

Keal

The Early Years

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Contents

1	Prologue	3
2	Young Keal	15
2.1	Trouble on the Road	15
2.2	Finally Some Gods	27
2.3	The Monastery	41
2.4	When Gods Walk The Earth	62
2.5	Going For A Walk	82
2.6	Secrets in the Night	104
2.7	Sneaking Around	124
2.8	Missing Monks	138
3	Young Assassin	150
3.1	The Monks' Secret	150
3.2	Awakening	162
3.3	Unheard Farewells	180
3.4	New Friends	182
3.5	Fate's Destiny	207
3.6	Claw Marks	219
3.7	Life of Blood	247
3.8	Tolora	256
4	Epilogue	280

1 Prologue

A cloaked figure walked slowly through the mist just outside the large gate. It gave off an eerie glow that lit up the mist before the figure itself became visible. The area in front of the gates was barren and littered with dark rocks on either side of the hard packed dirt road leading up to the gate.

As the figure came closer the guards on either side of the gate stood to attention. But rather than staring straight ahead, their wary eyes followed the figure's every movement. A few feet from the gate the figure stopped and glanced sideways up at one of the guards for a while before letting the hood of the cloak fall back. A young man's face was revealed, his expression one of utmost serenity. The eerie glow radiating from the man could now be seen to come from the very fabric of the cloak, though as he emerged from the mist the glow became dimmer until it disappeared completely when he reached the gates.

One of the guards started to move in front of the man, but a hiss and stern look from the other halted the movement. The first guard straightened again and spoke in a deep voice.

“Who approaches the Gates? Let your name be known that you may be introduced on the other side in a manner befitting your achievements and honour!”

1 Prologue

The young man let out a sigh and lost all traces of serenity as his shoulders drooped forward a bit. He slowly and deliberately gave the guard an annoyed look that lasted long enough to actually make the guard a little uncomfortable.

“Nice to see the new recruits are still given the finest education in all the worlds,” he said, the sarcasm so strong it nearly formed a mist of its own around the man. He looked up at the other guard who towered over him. This guard was both larger and older than the first and seemed to recognise the man.

“Well?” the man asked.

“Ehm... hullo Keal. Ah, you know, it really isn't a good time. You see, erm, ah, oh! It's after bed time. They're all asleep.”

“Sir!” the other guard sounded distressed, “that is not correct procedure. I must protest!”

“Procedure? Oh, erm, ah... there's, ah...”

The young man, Keal, shook his head and let himself slump down to sit on the ground. He let out another sigh and put a hand to his forehead. This was not the first time he had had problems with the guards at the gate and while he did not know the younger of the two he knew that the older was likely to give him quite a headache before he got anywhere. He shut both guards an annoyed glance and mumbled an indistinct curse at them.

“Sir, this is most disrespectful to our positions and to the Gates themselves! I really must insist that...”

The tirade of complaints was interrupted by a well-thrown rock that struck right between the guard's eyes, bounced off and fell clattering to the ground. Keal snorted and picked up

1 Prologue

another rock, this one slightly bigger than the one he had just thrown at the guard.

“SIR!”

“Now, now, Keal,” the older guard said, “that was just, ah, impolite. There really isn’t any need for... Ah! Right. Hang on, I’ll check immediately.”

The older guard’s eyes widened as Keal put down his rock in favour of a larger, more pointed one. Keal sneered at the world in general.

“Can I come in or not, Tosco?” Keal asked, throwing the rock from one hand to the other. For a moment it looked like the younger guard was about to explode.

“Come in? Come in?! Sir! What is the meaning of this? How dare this... this... well, look at him! How dare he even ask? His even being here in the first place should provide all the answer he could ever possibly need!”

The older guard ignored this and with a great deal of feet shuffling answered Keal.

“Sorry Keal. Ahm, you’re still not really, ah, welcome. Oh, I mean, we’re glad to see you, of course, ah, it’s just that, you see, we can’t really, uhm, actually let you through the gates, you know?”

“So they’re still mad at me?” Keal asked, a small smile almost finding its way to the corner of his mouth.

