightly, behind his book. There was a playful gleam in his old eyes as he winked at Keal before turning his eyes to the book and ignoring the younger men.

In the kitchen area Lonaer and Roald began to find things they needed for dinner and soon the table looked very nice and welcoming. They had even gone outside to find a few birch branches and placed it on the table. According to Roald the long, wavy end branches of the birch was a sign of peace and quiet for the hearth.

Together with Cine Keal went to another hut where they took a few loaves of bread from a low stone oven. Keal noticed that the different huts were more or less identical apart from the kitchen area. Where the first hut had had a fire place this hut had an oven and according to Cine one of the others did not even have a kitchen. That was the hut Cine and Niara shared. It had instead a work bench where they could do various bits of carpentry and wood working.

Keal took all this in as he moved around helping with the various tasks they did before dinner. Despite their easy going they seemed very organised and everything fit into a pattern that just made everything run smooth and efficient. Even the way the benches had been built with hinges so bed rolls could be stored beneath them showed that this was not just a make shift camp that had slowly grown into a settlement. This had been planned with great care. The table was even long enough that a person could lie full length on it.

All of this only increased Keal's curiosity and puzzlement. He began to wonder who these people really were. True, from the way they had worked together in the forest they must indeed be foresters. Or at the very least someone who had gone to so great lengths to disguise themselves as foresters that they might easily change careers if they so decided. Why anyone would want to pose as this Keal could not even begin to guess at.

For now he decided that if there was a hot meal at the end of it he did not care if it made sense or not.

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They finished their chores before the women finished their steam bath so the five of them slumped down on the benches and began to chat about this and that. The others were still very curious about where Keal had been and what had happened, but since he chose not to talk about Metobaph or the monastery his travels had actually been rather dull. And the time back at the tribe was a topic they left alone after it was clear how uncomfortable it made Keal to talk about it.

Soon the women joined them and the talking and laughing only increased as food was put on the table. From somewhere a small barrel of ale appeared and it was not long before Keal could lean back against the wall with a full stomach and a nice, relaxed feeling inside him. He once more began to nod off, the effect of the hot food and strong ale getting the better of him. The others gently guided him to one of the other huts and let him sleep on one of the benches. He was so tired that he did not even stir when Lonaer and Dorga joined him in the hut later that evening.

### Fate's Destiny

A boot moved swiftly through the air catching the big man smack in the middle of his face. He grunted as he fell backwards and blood gushed out of his broken nose. It took him a while before he managed to get his bearings and focus on the slim woman standing over him. He sneered and tried to get up but stumbled and fell down heavily again. This time he did not try to get up before speaking.

“Who the fuck are you?” Gerroth said.

The woman gave a snort and pulled a small home roller from her sleeve.

“Don't break your pretty little head on that one, you prick,” she said, “all you need to know is that you're no longer running the show.”

Around them the handful of warriors tensed. It was common among small raider parties like this that one of them would challenge another for leadership. It was not common that someone would simply beat the leader into a bloody pulp with no warning.

None of the raiders knew much about the woman. She had joined them a few weeks back under strange circumstances. They had been in the middle of cleaning a caravan after they had killed off the guards and those who had not managed to run away. Out of nowhere a young woman with long, jet black hair all clad in red leather simply walked up and nodded with approval. She had not tried to take anything from the caravan but simply walked around apparently inspecting the dead. From time to time she knelt down and took a closer look at a body, especially those who had been killed in a brutal and bloody way.

There was something about her general attitude and air of indifference to them that had made the raiders keep their distance. Eventually their leader had figured that he would either have to try and kill her or speak to her. He had not been sure which would be worse.

When he spoke to the woman she simply introduced herself as Dayr and told him that she was joining his group. It had been as simple as that. No asking for his permission or anything. She had simply stated that she would be joining.

Over the next couple of weeks the raiders had been busy. There seemed to be a lot of caravans and minor settlements in this end of the forest. At first this had greatly pleased the raiders because it meant a lot more loot for them. That began to change, however, when they noticed that their fights became harder and harder.

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As most other raider gangs they did not really have any home or base but simply drifted around. Normally that did not pose a problem since the forest was large enough that they could easily disappear and lay low for a while without risking anyone finding them. That was no longer easy as there were small settlements all over the place. Char coal burners, trappers, foresters, even small cities. It had become increasingly more important to make sure the raiders kept quiet to avoid being detected. The main problem with this was that with every day they grew more and more tense as they could not let loose and get drunk and let off steam and tension. Instead they grew more and more foul spirited and it was all the leader could do to keep them from ripping each other apart.

And then the woman had made her bid for leadership.

As he lay there on the ground waiting for his death he reflected that he should have seen it coming. She had been the only one who actually seemed to enjoy the tense weeks and the constant feeling of being on a battlefield. While the others had sat and fumed at night looking for a way to release their anger she had simply sat with a viscious, intent smile on her face as if she was waiting for something.

Blood was running freely from his nose and down on the ground. At least one of his ribs had been broken badly and he had a feeling that even if he should survive this his knee would never really work properly again.

Not surprisingly the woman took her time finishing him off. This was also common as the new leader wanted to make sure everyone in the gang knew how ruthless she were. Once she was done she took one last look at the bloody corpse at her feet. She wiped the side of one boot against some grass. That was the only part of her that had gotten any blood on it. During their brief fight Gerroth had not managed to get a single blow in on the woman. From their battles and skirmishes they all knew she was a deadly fighter and they respected her for that. And feared her.

She slowly let her gaze trail over every last one of them to make sure there would be no protests from them. When she was satisfied they were all appropriately scared she told them to go to sleep and be ready for more fighting tomorrow. Then she headed off among the trees away from the small camp.

On her way she spooked one of their sentries by sneaking up on him and putting a knife across his throat. She did not slit it, though, as she still had plans for the raiders. It was just their leader who was an incompetent lout and needed replacement. She dismissed the sentry and told him that their leader had said to get back to camp. He was young, barely more than a kid, and Rayd spat on the ground where he had stood.

A long time ago, when it had been real fun to be the God of War, a kid like him would never have been in a raider party like this. He was far too soft. She often found herself missing the old days. Or perhaps not so much missing them as she was angry at how miserable things were now. It had all happened after that messy not-quite-apocalypse that had happened a few hundred years earlier. Whatever happened to the whole fire from the sky theme, she wondered. Or a good flood. Or even a plague. But trees? Of all the least deadly things in the world trees would have to be a close contestant for the first place. She had to admit that it had proved remarkably effective in combination with the unknown disease that had rendered most of the population sterile. Effective, yes, but also incredibly dull.

These days there were not really any wars going on anymore. People had a hard enough time getting by and the few places where they had actually gotten back to a level of commerce and production that armies and empires might be of interest they still valued their young too dearly to allow them to be placed in much risk.

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She spat on the ground again and cursed whoever had come up with the trees.

None of the old gods had known who it was and she felt certain that she would have found out if one of them had been behind it. It was, she grudgingly admitted, a common trait among all the old gods that they were vain and arrogant so none of them would have been able to keep something like this to themselves for long. That pointed to outside interference and that did not bode well.

Strangely, though, after a few generations with a high level of sterility the disease had died out and the world seemed to have found a new equilibrium. The trees still grew far faster than before but the population growth made it possible to actually keep them under control in many parts of the world.

There had been no further signs of anyone or anything related to the not-quite-apocalypse. The old gods had been very pleased with this. Partly because a side effect of all the problems was that people had begun worshipping them again so fiercely that they had regained almost all their previous powers. And partly because it meant that they were likely to retain that power. But mostly because, deep down, all the old gods were genuinely scared of anything that could sneak something like this into their world without them knowing it.

Rayd stood for a few minutes in the darkness of the forest night. Lately she had, out of pure boredom, taken to join the raiders simply to get any kind of fighting done. It was far from the big battles of ancient times, but it most definitely beat sitting around at home throwing books after that jerk Literfe, the God of Love. Who other than the most kind and gentle of all the gods would go around getting a juvenile crush on the God of War?

She rolled her eyes at the thought. No, it was far better to be down here than back up home with the other gods.

Back from the camp she could hear a couple of raised voices. It sounded like someone was beginning to question her grasp at leadership. A pleased smile grew on her face as she heard how promptly those objections were met with cold, steel hard proof that she was in charge. The noise died down soon enough that she was sure they had not lost too many raiders this way. While they were not strictly necessary for where she was going her blood always boiled more the larger the battle.

And she could feel in her bones that she was close to a very nice battle indeed. Close by she felt the pull of such power as she had not in countered in decades, if not centuries. The raw waves of it that washed unseen through the night hit her harder than any blow Gerroth could have struck. For some time she simply stood there revelling in the feeling. Anticipation of battles to come, of death and destruction, of blood lust and passion, of the raw, naked, primal instincts that had let humankind rise to be the leader of the mortal realms.

She half turned and felled a young oak with a swift kick.

Yes, the leader of the mortal realms, indeed. Right after those bloody trees.

Swiftly she made her way back to the camp to boot the raiders around and get them to quiet down so they would be well rested for tomorrow. They still had quite a distance to go and she was impatient to get there as quickly as possible. Even though she did not know entirely where “there” was.

Back in the camp she saw that there were only two more bodies. Some of the more enterprising raiders had already relieved their dead comrades of their valuables and gear and dumped the bodies outside the camp area. She allowed them a brief respite and nodded her approval before retiring the Gerroth’s tent. As such she did not need to sleep and had

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spent most of the other nights on guard duty or just sneaking around. But she figured it was better to make the raiders comfortable by pretending to sleep.

Early the next morning, before the sun had risen, she got out of her tent and started kicking the raiders out of their bed rolls. She only allowed them a very quick breakfast before they started out through the forest at a brisk pace. In her mind she could feel which direction to take and though she could also feel where there were other people in the forest she steered the raiders well clear of them. She needed to be elsewhere.

All through the day she spurred them on, pushing them to their very limits. As night fell they came to a small patch that had been cleared of trees. There were still stubs left and across the clearing lay a large oak tree that had not been chopped down more than a few hours ago. It was getting dark so she risked leading the raiders out on a nearby road and set off again. This time she made them move slowly and as quietly as possible. They were close now, she could sense, and she did not want them to fall over before the battle had started.

To her godly senses it felt like something very big and important was waiting just up the road. Something that was of great significance, especially to her. Sneaking along the road she cursed herself for not having paid more attention when she had heard the other gods discuss their powers of divination and such. They had always struck her as unnecessary; you saw an enemy, you killed it. This time she would have given a great deal to be able to do more than simply sense that something was nearby. She promised herself that once this was over she would go back up home and spend at least a little time getting better prepared for things like this.

One of the raiders called out a quiet warning. There was a track leading off the road and through the trees they could see small lights some distance away. She signalled for some of them to flank out through the trees while she led the main force up the track. As she came closer to the light the feeling of importance grew rapidly.

The lights came from a small group of low huts in a small clearing. One of the huts was made from stone, the rest from wood. Behind Rayd the raiders gathered up as closely to the edge of the clearing as they could without leaving the treeline. Their eagerness to fight and kill showed clearly on their faces.