“Not so much mad as blindingly furious. I still don’t know precisely what you did, but it must have been truly horrific. Ah, could you please put that rock down?”

1 Prologue

Keal shrugged and let the rock fall to the ground as gently as he could via a spot between Tosco's neck and shoulder that he knew was sore from an old injury.

"Ouch! Now you're just being mean and, ah, petty!"

By now the younger guard seemed to have lost the ability to speak and, with an air of resignation, dropped forwards onto its front legs. The young dragon, for the guards were indeed dragons, levelled its head with Keal's and looked more closely at him. Distractedly Keal waved his hand at its jaw, not unlike the way he would wave off flies. The dragon snorted at this and offended withdrew its head outside Keal's reach and settled down to scratch its forehead where the rock had hit it. Keal noticed this and mumbled an apology.

"Sorry about that. It's just that I'm a bit tired from the walk across the plain, the crossing of the river, the climbing of the tree and so on and so on." His voice took on the strained sound of someone who had gone through too many troubles too many times.

"And for what?" he continued sarcastically, "just to be turned back for the hundreth time!"

Tosco, the older of the dragons, consulted a ledger it had dug out from somewhere behind it while Keal talked.

"Actually, it's, ah, only your ninety seventh time... unless you count the time where you tried to get by hiding in Rayd's baggage..."

"That was so close," groaned Keal, "but naturally she just had to stop and check her makeup again right before going through the gates. Say, who's the new guy?"

Tosco let out a yelp and fumbled the ledger so it fell to the

1 Prologue

ground. He looked around nervously and hissed at Keal. Lowering both his head and voice he spoke to Keal in serious tones.

“Don’t use that expression! You know they don’t like that term!”

“What term? Oh... ’The New Guy’?”

Keal smirked.

“Don’t say it!” Tosco said sounding almost panicking.

“Fair enough. Okay, then, who’s the new recruit?”

“Ligridan-ad-Tor-ad-Draconium, third rank of the most noble Guards of the Gate, twice awarded with...”

“We just call it Dragling,” Tosco said, its interruption earning it a disapproving glance. “It’s one of the hatchlings from the new breeding grounds.”

Keal and Tosco both ignored Dragling’s protests at being cut off.

“Its first day on the job?”

“More or less, ah, but you do realise, this, erm, time you humans are so hung up on doesn’t really mean all that much to us.”

“Yeah, I know. Goot thing, too, as I imagine a few centuries in this place would be hell.”

“No, no,” Dragling added in an attempt to recapture the conversation by being helpful, “you get to hell by swimming down the river not crossing it. And then...”

“Oh, shut up!” Keal and Tosco said as one.

Keal stood up and brushed his clothes. He picked up the ledger Tosco had dropped and thrust it at the dragon.

1 Prologue

“You done with the formalities?”

“Oh yes, your ninety seventh request...”

Keal looked down at a particularly pointed and wicked looking rock.

“Ah, I mean, your ninety eight request to come through the gates have been duly noted,” Tosco shot Dragling a warning glance, “and all formal customs have been properly observed.”

“And?”

“Oh, ah, and Request Denied”

“Thanks. I guess.”

Keal sighed again and looked up at the gates with longing in his eyes.

“One day...” he said quietly.

“But not today,” Tosco said. “Shall we get on with, ah, this?”

“We better.”

Tosco stretched out a talloned forearm and let the tip of a claw rest gently at the base of Keal’s neck.

“You know I really don’t like, ah, doing this to you?”

“I really don’t like you doing to to me either,” Keal said, “but it beats walking all the way back.”

Reaching forward Keal touched a ring on Tosco’s talon. As he did so the ring started glowing and rays of energy and light leapt from the ring to Keal’s body. With a sickening twisting of reality itself Keal’s body split into molecules that scattered invisibly in the air. The only thing left were faint echoes of an agonised scream Keal had let out as the ring’s powers touched him.

1 Prologue

As the echoes died away Dragling returned to its more formal, military nature.

“Sir? Requesting an explanation for what just happened,” it said.