Rayd raised her arm to signal the attack.

All around her the world suddenly seemed to explode with noise. It almost felt like the entire forest came down around her ears. Something very large moved right past her on both sides. With wide eyes she froze and looked around. On both sides of her were what looked like tree trunks at first sight. More than a meter ahead of her, however, the trunks grew claw like nails. And when she very slowly turned around she could see knuckles and, further up, a thick, strong, scaly leg.

From somewhere close by she heard another crash followed by some very faint screams. That must have been the raiders that were flanking the little settlement.

Keeping her head down and her tongue silent she raised her eyes to look up, directly into the face of a dark green dragon. Its amber eyes glowed and its jaw opened slightly to reveal serrated teeth. It drew its head back from her and breathed in heavily. As it did Rayd got a look at the dark robed rider on its back.

She pouted.

“Aw, for fuck’s sake,” she said, “why did you have to come spoil my fun!”

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With a childlike, or at least not very godlike, grunt she kicked the dragon's toe as hard as she could. It was a testament to her powers that the dragon actually pulled back its claw a little.

"You and that overgrown lizard!"

Around her she could see blood seeping under the dragon's claw. Despite her anger she could not help but admire how neatly the dragon had managed to land on all the raiders on the track and follow up with its tail to smash the ones in the forest.

Her attention swung back to the rider.

"Get your arse down here," she said, "you've bloody well better have a good explanation for this!"

The rider nudged the dragon's sides and it lowered him to the ground. He dismounted and pulled his hood back to reveal his bald head and nearly featureless face. As he did Rayd mockingly held up two fingers and let them tip-toe back and forth while making faces at the man.

He stopped a few paces from Rayd and sighed. The dragon had drawn back after he dismounted but it was clearly watching both of them warily.

"You should not be here," he said.

"Oh, haha, don't tell me," Rayd said, "it's not my Destiny, but yours?"

The man squeezed his eyes shut and pinched the bridge of his nose. That joke was beginning to wear on him.

"Very cute, Rayd."

"Pah! Serves you right. What were you thinking? Naming your little pet there Destiny?"

Fate sighed again. He knew he should have thought a little before Naming his dragon. It had seemed so appropriate at the time, now it just seemed like what it was: a really bad joke. Unfortunately there was not much he could do about it since the Naming ritual made it impossible to change the dragon's name without actually killing it in the process.

"Shut up and, for once, pay attention," he said.

Rayd pouted again but at least sheathed her swords and stood looking somewhat interested. Generally speaking the two of them got along fairly well. It was just that every once in a while their paths would cross and trying to derail an army was about as impossible as derailing fate and destiny.

"Yeah? What?" Rayd said.

She crossed her arms and began tapping her foot rapidly against the ground. Anyone who had been near her for more than a short while knew that this was not a good sign. Fate knew this, but did not care. Summoning his most dark and sinister voice he spoke to the God of War.

"Things are happening here that you cannot interfere with," he said, "things that will greatly impact the future. And your petty wish for carnage cannot be allowed to stand in the way of What Will Be.

"Had you been allowed to attack the settlement a mortal of great importance would have been slain, someone who still has a great role to play in this world. And the next."

"The next?"

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This actually intrigued Rayd. From time to time Fate had demanded that she allowed some random mortal to survive. A son born in the middle of a battlefield from under his father's saddle, a woman trying to take on an entire army on her own and other silly people who should simply have died if not for the gods' intervention. Rayd had not really been against the idea of letting the one woman army survive since she had been occupying her body at the time, but Fate had been quite adamant on letting her survive after the battle was over. None of his interferences had had anything to do with the next world. The world beyond death, the place mortals went when they died.

"Indeed the next world. In one of those huts sleeps a man who will one day both enter and leave the next world. Willingly, I might add."

Rayd stopped pouting and held her chin in her hand. She was still not entirely convinced, though.

"So... you're saying that some idiot in there is going to kill himself in a spectacular way one day?"

"Not precisely. His Fate is to enter the next world without dying, yet to not enter it when he does."

"Okay, here's the Fate we all know and love," Rayd said, "all cryptic and making no sense what so ever."

"Oh, shut up. Like you're any better with your selfimposed teenage rebellion every other week. Did you ever consider how much better your results would be if you actually did a little planning ahead rather than running around with a bunch of low-lives like these?"

At this Fate gestured at the bloody remains of the raiders. Here and there an unbroken bone or two could be found. Most of the area was simply covered in red mud. To be able to count the number of bodies, let alone recognise any of them would take a very long time and require someone to become very bloody.

"Hrmph! You're not my dad!"

"Fortunately not! That reminds me, he asked me to let you know that you should have been home two days ago."

"Oh, you just keep slinging those jokes around, don't you?"

Fate snickered. Or did the best he could with a featureless face.

"Leave this place alone, Rayd. That's all. I'm sure you can find other places to be or people to kill."

Rayd knelt and picked at some loose teeth on the ground. One of them was golden and she picked it up to inspect it.

"Yeah, I could. But you've taken all the fun out of it. Might as well get back home, I guess."

Rising to her feet she sighed and dropped the gold tooth.

"Hitch a ride?" she said.

"Oh, come on. Now who's joking?"

Despite his words Fate waved Destiny over. The great dragon gave a grumpy puff of smoke before settling down so the two gods could climb up on its back and fly off through the night.

## Claw Marks

Early the next morning Keal woke up before Dorga and Lonaer. At first he could not recall where he was. The feeling of a good bed, or at least something better than the ground, was not something he was accustomed to. Near him he could hear a low snoring which made him remember the foresters.

As quietly as he could he eased himself out from under the warm blankets and tip toed across the floor. On the way he picked up his pants and boots. He went outside and stretched in the cool morning air. The low sun peaked enough through the trees to give him a little warmth and he just stood there for a few moments taking in the scene and feeling the blend of cool air and warm sun rays on his naked chest.

Beside the entrance stood the basket they used to carry fire wood and wanting to make himself useful he put on his boots and pants. He picked up the basket and started towards the pile of wood nearby.

The hut he had slept in was at the back of the settlement so Keal did not see the bloody mess of bodies, weapons and broken trees that were at the beginning of the track.

When he had filled the basket he went back to the hut and put it down outside. He did not want to wake the others by dumping off the fire wood inside so he just left it outside and walked around a little, aimlessly drifting towards the trees at one side of the settlement.

Somewhere among the trees, not more than a few meters away, he spotted something strange. It looked like a man crouched down behind a tree. Crouching down he kept quiet and observed the man for a little while. He could not see any movement and the man's head was turned away from the clearing. Slowly Keal slid through the forest keeping himself as hidden from the man as possible. Since the man did not move an inch that was easy enough and Keal did not take long in getting close.

What he saw nearly made him vomit.

Behind the man were several fallen and cracked trees, their trunks overlaying each other, their branches covering most of the forest floor. A thick branch off one of the trunks lay across where the man's legs should have been. It was as if the branch had simply smashed off his legs and either flattened them completely or driven them into the ground. Keal bit his teeth together hard and swallowed the bitter lump that had risen in his throat.

The man was dressed in a light leather armour battered not just from the small branches that had hit him, but from a long time of hard fighting. On his head was a leather cap reinforced with steel bands and near his hand Keal could see a curved sword. The look on the man's face was one of utter incomprehension. Hardly, Keal thought bitterly, surprising given that the last thing the man must have felt was not having any legs.

Keal began to look more closely at the trees. The initial shock of the scene had subsided and he could once more focus on more than keeping his innards(?) where they belonged. Here and there he could see an arm or a leg among the branches and trunks and a few weapons were also visible. Based on this Keal reckoned that there had been at least ten men. No, he corrected himself, ten people. He had lifted a branch and looked into the open eyes of a woman. Her face was scarred and one of her ears was missing the lobe.

"What happend?" Keal said.

The sound of his own voice spooked him and he quickly glanced around to see if anyone, or anything, was nearby and might have overheard him. The forest was still as the grave. It was not until now that Keal noticed that there was not even any sign of birds or other

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small creatures. It was as if whatever had happened here had removed all presence of life. There were not even any flies buzzing over the bodies and the feces their bowels had spilled.

He was just about to back away when an extra look at the fallen trees revealed that they were all pointing in the general direction of where he was standing, away from where the track to the main road was.

With a feeling of dread inside him he sneaked through the forest until he reached the track and saw the gruesome sight. This time he could not help but vomit. The morning sun reflected off blood and weapons as playfully as it would normally glint off dewcovered leaves and spider webs.

From the clearing he heard shouts. Some were calling his name, some were just calling out in horror. The foresters had woken up and, being more aware of the forest thus noticing the eerie quietness immediately, they had discovered the same as Keal: the giant pool of blood several yards wide and twice as long. And right next to it they saw Keal, crouched down over the pool with blood streaming from the four strange scars on his back.

The first of the foresters to reach Keal was Cine. He stopped a few paces from Keal with a scared look on his face.

“Keal?” he said.

Feeling his entire body shake Keal looked up at him. His face was pale and his mouth moved without speaking. In front of him Cine could see the vomit. With very slow steps and holding his arms out in front of him he moved all the way to Keal and put a hand on his shoulder. Keal’s entire body gave an involuntary jerk at the touch and it shook him out of the state of terror he was in. His voice was rough and stammering as he tried to speak.

“Who did this? What did this?” Keal said.

“Don’t think, Keal,” Cine said, “just come with me. Let’s get you out of here.”

Back in the clearing all the others had now gathered, some looking at the scene in morbid fascination, some looking away. None of them moved while Cine gently took hold of Keal’s arm and managed to help him to his feet and out of the blood.

When Keal was back in the clearing he simply collapsed on his knees. Cine tried to get in contact with him, but the look in Keal’s eyes was enough to make it quite clear that he was beyond reach at the moment. Together with Lonaer Cine carried Keal back to one of the huts and put him down on the far side of it, out of sight of the blood. It took them a while to calm him down enough for him to tell them what he had seen.

In the mean time the others slowly neared the track and looked at what had happened. Dorga seemed the least affected of them and he carefully stepped around the spattered blood outside the pool itself and picked up one of the weapons.

“Hmmm... nasty looking blade, this,” he said, “I’m thinking raiders. Look over there. That’s a bit of leather armour. And that’s a spear sticking out of the ground.”

Beside him Apa had moved up and was inspecting the ground. He did not look too much at the blood or bits of bodies that were visible, or even the weapons. With a thoughtful frown on his face he grasped Dorga’s arm.

“Get up in a tree, lad,” he said, “I need you to check something.”

Dorga did as asked and deftly climbed up in a tree that had a thick branch hanging out over the track. The end of the branch had been broken off, but the tree’s trunk and the inner part of the branch were solid enough to hold his weight.

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“What am I looking for?” he said.

“Don’t look at the bodies,” Apa said.

“Don’t worry, I saw enough bad things in my youth to not be queasy.”

“No, no. Don’t look at the bodies. Look between them. What do you see?”

For several moments Dorga looked down trying to figure out what Apa meant. Then he spotted a pattern between the bits and pieces of bodies. When he did his eyes went wide and he nearly fell from the branch.

“Merciful gods!” he said.

“What do you see?”

“No, no, no. It can’t be. It can’t.”

As he climbed down he was visibly shaken and upset. He walked over to Apa and grasped the old man’s shoulder. Despite his best efforts he was unable to speak the thoughts that swirled in his head. Apa simply nodded.

“Yes,” Apa said, “it is as I feared. Come.”

With quick steps Apa lead Dorga back towards the huts in search of Keal. They found him on his back on the ground with Roald and Lonaer gently feeding him a little water.

“Turn him over,” Apa said.

“What? Why? He’s in shock,” Roald said.

“No matter. Turn him over. I need to see his back.”

The brothers took hold of Keal and rolled him over on his side. Underneath Keal the ground had turned crimson with the blood that ran from the scars.

“Fuck,” Dorga said, “this can’t be real.”

“Oh, I’m afraid it is,” Apa said.

With his crooked fingers he traced the scars. He looked at the blood his fingers had picked up and first sniffed it then, to the others’ horror, tasted it. With a wry grin he held out his fingers to the others. They shrank back.

“Ha! Weaklings. It’s just a little blood. Granted, it’s not human blood, but still just blood.”

For a very long time the others kept completely still, looks of incomprehension visible on their faces. Apa sighed.

“Let him down again, he’ll be fine in a few minutes. Leave him a little water and come with me. There are much we need to discuss before he comes to his senses again.”

Together they went back to the hut Ama and Apa lived in. They called out to the others to join them and then went inside to discuss what they should do. Once in the hut Apa stood up straighter than he had in years. The rest quickly sat down and listened.

“When I was young my great grandfather told me a story that he himself had been told by his great grandfater. I know not how long it goes back, but I do know that the light that shone in his eyes made me remember every word of the story from that day on. Other things, yes, those I have forgotten. Never this story, though.

“Back when the world was young, before us Humans existed, even before other races existed, that was when the gods freely walked the world and created it as they thought it should be.”

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Glancing back to the door Apa shrugged and changed his tone of voice. He had started with a deep story teller's voice, but now changed it to a slightly lighter everyday one.

"Anyway, we do not have much time. The gods did indeed walk through the world and created it, shaped it, to their liking. However, the gods had different ideas and they ended up struggling. Not unlike how little children squabble and fight over their toys.

"Eventually their bickering turned to outright war and after aeons of fighting, gods don't see time as we do, they settled into some kind of peace. That was how the Old Gods came to be. They were the ones who had the power to survive the war and the wisdom to see that they were better off without the fighting."

Apa paused and sipped a little tea before continuing.

"One of the things that came out of the war was a race of dragons. Yes, the mythical beings that you've all known from fairy stories. They were real. Or, judging from the blood outside, they are real."

Throughout the hut gasps could be heard.

"So," Dorga said, "that was what the dark shadow in the blood was? A dragon's claw mark?"

"Yes," Apa said, "from the ground I could see some kind of pattern where the dragon had landed and pushed to bodies so far down that they were not visible. The bodies around it had 'only' been crushed by it's body.

"But. Over time both the gods and the dragons retreated from the world. The mortal races had begun to prosper and could take care of themselves. It was not really the gods' own choice. People just stopped believing as much in them as they used to. So the gods gradually faded away.

"At least until the catastrophe that happened so many years ago. When the trees began to grow and most of the population died out. Only the human race seemed to survive this. Or, if any of the other races survived, they are the only ones we know about now."

"Wait," Kari said, "what other races? You mean like ghosts and goblins?"

"Both yes and no," Ama said, "it is as Apa said. Things we only know from fairy stories. But shush, there is more."

"Yes," Apa said, "too much more for me to tell. So to cut it short. After the catastrophe people began looking for some kind of meaning with everything, something to believe in and give them hope, I guess. That somewhat restored the gods' powers and they slowly began to make their presence known again.

"At first it was only small things, but soon they were almost as mighty as they once were. And not only because people believed in them. No, other things happened. Foolish things."

His voice trailed off and for several moments he stood staring at the wall and some distant memory. From his eye a single tear ran down his cheek, a tear of blood. None of the others dared say anything.

With a shudder Apa returned to the present and looked sadly at the others. Slowly, as if he was in great pain, he took off his shirt and turned around.

"This is one of the reasons I claimed to be too old to join you in the steam hut."

On his back was a set of scars similar to Keal's. They, too, were bleeding.

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“Yes, I know where Keal got those scars. And how. Poor lad, poor lad. I can’t tell you the details. But know that if he is here and not someplace else it means he has one of the strongest minds in the world. And probably also one of the most confused.”

He slumped down on the edge of one of the benches with a sigh and wiped the blood tear from his cheek. When he looked at the others again his eyes were hard as steel and just like he had said his great grandfather’s eyes glowed so were they.

It took a long time before any of the others dared say anything. The only one that did not look surprised and frightened was Apa. Apparently she had known at least a part of the story. Gently she put a hand on Apa’s shoulder.

“You know what you must do,” she said.

“Yes. I must take the boy, train him.”

A small whimper escaped Apa’s lips.

“I know it must be done,” she said, “but... are you sure there’s no other way? Anything else? Anything would be better.”

Apa’s face was as hard as stone as he stood up.

“No. There is only one thing to do with a marked one. The only alternative is to kill him, and that cannot be done. Must not be done. The results... they’re immeasurable worse than training him.”

Apa buried her face in her hands and began to weep freely. This seemed to shake the others into action and they began talking all at once.

“What’s this?”

“Who is he?”

“Fuck him, who’re you?!”

“Where... ”

A single, hard look from Apa quieted them down. Slowly he put his shirt back on and picked up a knife from the kitchen. Without paying any attention to the others he went outside and around the hut to where Keal was lying. Keal was moving slightly, slowly coming to his senses.

Taking the last few steps quickly and, especially considering his age, very nimbly Apa swung the knife down towards Keal’s throat with a fluid circular movement.

Just before the knife’s point touched Keal’s skin it stopped. One of Keal’s hands had grasped Apa’s wrist without Keal even opening his eyes. Apa’s face lost its hardness in favour of a strained nearly painful mask as Keal twisted his wrist. Just before the wrist broke Apa let go of the knife and rolled with the twisting movement landing on the grass a few feet away.

Ever so slowly and effortlessly Keal sat up and grabbed the knife. For a few moments he played with it, flicking it around in his hands. His eyes were still closed and he had a slightly puzzled frown on his face.

Dorga and Cine had gathered themselves enough to go outside to see what was happening and were peeking around the side of the hut. Neither of them dared go close to Keal or Apa who by now was up in a crouching position. The scene was oddly serene. Keal playing with the knife. Apa crouching as if he was ready to spring into action at any time. And the two foresters just looking on.

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“So, Keal,” Apa said, “you were in the mountains?”

There was a strange unearthly quality to Keal’s voice when he answered a few seconds later.

“Yes.”

“And you found the monastery?”

“Yes.”

“And the monks?”

“Yes, the monks.”

“What else?”

At first Keal did not answer. Then suddenly his eyes opened wide. In a split second the last two years of his life passed through his mind’s eye. The time at the monastery, finding the strange being Corrim in the basement, being trained in combat and stealth by others like him, his final test in front of a great, black beast that had scarred his back nearly killing him. The knife fell from his hands and he screamed a long, blood chilling scream.

“Easy, lad, easy,” Apa said.

He went over to Keal and moved the knife away putting it down behind him somewhere. With great care he reached a hand out to Keal and took his shoulder. At his touch Keal flinched once, but soon began to quiet down and leaned forward against Apa who wrapped his arms around him.

“Come, lad,” Apa said, “your troubles are far from over.”

Keal looked up at Apa through tear filled eyes.

“What happened to me? What did they do?”

“Bad things, lad, very bad things. But compared to what they could have done, you should consider it an act of mercy. They could have made you one of them.”

“I . . . I think they tried. There was something wrong.”

“Yes,” Apa said.

He placed a hand on Keal’s forehead and concentrated for a while. Beside him the two foresters’ eyes grew wide as they saw his eyes turn solid green. Apa blinked and when he opened his eyes they were once more normal.

“Ah, good,” he said, “I can sense it in you, Keal. You have a Fate inside you. And much that is good. They must have tried to eliminate that part of your human soul that is compassion . . . and they failed. Deep down you are still intact, but there is much foulness around it. Foulness that cannot be removed. At least not by me.”

Calling out to the others for help he managed to get Keal back up on his feet. They began to drag him back around to the front of the hut, but stopped when they saw the others gathered outside, weapons and sharp tools in their hands.

Apa was trying hard to stop them from attacking Keal and Apa, but of no use. Their eyes burning with fear and hatred Roald and Lonaer pushed her aside and advanced warily.

Kari would have followed them, a long carving knife in either hand, if it wasn’t for Niara slamming bodily into her sending them both sprawling on the ground. For her effort Niara earned a wicked slash across the face. Despite the pain of the cut she managed to get close enough to elbow Kari in the stomach, winding her. After that she had little trouble relieving Kari of the knives.

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“Stop,” Niara said.

The two brothers had almost reached Keal, ready to kill him. Niara’s shout made them stop and look back quickly. She was holding Kari by her hair twisting her head back and holding one knife across her throat.

“Drop your weapons or she’s dead,” Niara said. “Now!”

Looking from Kari to Keal and back Roald hesitated. His brother hissed at him to continue, but Roald kept still. In his eyes burned both his love for his wife and his fear of both Keal and Apa. Everyone were quiet as they knew the next few moments would determine what would happen. Everyone except Lonaer who sneered and hissed.

“Kill the evil spawn,” he said.

“Roald,” Niara said, “think of your wife. At least listen to what they have to say.”

“Kill them all,” Lonaer said.

Roald kept looking back and forth between them. His knuckles were white from gripping the handle of the axe he had picked up. With a final hateful stare at Keal and Apa he screamed and swung his axe at the side of his hut, finding some kind of release for his anger and frustration. The axe head bit deeply into the wood and lodged there. Beside him Lonaer roared and charged Keal.

A very loud cracking noise rang out over the clearing.

Standing behind Kari and Niara stood Apa with a small, smoking metal object in her hand. Lonaer had stopped in the middle of a step, the knife he held raised high above his head ready to strike. He blinked in surprise and looked down at his stomach. Blood began to seep from a small, round wound in his side. Gingerly he touched it with his left hand and lifted his bloody finger tips to his eyes. Again he began to charge Keal, but this time his stride was stumbling and the knife slipped from his grasp. Before he had taken two steps he collapsed on the ground, groaning in pain.

Blood gushed from his wound and his breath became ragged and laboured. Roald gave a strangled cry.

“Lonaer,” he said.

He rushed over to his brother and knelt down next to him.

“Relax, lie still!”