Tosco looked at him with a puzzled expression.

“Ah, erm, no one told you about Keal?”

“No, sir!”

“And you’ve never heard the rumours?”

“No, sir!”

“Surely your comrades from the grounds must have told some stories?”

“I’m sure they did, sir, those malingering slobs. Most of them spent more time chatting and carousing than training!”

“But, ah, chatting and carousing. That, ahm, is training?”

Tosco’s expression went from puzzled to pure incomprehension.

“Sir! The fine military traditions of the most noble regiment in all the armies of all the worlds do not sit idle but strive to become the fiercest, most loyal and noble!”

“Ah, right, so when the others had fun and learned important things like, ah, drinking songs and, uhm, stories of heroes past and present you were... ah...”

“Polishing my scales before the next days parades,” Dragling finished the sentence, pride gleaming in his eyes.

“Yes, I was afraid you’d say something like that. Ah, well, at least you weren’t busy stroking your tail.”

1 Prologue

“But I was, sir! Tail stroking is...”

“I don’t want to know!” Tosco shouted, “back to Keal.”

“Right, sir. Sorry, sir.”

Tosco sighed and thought back to the first time Keal had been turned back at the gates. That was a long time ago, even by dragon standards, and Keal had definitely grown bitter since then. He could hardly be blamed.

“Let’s just say that, ah, Keal managed to really upset everyone who is anything on the other side. As the only one in, ah, the entire universe of time and space he’s been forbidden entry for all eternity.”

“Sir, they can’t do that, surely?” Dragling sounded genuinely concerned.

“Ah, well, no. Not completely. There is a small loophole that, ah, might let him enter eventually. You see, ehm, someone once pointed out that if he were to, ah, destroy time, erm, eh, he would effectively have made it through all eternity and thus, ah, be able to pass through.”

“Can’t he get a pardon, sir?”

“From them?” Tosco tilted his head and looked meaningfully at Dragling.

“Beg pardon, sir, of course he could not. But why does he come back, sir?”

Tosco shook its great head sadly and became unusually sombre.

“He doesn’t always have much choice in these matters.”

For a while the two dragons sat in silence contemplating the difficulties of Keal’s situation until Dragling lifted his body up

1 Prologue

and stood to attention on his hind legs. He nodded towards the mist where another dim light had appeared.

Tosco blinked a few times and consulted his ledger. He shook it a few times and turned it upside-down.

“No one else is supposed to come through now,” he said in a surprised voice.

Slowly a figure became more visible through the mist and soon became recognisable as an old man. Unlike Keal his walk was a lot more uncertain and the hood of the cloak did not cover his head revealing grey hair and a wrinkled face. It did, however, keep the old man’s from noticing the large shapes of the dragons until he was very close to them. When he came close enough to see their clawed feet he gave a small shriek and looked up. Seeing the two large forms looming over him he scrambled back a few paces covering his face with his arms.

“Help,” he screamed, “get away from me, you beasts!”

Both Tosco and Dragling stood still at attention, their only movement to exchange a tired glance. Humans never could get it into their heads that just because dragons are big it does not mean they will eat them. After a few moments the man quieted down and seemed to figure out that perhaps he was not about to get eaten after all.

Dragling’s voice boomed through the mist.

“Who approaches the Gates? Let your name be known that you may be introduced on the other side in a manner befitting your achievements and honour!”

“Where... where am I? What is this place?”

“You stand before nothing less,” Dragling continued, “then the

1 Prologue

Gates to the Afterlife, the Land of the Dead, the Netherworld, the Other Side, the..."

"Ah, look," interrupted Tosco, "just tell us your name and we'll make sure you'll be received by the, ah, proper people once you pass through."

The old man looked from one dragon to the other something clearly not making sense to him. Tosco put on what he believed was his most benign and patient expression, a wide smile that very clearly showed every single tooth in his gaping maw, and calmly explained.

"Please, my good man, ah, it would seem that your physical body has given up on, ah, its normal functions such as breathing, moving and generally just being alive. This has allowed the real you, or your soul or spirit if you prefer, to pass on to, ah, whatever you'll find beyond the gates."