From his shirt Roald tore a strip of cloth and pressed against the wound. All the while he kept telling Lonaer to keep still and that everything would be okay. Behind him Niara had let go of Kari who had rushed to help Roald bandage the wound. They did manage to stop the flow of blood, but not before Lonaer had begun to turn pale and was very still on the grass. Quiet sobs escaped Roald as it became evident that his brother was dying.

For their part, Keal and Apa had recovered, but they too were helpless against Lonaer’s injury. And Keal was not sure he would be allowed near him anyway. Instead he and Apa circled around and headed into the hut. There was nothing they could do and they were both shaken from the recent events and needed to sit down.

On his way into the hut Keal briefly glanced at the strange metal object in Ama’s hand. It looked a little bit like an axe held around the head rather than around its metal handle and there was a small cylinder just above her grip. As she swung it around he saw that the end pointing away from her was hollow, a long tube.

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Somewhere deep in his mind he remember some of the other kids in the tribe talking about guns and revolvers late one night. He had not believed them back then, thinking that they were probably trying to trick him into believing some stupid story simply so they could laugh at him. Whether they had known at the time or not the stories had apparently been right. Keal had never seen guns before, though, and what he had seen just now scared him almost as much as the thoughts of dragons and gods. Almost.

They came inside the hut and Apa pushed Keal down in one of the chairs. Then he went to a shelf and pulled down a small clay flask with a cork stopper. As he sat down he took a deep swig from the flask and offered it to Keal.

“Here, lad, you’ll need something strong.”

Without a word Keal took the flask and tenderly took a small mouthful. The stuff tasted horrible like a mixture of coal and pines and it burned his mouth and throat as he drank it. Coughing hard he gave the flask back to Apa and for a while they sat there passing it back and forth between them.

Outside the hut things had quieted down a bit. Kari and Roald were sitting over the now dead Lonaer, sobbing quietly. The others had drawn away from them, Dorga moving to Apa’s side near the entrance to the hut and Cine and Niara standing a little bit away from all the others looking lost and unable to find out what they should do.

Slowly Roald got to his feet with a pained look in his eyes. He looked down on Lonaer’s corpse for a while with tears running down his cheeks. Then he abruptly turned to Apa and simply looked at her. She, in turn, raised the revolver a little and gazed intently at Roald. It was clear that she would not allow him to go into the hut to the others. With the revolver she waved him away and he and Kari went off to their own hut leaning on each other’s arm.

When they had disappeared out of sight Ama turned to Cine and Niara.

“I’m sorry you had to see this,” she said, “Apa had a feeling it would happen at some point, he just hadn’t realised it would be this soon.”

It was Niara who first found her voice.

“What exactly happened?”

“Well, as Apa told you Keal is a very special lad, they share things in their past. Violence, blood, horrible things. I reckon he and the lad will be off soon, not sure to where, though.”

“But. . .” Niara said, “you just shot Lonaer!”

Ama shrugged. Though she did not look remorseful she did not seem uncaring either.

“Ya, the only other option seemed to be to let him charge in. From what little I know about Apa’s strengths Lonaer was better off being shot. Can’t say I like it. But that’s the way of the world. Lots of things we don’t like, too few we do.”

Beside her Dorga simply grunted his agreement. He shot a questioning look at Apa who nodded whereafter he walked over to Lonaer’s body and knelt down beside it. With swift movements he straightened arms and legs and, mumbling something the others could not hear, closing Lonaer’s eyes very gently. After that was done he briefly stroked Lonaer’s hair back out of his face.

“We should burry him. Not near the track, though. Away from the blood. Cine, give me a hand, there are some plans in the shed.”

Together they went to pick up some boards and roped them together to form a make shift stretcher. On this they placed the body and prepared to lift it off to the woods.

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From their hut Kari and Roald emerged carrying stuffed sling bags on their backs.

“We’ll take him,” Kari said, “we don’t want him anywhere near any of you.”

Cine and Dorga looked at each other the former seeming concerned, the latter looking withdrawn. None of them contented the couple’s decision and they placed Lonaer down on the ground and stepped back. Just as Roald and Kari were about to bend down Cine stopped them.

“Listen,” he said, “I don’t know what happened here. But we’ve all known Ama and Apa since forever. They’re not bad people, there’s got to be some kind of explanation to this.”

Roald’s face was darker than a thundercloud.

“All I know,” he said, “is that that old hag shot my brother. If she did not have that thing in her hand I’d be over there with my hands around her neck. What you choose to do is your own headache, I just know that I have to get away from here. Far away.”

“Roald, wait,” Cine said. “if she didn’t have that revolver I’d be right there with you. But stop and think. Don’t just walk away.”

“If I don’t walk away now I’ve a feeling that I’ll do things I’ll regret. Like trying to kill them anyway. You know the way of the forest. Once a tree is felled it can never be raised again.”

There were a lot of old sayings among the foresters, this one being one that was typically used to end arguments and discussions. Against it there was little Cine could do but back away and let them leave.

He stood there for a while shaking his head slightly. Niara went up and placed a hand on his shoulder and spoke softly.

“We should go as well. I do not like what’s happening here. Not one bit.”

“Me neither,” Cine said, “I just can’t make myself walk away. I’ve known Ama and Apa for more than a decade. Since far before you joined us out here.”

“I know,” Niara said, “and if it wasn’t for you and your friendship with them I would be running away as fast as I can.”

From up near the hut Ama called to them and they turned around. She had put the revolver away and were signalling for them to join the others in the hut. Sighing and casting one last look after the disappearing Kari and Roald they both went back.

Inside the hut Keal had not registered what went on outside. He was still shocked and though the foul drink Apa had served was beginning to bring him back to his senses his sight was still unclear and his head throbbed every time his heart beat. With a vague unreal sensation he realised that his heart was actually not beating very fast. He had plenty of time to shift his head and gaze around between each dull pounding in his head. Slowly, though, the throbbing began to subside and he was able to hold a thought in his mind for more than a few seconds. Long enough to begin putting the pieces into place.

“You were at the monastery,” he said.

It was not a question, just a statement of fact. Apa simply nodded, his eyes looking Keal over. Keal took another sip from the flask before he spoke.

“When, though?” he said, “must have been long ago. Far longer than you could live?”

“Yes,” Apa said, “by all means I should have died from old age long ago. Things don’t always go as they should, mind you. You of all people should know that by now.”

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This time it was Keal's turn to simply nod.

"That's true," he said, "but the monastery is real? Not just in my mind?"

His head had almost stopped hurting by now. Briefly he wondered why the pain subsided so quickly, then he looked at the flask. Raising one eye brow he looked questioningly at Apa and then at the flask.

"Yeah," Apa said, "it tastes like hell, but it works wonders against pain. And injuries, by the way."

"Hmmm, yeah. Do I want to know what it is? Never mind, the monastery?"

"Yes, the monastery is real. Not necessarily real in the same sense that the trees in the forest are real. Sometimes the monastery... hmmm... is not in tune with the real world as we perceive it. It sort of phases out."

Keal thought back to when he had woken up in the mountains a few weeks ago. It had seemed like a dream, his time at the monastery, yet at the same time it had also seemed so incredibly real.

He looked up as the others entered the hut with Ama in the lead. Of the other three only Dorga looked fairly normal. Cine, in particular, looked worried and troubled by what had happened. All of them sat down in complete silent while staring intently at Apa and Keal.

Several minutes passed in silence. The only movement was Niara who shuffled her feet every now and again, clearly being too scared to ask whatever questions burned inside her. Finally she could bear it no longer.

"What just happened? Who are you? Why did you shoot Lonaer? Why?"

The last came out at a shout and Ama flinched and looked away. Apa coughed once and looked her straight in the eye.

"Shut up, lass," he said, "lest you venture into things you really do not wish to know about."

"Oh, you shut up," she said, "just give me one good reason why I shouldn't wring your scrawny, old neck. And that old hag's. She just killed Lonaer. Shot him in the back with that evil monstrosity she's got."

From under the table Apa took out the revolver and put it in the table. She fiddled a little with it and opened it so a few metal cylinders fell out.

"There," she said, "it's unloaded. With no bullets in it it's just a piece of metal."

With fascination Keal stared at the revolver and bullets. Out in the open it suddenly did not look as strange anymore. He could begin to figure out how the bullets would fit into the holes in the cylinder, how the tip of each bullet was fired through the long barrel, how the cylinder could rotate to let the next bullet be fired. It all seemed so incredibly simple to him.

One of his hands almost reached out for the revolver, but he stopped himself thinking that the others might not take too well to him picking it up. Instead he looked back at Apa.

"What now?" he asked.

Niara began sputtering again, but shut up when everyone looked harshly at her. Instead she crossed her arms and leaned back against the wall, sulking.

"What now, indeed," Apa said, "preferably you and I should talk under four eyes. However, the others have already seen enough that there's little point in keeping the rest from them. They're good people, it'd be a shame if you had to kill them."

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Hearing the old man talk so casually about killing them made Niara gape and Cine grow red with anger. Dorga, however, simply gave a small, knowing smile and nodded slowly.

“Yes,” he said, “I figured you’d say something like that. Your kind always does.”

At this Apa briefly froze and his eyes flickered to the gun, then back to Dorga’s face.

“So,” he said, “you know?”

“I know some. Enough to know that you being here and not in the mountains is a good sign. Or perhaps it’s the other way around. If you’d been in the mountains it would have been a bad sign.”

“True. Not many of us escaped from that cursed place. And of those only a handful are alive, including Keal and me.”

“Can’t say I care much for who you are,” Dorga said. “But I do care about what happens to me.”

Leaning back in his chair Apa spread his arms in a conceding gesture.

“Nothing wrong with that,” he said, “Keal, what do you say? Want to continue in private or with the others here?”

Slowly Keal looked from one to the other. Several times his eyes flickered back to the shocked and angry Niara. Before his eyes images began to flash. Different courses the future could take. In one Niara was left alone with Cine to live in the forest. In another she lay with blood on her face. In yet another... Keal’s face turned red at those images and he quickly turned away.

He could not bring himself to even consider the future where she died. Not from any chivalrous notions or even because of the way she had smiled at him earlier. Something inside him just told him that it would be wrong.

From his chair Apa watched intently. A slow smile spread on his lips, not in a sneer but in what looked genuine pleasure.

“Good, good,” he said, “they haven’t taken that from you. Your judgement.”

At Keal’s bewildered look he continued.

“That’s one of the things those monks will try to do to you,” he said. “They’ll try to tear you apart, on the inside. Make you believe that nothing matters anymore, that everything and everyone are doomed anyway. That’s how they mould you into the shape they want you in. Your body and mind alike.”

“Huh?” Cine said. “Mould him?”

“Train him, teach him. Not entirely unlike how you would break a dog to make it obey its master’s voice and whip.”

“Oh,” Cine said, “guess that sort of makes sense. In a horrible way, that is.”

The mentioning of whips made Keal recoil.

“Ah,” Apa said, “used the whip on you, did they, lad?”

Keal nodded. All over his back it seemed like every single scar began to itch and hurt. Every single scar he had from all the beatings in his life, both during his time with Fredic and at the monastery. Or rather, under the monastery.

He and Apa shared a very long and meaningful glance that was only interrupted when Apa coughed discreetly.

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“Perhaps,” she said, “now would be a good time to fill the others in on where we go from here? I know you and Keal have a lot of things ahead of you, but they also have some choices to make.”

“Right,” Apa said. “I’ll try to make this brief.”

In turn he looked each of Niara, Cine and Dorga straight in the eye until they looked away. He nodded and mumbled a little to himself, apparently pleased with their reactions.

“Good,” he said, “despite your rough life, Dorga, I sense none of their presence in you. You two are even more clean. A few scars, rough times a long time ago. Nothing really bad, though.”

At this Cine shrank a little. Niara shot him a questioning look, but he shook his head and mumbled something about him explaining it later.

“The choice is simple, or at least it sounds simple. You’ll want to think it over briefly, though. So here are the basic facts, just to make sure you have at least a little information at hand.

“Yes, dragons exist. Yes, both Keal and I have, literally, been in their claws. No, they’re not, I repeat not, all powerful creatures. In fact, many of them are downright stupid. That does not mean, however, that their masters are equally stupid. Which brings us to the last thing: yes, the gods are very much real.”

“But,” Niara said, “we already know the gods are real.”

“Yeah,” Cine said, “that’s why we say prayers and give offerings.”

“No, no,” Apa said, “not that kind of real. We’re talking really real. That pool of blood was made by some god landing her dragon right on top of the raiders.”

“Her?”

“Yes, I’m guessing the God of War is behind this. It would fit her well to leave a blood bath like this behind. She always had a thing for over kill.”

The faces on the other side of the table were all wide eyes and open mouths. Eventually Niara recovered.

“So, you’re saying ‘walking on the ground’ real?”

“Or at least landing their dragons on it, yes,” Apa said.

“And now you say we have a choice?” Dorga said.

“Yes. The simple way of putting it is: do you want to live or do you want to die? Right now. Or, well, fairly soon.”

Something about the way he said it made them sit up straight. To Keal the words had seemed distant and callous as if Apa really did not care either way. There was nothing threatening about the way Apa looked and there was something very matter of factly about it that made Keal think that whatever the decision it was not Apa who would have to enforce anything. That Apa was simply the messenger giving them the choice and then someone, or something, else would do the rest.

“However,” Apa said, “as I said the choice was only seemingly easy. Life, death. That should be easy, right?”

No one answered.

“Well, it isn’t. Because with life comes a condition. You join us.”

“What?” Cine said, “join the dragons?”

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Apa rolled his eyes.

“No, you twit. Pay attention,” he said. “We are not the dragons. We are the ones who escaped them, the ones they will hunt and harass forever. They may get us, they may not. But for the rest of our lives we are sworn to take every chance we can to go up against them.

“Think hard before you decide. For there are fates worse than merely death. If you join us you, too, will place yourselves in their way.”

Keal raised his hand and shook his head.

“Listen, old man,” he said, “you’re forgetting one thing.”

“Huh? What?”

“I don’t give a fuck about any dragons, or the monks for that matter. I just want all of them to leave me alone so I can get on with my life.”

At this Apa flew out of his chair making the others jump in their seats. He was clearly angry and his eyes burned fiercely.

“You,” he said, “do not have a life. They carved that from you, slowly and carefully, over your years of training.”

Waving his hand in the air and getting out of his seat as well Keal broke him off.

“What years of training? Yeah, there are things that I only remember vaguely. But I’m not that much older than when I came to the monastery. Are you telling me that they stopped time or something?”

All the air seemed to go out of Apa. With a heavy thump he sat straight back down.

“What? How old were you?”

“Dunno,” Keal said, “maybe 14. Or maybe 15. I’ve never known my true age.”

He scratched his beardless chin, showing that he could not be more than a year or two older than that. Apa’s eyes went wide and for the first time Keal actually thought he looked frightened.

“This is not normal,” Apa said.

“Damn right it’s not normal,” Cine said, “all this talk about dragons. I’m beginning to think you’re pulling one over on us to cover your wife’s murder.”

Niara laid a hand on his arm and squeezed hard.

“Cine,” she said, “how’d you explain the bodies. Shut up and listen. I don’t know if I believe a word they say, but at least they seem to do.”

Grudginly, Cine slumped back down and rested his elbows on the table. All this barely registered with Keal as he and Apa stared at each other. Keal was really beginning to lose both patience and temper. Mockingly he spat his words at Apa.

“So sorry to disappoint you,” he said, “but I was busy spending, oh, some ten years getting the shit beaten out of me. Would have loved to cram in a little dragon school, but yeah, fuck you.”

Apa still sat with a frightened look on his face. His mouth quivered and he began mumbling incoherently to himself. Somehow it looked like he began to age right before their eyes.

“It can’t be,” he said, “they never take them in that old. They know the risk. How could this be?”

“Shit,” Keal said, “I’ve had it with old men.”

He stood up so quickly that he knocked the chair over.

“To hell with all of this. I’ll be out of here and if I never see an old man again, that’s far too soon.”

With a last angry glare at Apa he ripped open the door. Halfway through it he paused and looked back as he remembered something.

“You know, there’s this guy I traveled around with a while back. If I ever see him again I’ll point him in your direction. I’ve a feeling you’ll get along just fine.”

“Who? What?” Apa said.

“Ha! Yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised if you actually knew him. Ever met a guy called Metobaph?”

And then Keal stepped out, heading for the hut he had slept in and his few belongings. Behind him, and unknown to him, Apa gave a small scream at the mentioning of Metobaph’s name. The old man nearly fell from his chair and it was now very clear to everyone that he was most definitely frightened. Very frightened.

## **Life of Blood**

A grave like silence spread in the small hut. All but one stared from the door to Apa and back. Only Ama seemed to be unsurprised by the turn of events.

“Well,” she said, “you did know it would happen sooner or later.”

Apa just shook his head quietly. After several long breaths he got up and paced back and forth between his chair and the kitchen area. Eventually the others found their tongues again and began to speak. None of them could make heads or tails of any of it and they ended up just talking all at once about whether they should try and talk to Keal or go after Roald and Kari or simply just stay and hope it all went away.

In the middle of it all Apa kept pacing and pacing and pacing. Whatever thoughts went through his head must have been hard and he seemed unable to find any kind of resolution. The noise in the hut did not seem to help him, either, so eventually he lost his temper and shouted at the others to shut up.

With a sigh he sat down again.

“Sorry,” he said, “it’s just... well... I guess I know what must be done. I just don’t like doing it.”

The others were still clearly not aware of what he talked about.

“What do you mean?” Cine said.

“That name he said before he left,” Apa said. “No! Don’t say it! It draws unwanted attention.”

“That man is not a man. He was a normal man a long time ago, but somehow he changed. By now he must be several hundred years old, if not older. No one really knows, probably not even himself. He does not see time as we do.”

As he spoke he began to go around the hut picking several items down from shelves and placing them on the table. Most were common enough, provisions and equipment for traveling. A few were not so common. The revolver Apa had shot Lonaer with as well as

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a handful of extra bullets went into the pile as did a strange symbol he picked out from under a loose floor board.

“Personally, I’ve only ever met him once and that was bad enough. I know for a fact that he, too, is against the dragons. He just works in a way that’s almost as bad as theirs. He uses people, twists their heads around so they don’t see that they’re his pawns. If he’s gotten his hands on Keal we must do whatever we can to help the poor lad.”

“But can it be done?” Apa asked. “Or is it too late?”

“I don’t know. Between what he and the dragons have done to Keal I’m wondering if it wouldn’t be best to simply kill him.”

Apa had been so absorbed in his ranting that he had not noticed that Keal had opened the door and overheard the last bit.

“And why,” Keal said, “should I not simply kill you first?”

“Not best for us, best for you.”

“Pah!”

“No, Keal, I don’t mean to kill you. But know that no matter what you think you will never be in control of your life again.”

For the briefest of moments Keal’s eyes flickered uncertainly as he recalled the times he had met his unwanted follower Jinx. The thoughts took the edge off his anger and his voice softened a bit.

“I don’t think I ever was in control,” he said.

With a quick shake of his head he pushed the thoughts away and tried to focus on what was in front of him.

“So, what is it you have in mind?”

With a nod of the head Apa gestured the table.

“Pick up the revolver,” he said, “and see if anything happens.”

Around the table people sat in quiet fascination. Keal wondered briefly why none of them had tried to intervene. There was something about the way they just sat there that seemed odd to him. Apprehensively he picked up the revolver and let its weight shift around in his right hand until it felt right.

“No,” he said, “nothing really... oh!”

It took him less than a second to quickly flip out the cylinder with the hand holding the revolver while the other hand deftly grabbed six bullets from the table. He did not even count the bullets, his fingers just found them and in one fluid motion placed on between each finger so they would easily fit into the holes in the cylinder. All of them except a single one which he kept in the palm of his hand until the first five was in place. Then he slowly and deliberately slid the last bullet in and closed the revolver.

The weight had shifted a little when the bullets was added. Not a lot and most people might not have noticed it. But Keal knew precisely how he should grip the handle a little differently to adjust for the bullets’ weight. He was just about to spin the cylinder around by dragging it down his left hand. Something made him stop with a puzzled frown on his face. Instead he simply bent his arm so the gun rested comfortable near his shoulder, the barrel pointing towards the roof of the hut.

“Not bad,” Apa said, “do you remember anything?”

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“No, not really,” Keal said. “Or, yeah, I guess I do. I mean, I know that I know how to do this and use the gun. I just don’t know how or why I know it.”

“Yes, that would be how they have trained you. Take a look, slowly, at your index finger.”

Keal turned his head and looked at the revolver and noticed for the first time that his finger was not only resting on the trigger, it was actually pulling the trigger tight. He felt like he should be shivering because he realised that even the tiniest squeeze would make the gun go off. Somehow his finger had, on its own account, found the balance and slipped into place.

Very carefully he let go of the trigger and lowered the gun.

“Very good,” Apa said, “whatever else they did they did a good job on your reflexes. Now, how about stepping outside. I’d like to see you fire it a few times.”

“Are you sure?” Keal said.

Then a thought struck him and he gestured at the others. He was about to say something when Apa broke in.

“Let’s go outside, just you and me.”

Puzzled Keal followed him outside. When the door was closed behind them Apa took a deep breath and let it out slowly with his eyes closed shut.

“Ah, that’s better. I’m getting too old for these mind tricks. Did they ever teach you to... never mind, you won’t know until you need it, I guess. For now it will suffice to say that your training most likely involved more than just the physical skills.”

Apa pointed to a tree trunk at the edge of the clearing.

“Think you can hit that one? The one leaning a little there to the right of the steam hut.”

“Sure,” Keal said.

His arm whipped up in a quick, yet controlled, movement and a loud crack rang out. Bits of bark and chips of wood flew from the trunk. It took a few seconds for Keal to truly register what he had just done.

“Oh...” he said.

“Yes, and this is just the beginning of it.”

Keal was still looking at the tree trunk and the revolver in wonder. He knew, when he thought hard, that he should not be surprised by this and yet it felt completely unreal. A small plume of thin smoke was rising from the barrel and Keal experimentally touched it, somehow knowing in advance that it would be warm yet not able to keep his fingers away. It burned a little, but not much.

Behind his back Apa knelt down and, with surprising ease, picked up one of the large axes that were still on the ground. There was nothing to give away his movements as he quickly swung the axe around to hit Keal in the back.

Just before the axe blade was about to bite into Keal’s back he simply dropped to the ground and rolled away. The revolver was pointed straight at Apa’s head when Keal had finished his roll and was kneeling a few paces away. His breath was calm despite the sudden burst of activity and there was no anger in his mind. Only the absolute certainty that he could easily take out Apa if it was necessary.

“Easy, easy,” Apa said.

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Still with the revolver trained on Apa's head Keal got up. He looked at the old man in front of him and suddenly he began to shake. Violently. It was all he could do to stop his finger squeezing the trigger again as he took a stumbling step to keep his balance.

"Whoa, lad," Apa said, "steady now."

He dropped the axe and went to steady Keal. Before he had taken the first step Keal's shaking stopped and the revolver was once more steady in his hand. In his eyes a strange light seemed to burn and they seemed cold and hard.

"Ah, right," Apa said, "just relax, breathe deeply."

Keal did so and though the shaking returned it was not as bad and he could more or less keep it under control. He flipped the gun around and passed it, handle first, to Apa.

"What just happened?"

"Hmmm," Apa said, "that was me taking a chance. Fortunately the dragons have done a good job training your reflexes and survival instinct. Your sixth sense, if you will."

"Sixth sense?"

Keal looked sceptical.

"Yes, or whatever else you might want to call it. It's what allowed you to move away from the axe without seeing it."

"And if they hadn't trained it?"

"Ah, yes," Apa said, "that would have been messy indeed. However, that was not the biggest risk I took."

"What do you mean?"

Apa gave him a knowing look.

"Why didn't you shoot me?" he said.

Keal was about to say something but stopped with his mouth open. The old man is right, he thought, something stopped me from shooting him. He narrowed his eyes and looked suspiciously at Apa.

"Are you telling me that it's impossible for me to shoot you? Or even shoot them?"

"I honestly don't know, Keal. Perhaps you, and me for that matter, have been conditioned to not kill each other. Maybe it's because you've been conditioned to take in the entire situation before reacting. And being out of my reach you did not feel immediately threatened? I don't know."

From inside the hut Ama called out to them.

"Quick," Apa said, "we better get back inside. It looks like the others are regaining complete control of their thoughts again."

They quickly went inside and saw Ama backing away from the table. The foresters, especially Dorga, looked very angrily at her. Apa quickly shouted to get their attention and, when he had it, mumbled something Keal could not hear. The others got a distant look in their eyes and their voices became softer and softer until they quieted down completely.

"That's better," Apa said, "now, quickly, help me get all this into a sack and let's be off."

"What about them?" Ama said.

"Well, they know enough to make the choice for themselves and I have a feeling what they'll choose. Can you handle them when they wake up?"

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“I should think so. As long as neither you nor Keal are around. They seem to react more to you than to me. Take the boy and get out of here. I will meet you in Tolora later, probably a few weeks from now.”

The old couple embraced quickly before Keal and Apa left the hut. They did not take the track but gave it a wide berth to avoid the blood. By now the animals and insects of the forest had returned and flies were buzzing in large clouds over the blood and gore. As the sun began to reach the blood a horrible smell began to spread through the clearing.

With quick steps Keal followed Apa through the trees and soon they found themselves on the road and headed West.

“Didn’t Ama say the town was to the South?” Keal said.

The road leading East bend in that direction a little further down.

“It does. Don’t let the road trick you here. There’s a crossway a bit further up. That’ll take us straight down to Tolora.”

“Why are we headed there? Apart from it being somewhere else than here?”

Keal could feel that his discomfort and dislike for other people were beginning to surface again. The thought of any kind of large settlement, not to mention an actual town, made him feel uneasy.

“It is a good town to start out in. Enough people that we can slip in unnoticed, so few that it will not be too large for you. Oh, pah! You look like a deer that’s just seen the hunter. About to run off like a scared little rabbit.”

“Hmmm. . . true, I don’t care much for places with many people.”

“Makes sense,” Apa said, “especially in light of who you’ve been around.”

They walked on in silence for a while.

“Ah,” Apa said, “there’s another reason for going to Tolora. At least, I hope there still is. It’s been a while since I was there, but there should be some people I know that can help us with, hmmm, with various things.”

A nasty suspicion crept into Keal’s thoughts.

“What exactly are we going to do once we get there? You haven’t really mentioned any specifics?”

Apa got a pained look on his face. It was quite clear that he did not like what he was about to say. This only made Keal even more keen to hear it.

“I might as well tell you, lad. Better now, on the road, than in a town with people around. Just in case you don’t, ah, take lightly to this.”

“Out with it, old man.”

“Long story short, you’ll never be able to walk away from the things they taught you. People have tried. They just can’t. You’ve been conditioned on such a low level that there’s nothing you can do.”

“Fuck,” Keal said, “why do I even ask? Every time I learn more things just seem to get worse.”

“And you’re not even close to the bad things.”

As they walked down the road Apa began to tell Keal about how the dragons had trained him to become, in time, one of them. For some reason Keal had managed to escape the monastery before he was actually drawn all the way in. He had, however, not escape the

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basic training, or conditioning as Apa liked to call it, so his reflexes and thoughts would forever be honed for neverending war and fighting.

And now he and Apa were walking toward Tolora, where Apa knew people who could help Keal get himself under enough control that he might at least function among other people. At least to the point where he did not attempt to kill them simply because they got in his way.

However little Keal liked it he was destined for a life of blood.

### Tolora

One afternoon Keal could finally see the heavy, black smoke rising from Tolora. He and Apa had been on the road for almost a fortnight, discussing their options and trying to make Keal remember what he had learned. Along the way they had held a series of training sessions that were meant to trigger different kinds of abilities. Sometimes Apa would try to surprise Keal with a trick attack of some kind. At other times he would wake Keal in the middle of the night and ask all manner of strange riddles.

Slowly a pattern had begun to emerge. It seemed like Keal had been meant as an assassin. Though he did have some more theoretical skills even they were more oriented at direct problem solving based on a here and now approach. Stealth and fighting, those he were good at. To the point where even Keal himself was somewhat scared of himself.

Neither of them felt good about this. It was bad enough that he had been trained by the dragons, but to be trained simply to kill made them both nervous. For starters there was the fear that there was some yet unknown conditioning that would suddenly spring up and turn Keal into a psychotic killer machine. Then there was the fear that the dragons, or perhaps some agents working with them, had some way of controlling Keal. And finally there was the fear that Keal would be so marked by this that he had no choice but to actually become an assassin.

“A life of blood, indeed,” Keal said.

He looked at the smoke rising above the tree tops. They were only a few hours away from the town itself so the road was now well traveled and they frequently passed, or were passed by, carts and wagons and the occasional rider on horseback.

“You still think the people you know are around?”

“Well,” Apa said. “They might have moved on, but I think Giederus should still be around.”

“The bar keep?”

“Yes. He will have aged a bit by now. Can’t imagine him not staying with his tavern, though, swinging his wooden leg at people if they give him too much lip.”

Some to Keal unknown memory made Apa lough. A passing tinkerer(?) looked sideways at them shaking his head and grumped something. Most of the people they had passed had seemed withdrawn if not downright grumpy. When he mentioned this Apa just shrugged.

“It’s always been like that in the larger towns. I guess it’s got something to do with people not having to rely as much on each other. Or, well, I suppose they do rely on each other. They are just not as, hmmm, dependent on each other.”

“Yeah,” Keal said, “I guess. Different from life in small settlements.”

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For a while they walked in silence. More wagons rumbled past them and once or twice Keal nearly jumped because he thought he recognised a wagon or a face from his time with the tribe. Looking twice, though, he found that they were strangers.

In the past two days Keal had seen more people passing them by than he had seen for several months before he came to the foresters' settlement. Again the sense of fear of other people began to creep up on him. With a force of will he pushed it back and told himself that it was not worth being afraid of. If it had been then how come so many people seemed to survive living in the town?

They passed a bend in the road and suddenly the entire landscape changed. The forest had been as thick as ever, but after the bend they came out into, well, Keal could not think of it as a clearing. From one step to the other the trees just stopped and they were looking out over at least a mile of fields on either side of the road. The road itself angled down toward a vast, dirty and smoky town. Beyond the town was the ocean. Blue, rolling, glittering and seemingly never ending.

It took a few moments for Keal to take all of it in and he was not helped by Apa who pointed to the sides along the coast line. The forest had not only been cleared in a band along the road, they spread out for several miles on either side. All over them people were working and gathering grain and other crops before the winter. And on the ocean Keal saw a few dozen ships that seemed to just sail around randomly.

"Ah," Apa said, "that would be the fishing fleet. Good season for herring and the occasional catfish, I think."

"Fish? Gah, I guess that's not surprising. I'll pass, though."

At some point, a long time ago, Keal had tasted fish. He could not recall precisely how it tasted, but he remembered it as being somewhat greasy and lacking the substance of meat or bread. It also did not make him feel better that he had choked on a small fish bone.

"You can't mean that!"

Apa seemed outright appaled by this.

"Fish is one of the most delicious foods around. Ahhh, grilled cat fish. Smoked herrings. Yum!"

Shaking his head Keal started down the road toward Tolora.

The closer they came to the town the more they could hear the sounds and smell the stink of the town. In addition to the smoke from the chimneys that rose above the houses there was also the stench of too many people living in too little space.

"Eww," Keal said, "how do people manage to live here? It's one thing that there are so many people around. But the smell. That's just nasty."

"Well, I guess they just get used to it. Eventually. Granted, Tolora is not the best town in this aspect. Only a part, those large stone buildings there near the docks, of it actually has sewers. Or what passes for sewers."

"Sewers? Underground shit canals?"

Apa chuckled at Keal's euphemism.

"Actually, in Tolora's case the central part was originally build on a series of very small islands connected by a labyrinth of equally small bridges. Eventually people found out how to connect the islands with a sort of large platform and, well, now the ocean actually rolls in under a part of the city."

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“What? You’re joking. Those stone building? They’re far too heavy to not simply fall into the water.”

“No, no. Or, well, I guess they would have been if they had been made from real stone. It’s some kind of very light stone or something. Some char coal burners discovered it a while back, I think. It’s got something to do with burning clay in an oven. I don’t know all the details, though.”

Once more Keal shook his head. So he might have been trained as an assassin. But the dragons seemed to have skipped a lot of basic things about how the world functioned. That struck him as odd since, surely, an assassin would be more likely to work in places with many people than out in the middle of the forest.

He had not yet come to terms with what had happened and often he felt as if it was just a distant memory or dream. Especially in the middle of the day like now when there was light and a lot of people around that simply went about their business, ignoring both him and Apa.

When they reached the beginning of the last slope down to the town Keal began to get a really good look at the buildings. They were very different. Some were simple cabins or huts, especially at the edge of the town. Others were larger, some even had several stories. Near the docks, on the part that was not on the platform over the small islands, several large, square buildings stood side by side. Their lack of windows made them seem strangely out of place next to the rest of the buildings.

“Are those warehouses?” Keal said.

“Yes. And do you see that large domed building off to the right? The one with the twin chimneys in this end and a large one near the ocean?”

“Yeah, what is that? It looks weird.”

“That’s the central boiler. See how the smoke from the farthest is a lot lighter than the rest?”

Keal squinted and saw that the thickest of the plumes was actually closer to grey than black. It had just been obscured by all the other smoke.

“Why is that?” he said.

“It’s steam. From the boiler.”

“All of that?”

This really did surprise Keal. He had heard a lot of stories about the large boilers in the towns and he had come across a few boilers over the years. But none of them had produced this much steam.

“How large is it?” he said.

“It takes up most of the building. Can you see the wires running out from... no, we can’t from here. I’ll show you once we’re down there.”

Behind them they could hear the deep rumbling of a large wagon. They turned and saw a huge, ox driven wagon loaded with coal. Neither the oxen nor the wagon’s driver seemed to care about other people on the road so Keal and Apa had to quickly jumped to the side to avoid being run over.

Standing up they brushed themselves off and walked the last quarter mile to the town. There were no town gates as such since the town had grown over its original sides. And the bandits who did still roam stuck to roaming and never attacked the towns. Probably

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because the raiding parties were not large enough to need to plunder an actual town to get by.

Once they entered the town itself Keal got a whole different feel for how it felt to have a lot of people around him. On the road people had still been some distance from him and they either overtook them or passed them so they rarely spent much time with strangers all around them. On the streets of Tolora it was very different. Everywhere there were people milling around, getting in each others way, bumping against other people and so on. And the noise was deafening. All around him Keal could pick up pieces of conversation, the rattle of wagons, hooves against cobbles. He very nearly started screaming such was the cacophony.

Apa noticed this and quickly pulled Keal down a side street that was less crowded. He guided Keal out to the side of the street so he could take a few breaths and not have to constantly move around to avoid being hustled.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Keal said, “just give me a minute.”

He bent over and took several deep breaths. Then he slowly stood back up, once more in control of himself.

“Right,” he said, “let’s get on. The sooner we get to that friend of yours and his tavern the better.”

Keeping to the side streets Apa led Keal towards the docks and soon they could see a wooden sign with a broken cup painted on it.

“There we go, the Cracked Cup,” Apa said, “we’ll soon be inside with a mug of ale and a warm meal. Though it’ll probably be fish.”

Keal looked sceptic but chose not to say anything. He just wanted to get away from all the people. They were so noisy, they were everywhere and he could not help but try and keep track of all of them. Just in case one of them should suddenly attack him.

He stopped dead in his tracks.

Why, he thought, would I think that?

Suddenly he reached down to his side with one hand, without consciously thinking about it and his fingers closed around someone’s wrist. He looked down and saw a child trying desperately to free its hand from his grasp. The child was so young and dirty that Keal could not see if it was a boy or a girl. Not knowing what to do he held on for a while and just glared into the child’s eyes before letting go. The child quickly ran off down the street holding its hand close to its body. Keal’s grasp had left dark, and obviously painful, bruises on the child’s wrist.

Around him people either had not noticed this or they did not care. Keal stood for a moment thinking about what had happened. Somehow he had managed to anticipate that the child would try to pick his pockets. Not that there had been anything to pick, though. But the child would not have known that. It made Keal slightly nervous, yet also intrigued. So far he had only trained with, or rather against, Apa so the fact that he could pick up on someone else’s thoughts and intentions in the middle of this crowded place was new to him.

“Come on,” Apa said, “nice catch, but we really should get going. I could do with a mug of ale.”

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It was not long before they had entered the tavern and when they did Keal almost marched straight back out. The room was almost as crowded as outside and since the tavern's windows seemed to be impossible to open the stench was even worse inside than out in the street. Straight ahead of them was a long counter where a handful of people hang, most of them nursing wooden mugs of some kind of frothing ale. Scattered throughout the rest of the room were another dozen or two other customers sitting on the floor around low, round tables.

When the two of them entered a couple of people stopped talking and glared at them. Keal got the distinct impression that he had trespassed upon some kind of invisible/unknown domain and that he was not welcome. Beside him Apa let out a short laugh and spoke to no one in particular, yet loud enough to be heard.

"Ha!" he said, "this place looks as rotten and dirty as ever. And so does the scumbags that pass for its patrons."

Keal thought that, judging by the murderous looks they got, they were headed straight for a nasty fight. Briefly he wondered if this was another way for Apa to test his abilities. Then a man came out from a door leading out behind the counter. He was a huge man. Not as such physically, there was just a lot of him. It was as if his presence in the room was that of ten men. From the way he carried himself and the apron around his waist Keal guessed that this must be the bar keep.

A couple of people had looked like they were about to get up and do something about the old man who had just insulted them. When the bar keep entered the room they held back, however, and waited to see what he would do. He walked out from behind the counter and spoke in a loud, booming voice.

"By Tep's Hairy Balls," he said, "who is the dead man who's too stupid to realise his body should not be moving. Or his tongue!"

An evil gleam crept into the eyes of two men at the counter. One of them discreetly slipped a hand down near the top of his left boot. Keal instinctively kept one eye on him while he shifted slightly to the side to be able to circle slightly to the side in case the man went for a hidden weapon of some kind.

"Ha", Apa said, "if anyone's got hairy balls it you, Gied. As for moving, well, what the fuck are you gonna do 'bout it?"

As he spoke his voice took on a more rough note and his speech slipped from the fairly civilised tongue had used with Keal in the forest. Now he sounded like Fredic had sounded when he was drunk and angry.

The bar keep came straight at them, hobbling a little on his wooden leg, while gesturing for the two men at the bar to remain seated. He walked all the way up to Apa and looked down at him. Apa was at least a head shorter, but simply stared up at him in return.

"You got something to say about my bar you say it to my face!"

"Pfff! I'll say it to your arse when your face down in the mud, you son of a leaf blower."

Now Keal was sure they were about to be killed. Behind them the door opened and two men walked in and simply placed themselves in the doorway behind them. Without thinking Keal reached around back to pull out a knife and cut his way through the men blocking the exit.

Suddenly Apa and the bar keep started laughing. It took a few moments for this to register on the others, but when it did the men at the bar visibly relaxed and returned their attention to their drinks.

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Keal did not understand anything that was happening and stayed tense, ready to attack if need be. But when the bar keep and Apa shared a bear hug and began chatting he figured that perhaps they were not about to die after all. The men behind them stepped to the side and sat down at a table under one of the grimy windows.

“Pelkan,” the bar keep said, “you old fart. What the fuck are you doing back in Tolora! And why didn’t you tell me you were back in this end of the world?”

“Only just got back, literally just minutes ago. Naturally we came straight to see you. I figured it’d be easier to just get it over with, drinking that piss you call ale.”

Apa poked Keal in the ribs.

“Relax, lad, old Giederus here won’t be harming us. At least not right now, hehe.”

The bar keep, Giederus, stuck out a hand to Keal. He had a grip like an iron vice and though Keal did his best to return it felt like he was trying to knock over the world by pushing a tree.

“Name’s Giederus, bar keep of this shit hole. It’ll be my pleasure to get you drunk and away from that old dirtbag.”

As he said it he winked at Keal who was still standing with a look of utter incomprehension on his face. Eventually Keal gathered his wits and managed to croak out a quick reply.

“Thanks. I’m Keal. Don’t know about the dirtbag part, just happened to run into Apa a while back.”

“Apa?” Giederus said. “Apa?! What the fuck? Don’t tell me you went and settled down, did you?”

This time it was Apa’s turn to look slightly off. He nodded at an empty table.

“Ah, right,” Giederus said, “yeah, let’s sit down. Hey, kid, three mugs of ale here.”

The last bit was yelled to a boy who was carrying empty mugs from the tables to the bar and returning with them filled. The boy brought the mugs and they settled down, Giederus with a curious look in his eyes and he looked Keal over.

“So,” he said, “what are you doing here?”

Apa sighed and did indeed look very old and tired. This was not lost on Giederus who instantly sobered up and looked serious.

“Well,” Apa said, “it’s a long story and I’ll spare you the details. A while ago Keal here came across the settlement I’ve been living at these past years. He needs our help.”

There was something about the way Apa said “our” that made it possible that it was not just him and Giederus but someone, or something, else as well. Giederus’ eyes went wide and he stared intently at Keal for a moment or two.

“No!” he said. “He was up there? In the mountains?”

“Yeah, but there’s something strange about it. I can’t tell you much now. How quickly can you gather the others?”

“Soon, right now, yesterday. Whenever you need them.”

It was clear to Keal that these two went far back and though they obviously had not seen each other for a long time they knew each other well enough that Giederus were willing to aid Apa without thinking twice. He felt like he should say or explain something to Giederus, but he could not for the life of him think of what to say. Instead he chose to simply shut up and look at the bar keep to try and size him up.

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“Later tonight will be soon enough. We need to get the dust from the road off us first. Can we crash here? Perhaps even wash up a little?”

“Sure, I’ll have the kid get the guest room ready for you. It’s small, as you know, but better than any other place you might be able to find a place to sleep. These days the town’s overflowing with drifters looking for work but finding none.”

“Excellent,” Apa said, “can you get us some grub first? And another mug of ale. You’ve really gotten good at brewing, you know.”

“Ha! Or perhaps you’ve simply been out in the wilderness for so long that you’ve lost all taste. You think this piss tastes good?”

Giederus nearly fell backwards with laughter.

To Keal the ale tasted great. A bitter freshness mixed with a slight tingling on the tongue. And, of course, the warm feeling of alcohol in his stomach.

Apa and Giederus shared a look as they both took a long swig.

“If your piss tastes like this you should bottle it,” Apa said, “it really is good.”

“Thanks. I’ve been experimenting a little with adding crushed nuts to the brew. Don’t go around telling people, though, I’d prefer it to stay my little secret.”

“Lips are sealed.”

They looked at Keal who mumbled his agreement that he would also not mention the nuts to anyone. Giederus got up and nodded to them before he went back behind the bar.

After a few minutes the boy brought over two plates piled high with bread, stew and a little cheese. Compared to what they had eaten on the road the meal was pure bliss and Keal slowly began to unwind and relax a little, helped along by a second mug of ale. Now that he was aware of it he really could taste the nuts. Not a lot, but it was there. Just at the edge of his tastebuds.

Almost as soon as they had finished eating Apa got up and told Keal to follow him. They went out of the side door into a narrow hallway and up a flight of stairs to the first floor of the tavern. There were a few doors and Apa pointed to one at the end.

“That’s the guest room. The other rooms are used by Gied himself, whatever kid is helping him out and if my memory serves me correctly that last one is a store room.”

Keal nodded and they headed into the guest room. It was small, just like Giederus had said, but there was enough room for two beds and a chair between them. They dumped their bags on the floor and sat down on the beds.

“Okay,” Apa said, “in a few minutes I guess Gied will be up here. He and I go way back and though he’s not really one of us he has helped us a lot in the past.”

“One of us? You mean, someone who’s been trained by the dragons?”

“Precisely. Though I’d advice you to not mention the dragons freely. At best people will simply think you’re mad. At worst...”

Apa shrugged and made a choking sound. It was clear that certain things should be kept secret. Keal nodded his understanding and leaned back on the chair. It felt even better than the bench he had slept on for a single night back with the foresters. He almost drifted off to sleep, but Apa’s voice kept him awake.

“Gied knows a lot of people here around and he’s been a loyal friend to me ever since he and I first met more than fifty years ago. He knows that I age differently, but apart from

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that I don't think he knows much. That might have changed in the decade or so that I've been away from here."

"Why did you leave the town?"

Keal was tired and the question just escaped his mouth without him thinking about it at all. Apa kept quiet for quite some time and Keal eventually lifted his head and looked at him. The look on Apa's face was one of sadness and anger. At first Keal thought Apa was angry with him for asking, but when Apa spoke his voice was soft, almost dreamy. It was obvious to Keal that the old man was returning to some former self now that he was back in the town.

Back when he was still living in Tolora Apa had spent a lot of his time organising a network of people who had either escaped from the dragons' training or had otherwise been influenced by them. A secret group of people referring to themselves as the *Ordo Draconis* (find a better name!)

Granted, there had not been many who had actually been directly influenced, and even fewer who had been trained. Compared to the training Keal had gotten Apa was merely a rookie. Even so Apa had still been one of the best trained people in the network. He had never met anyone who could come close to what Keal knew. That was why he had chosen to go back to Tolora despite the risk he faced here.

The last time he was here the local authorities had learned that someone was organising a secret network in the town and, naturally, had set out to find out what it was all about. Little did the authorities know how dangerous such an endeavour was. Not because Apa and the others meant the town harm, but because any kind of unwanted attention might draw other forces toward both the network and the town. As such Apa did not believe that the town's council needed to be kept in the dark about the order's activities. In fact, one of the members was on the council. There had been a lot of debating about whether to keep the order secret or not but in the end they had chosen to err on the side of caution.

Eventually, though, the authorities had caught up with them and had managed to track down Apa to one of the order's hiding places. At the time Apa had lived as a normal shop owner, keeping a low profile while being in a position where he could easily get in contact with all the others either by them visiting the shop or him hiring them to deliver his wares or some similar mundane task. Apa had barely managed to escape without getting caught, and without killing any of the spy catchers. Despite his dislike of the spy catchers' often questionable ways of obtaining information he had not felt good about actually killing any of them. Fortunately he had gotten away, but too many people know how he looked so he had been forced to retreat to the forest.

For the first few years he had simply hidden away deep among the trees, waiting patiently for things to settle down so he could get out of hiding again. He had sent a couple of feelers out and after half a dozen years it had seemed safe for him to get close to town. Not safe enough that he could return to the town to live there, but at least he could live in one of the settlements and expect to be left in peace.

One of the others from the order, Ama, had joined him and for a while she had been helpful in sending messages back and forth. A few years ago, however, the spy catchers had once more cast their eye on the order's network. The spy catchers had at first assumed that the network had been unravelled back when Apa fled Tolora. It had indeed put a damper on things, but the network had survived and slowly began rebuilding itself.

Living far from the town Apa had not known what had caused the problems that cut him and Ama off from the others, but he was hoping to learn more about it once Giederus had

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organised a meeting.

“So,” Keal said, “basically you have not been here for over a decade. And you have not heard from them for almost five years?”

“Yeah, something like that. Listen, tonight when we meet the others I want you to keep your eyes open. I’ll not tell the others just how powerful you are. Not yet, at least. We need to maintain the element of surprise in case the worst happens.”

“The worst? The spy catchers?”

“The spy catchers would be bad, yes. But as I said there are other forces who work against us. The dragons have agents working for them, often people who don’t even know anything about who they work for or even what they’re doing. They’re just happy to earn a little coin relaying informations, keeping an eye or ear open and so on.”

A quiet knocking came from the door. Keal did not catch the rythm, but there was definitely some kind of pattern to it.

“Ah,” Apa said, “that would be Gied.”

He went to the door and opened it a crack to check that it really was Giederus. When he had seen that it was he opened the door completely and let the bar keep in.

“So,” Giederus said, “I’ve talked to some of the others and they agreed to meet later tonight. We decided that we’d only bring in a few of the highest ranked members to hear what you have to say. After that, well, I guess we’ll see how it goes.”

Apa nodded.

“Good. Where are we meeting? And when?”

“In a few hours. We’ve got a safehouse down in the back of The Boiler. You remember that place?”

“Hmmm,” Apa said, “can’t say I do. Probably from after I left.”

“Yeah, well, anyway. I’ll come pick you up when it’s time. For now I suggest you relax a little. I’ll send the boy up with a little more food if you need it.”

Both Apa and Keal nodded. It was nice to have real food again and while Keal was not as such hungry he would not mind some more of Giederus’ delicies food.

When the boy came Apa questioned him briefly and learned that he was called Haklan and was an orphan that Giederus had taken in when he was very young. Haklan had worked in the tavern every since cleaning tables, serving food and so on. It was not the best job and often hard, that much was evident from the way he talked about it, but it was far better than living on the street.

As Keal listened to them talking he once more thought back to his own childhood and reflected on the fact that Haklan both seemed well nourished and he did not flinch when peolpe moved. Though he was sure Giederus would send the occasional slap in Haklan’s direction he got the impression that the boy actually led a fairly good life. Or at least a far better life than he himself had.

In addition to the food Haklan also brought some heavy, rich cake that tasted wonderful. It almost made Keal regret having seconds, but he managed to cram down a large piece before laying back on one of the beds feeling very satisfied. He was still a little nervous about what would happen later that evening. With a full stomach, though, that seemed to be far out in the future and not really important.

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It did not take long before he fell asleep, exhausted for the many days of walking and being tested by Apa.

While he slept Apa began rumaging around in his backpack and pulled out a set of clothes that were hidden all the way at the bottom. Outside the sun had set so he pulled the curtains for the windows and in the light of a single candle he changed clothes.

The set he had brought with him looked slightly old, yet not worn. It was well kept and consisted of a set of breeches, a simple cut shirt and a vest and jacket. It was far above the standards of the people who had been downstairs in the common room of the tavern.

He put his old clothes away and found another object from the bottom of his back pack. A small amulet hanging in a thin silver necklace. The amulet depicted a dragon's claw. Before putting it on he sat down on the chair and held the amulet in his hand for a while. Then he sighed and put it on with an expression like a man who puts the hangman's noose around his own neck.

There was a discreet knock on the door. This time he opened the door even more carefully and had his foot ready to help block it. He gave a sigh of relief when he saw that it was Giederus. The bar keep had also changed to better clothes, roughly the same outfit as Apa's except that they looked newer.

"It's time."

"Okay," Apa said, "give me a moment to wake Keal."

Giederus waited outside while Apa woke Keal gently and told him that they needed to leave. Keal was groggy from sleeping, but quickly rubbed his eyes and got on his feet. When he noticed Apa's clothes he stopped, feeling puzzled at the old man's appearance as well as a little bit embarrassed about his own worn out clothes. He shrugged it off quickly. Fancy clothes were the least of his worries now, he thought.

As they left the room Keal got a sudden sense of apprehension and looked around nervously.

"What do you feel?" Apa said.

"Don't know. Just feel nervous. Something's about to happen. Nothing that feels threatening, though, just... something important."

They went back downstairs and rather than leaving through the common room Giederus led them out the back. Keeping to the side streets they made their way towards the docks and the large boiler building Keal had seen from the road. When they came near it Giederus stopped them at a corner and nervously looked around it down the next street.

"The tavern is further up this street," he said, "but we have to be careful. One of the others said the spy catchers were more active than usually these days."

"Okay," Apa said, "how about we split up? You and I can circle around to the back, Keal should be inconspicuous enough to be able to simply enter the tavern on his own. We can signal him from inside, yes?"

"Yes, that sound good. You up for it Keal?"

"Sure. In the bar, get something to drink, sit down wait for you guys?"

Apa nodded.

The streets were still busy so it was easy for Apa and Giederus to slip into the throng of people and head down the street in the wrong direction so they could circle around to the back of the tavern.

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In the mean time Keal waited in the alley for a few minutes and then discreetly walked around the corner and slowly made his way to the tavern. It was easily recognisable with a large, wooden sign and an entrance door that was framed by a bent brass tube similar to the ones used in the large boilers.

Outside the door a bouncer was leaning against the wall quietly scanning the crowd and the people who entered the tavern. Keal felt slightly nervous under his gaze but kept his wits about him, his eyes low and walked through the door as if it was the most natural thing in the world.

The inside of the tavern was very similar to the one in the Cracked Cup except that here there were actually chairs at the tables and there were a lot fewer people. Those who were there were also far better dressed and looked less ragged. Once more Keal felt slightly embarrassed about his own clothes and his hands unconsciously began to straighten his shirt.

Fortunately no one seemed to mind him too much and soon he was sitting at a table with a mug of ale in his hand. Around him there were only a small handful of people and all of them kept to themselves. After he had been there for about a quarter of an hour a small group came into the room. They were far more jovial and laughed at some joke one of them had said. A few of the other customers actually left the room when the group sat down at a table in the middle of the room and ordered several rounds of ale “simply to get started” as one of them shouted.

Keal shifted around in his chair to be able to look around the group towards the door leading out to the back of the tavern, hoping Apa and Giederus would soon signal him. The roaring group were tickling his annoyance with other people and he felt increasingly uncomfortable.

Finally, after the group had finished at least five rounds, he saw Giederus stick his head in and nod. Keal quickly got up and went straight out the back. He knew he should be more careful, but he just really needed to get away.

Behind the tavern there was a small outhouse, some kind of storage shed. Giederus led him inside the shed and Keal saw a group of people gathered there. The men were dressed like Giederus and Apa in vests and jackets, the few women present had fine dresses.

When they entered the shed everyone stopped talking and looked at them. Giederus put a reassuring hand on Keal's back.

“Just relax,” he said, “these are people we can trust. Now, please do us the favour of presenting yourself. Apa has given a general introduction, but I for one would like to hear a few words about you from yourself.”

Keal nodded and went to the center of the hut. Everyone's eyes were on him and a cold shiver ran down his spine as he drew in a breath to address them.

“My name,” he said, “is Keal. I grew up somewhere North of here with one of the tribes. As a slave, I guess. After my master died I kind of drifted around until I came across... YOU!”

His last word was a shout and his eyes burned with anger as he launched himself directly at one of the people in the room. He snarled as he drew his knife.

“You're dead!”