"You mean that I'm..." the man gulped, "that I'm dead?"

"That would be, ah, correct, yes."

"But no. It can't be right. One minute I was right there on the road and now I'm here. There must be some mistake."

"You were just on the road?" Dragling asked. "No accidents happening, no wild animals nearby or any other similar dangerous elements as covered by the regulations' articles on life threatening situations?"

"No, well, there was this man, but he was just lying dead at the side of the road. Surely that doesn't count. And I did check that there were no poisonous insects in his boots before I put them on. I mean, yes, 'you must not steal' and all that, but he was dead and had passed on to a better place. He was beyond owning his boots, wasn't he?"

1 Prologue

“Ah, erm, boots you say?” Tosco said, “they wouldn’t by any chance be green leather boots with a star pattern on the heel?”

“Now that you mention it...”

The conversation was interrupted by a loud metallic groan from the gates. Slowly they opened and bright light spilled out from the other side. The two dragons urgently waved the man on so he would get through before the gates closed again.

“Sir, with your permission, what was that about the boots?”

“Boots? Oh, ah, the boots? Well, suffice it to say that Keal gets, ahm, annoyed when people try and steal his things while he’s, ah, dead.”

“Oh,” Dragling said and thought about it a bit.

“Guess I would be too, sir,” it said with a firm nod, “but what about the other things he said? The ‘don’t steal’ bit? That sounded odd.”

Tosco shrugged, but did not reply. He was not himself sure what it was all about, but an increasing number of people had started saying things like that and other nonsense. He had even once overheard his superiors mention this line of thinking briefly. Apparently there was some concern over this new way of thinking that was being spread across the lands. At first it had started out small, but for some obscure reason people seemed to find the thought of simply being nice to each other comforting. Tosco shared his superiors’ concerns. A world where people were being nice to each other would be boring indeed.

“Sir?”

“Huh? Oh, ah, let it go,” Tosco sighed as he settled down for a nap, “that part is not our headache. We just have to get their

1 Prologue

names and get them through the gate. Or, in Keal's case, not get him through the gate."

"But sir," Dragling said nervously, "we never did get that last man's name. What will happen to him then?"

"Hmmm... never thought about it. He'll probably just, ah, cease to exist or, ah, something. Hardly matters, does it?"

Before Dragling had a chance to answer a new light could be seen in the mist. Groaning Tosco also stood at attention and the dragons waited patiently for the next confused person who would make the final journey.

2 Young Keal

2.1 Trouble on the Road

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

2 *Young Keal*

known world, mainly in the larger towns and cities, old pieces of machinery had survived old age and some of them were still working though no one really knew how their internals functioned.

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

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

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

There still had not been time for him to really think much about what had happened back in the camp. Everything had been so confusing after Fredic's death with the others in the tribe going through their belongings not caring which were Fredic's and which were Keal's. At the end of it he had found himself pushed out of the tribe without much of value to take

2 *Young Keal*

with him. It was only by sheer luck the tribesmen had not found the small stash of bread and cheese Keal had gotten into the habit of collecting. He never knew when Fredic would give him food so whenever he had had the chance he had tried to hide away that which he did not need right at the moment. Sometimes he had even managed to pilfer some from Fredic's wagon when the old man had either fallen asleep early or been too busy grumbling in a corner to notice.

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

Lost in his thoughts Keal did not notice the tipped over wagon at the side of the road until he was almost next to it. With a jerk he stopped and looked around. No one was around so he walked closer to the wagon to see what had happened to it. At first it looked like it had simply tipped over and been left by its owner, but when he took a closer look at the seat he could see dried blood on the side hidden by the tall grass.

2 *Young Keal*

Upon closer examination he saw that it was not merely a few drops but a very large smear spattering most of the side of the wagon and part of the seat. It was almost as if someone had been crushed by the wagon and dragged along for a while. Feeling nervous he glanced around once more for signs that the owner, or worse, whoever had been the cause of this. Still there were no signs of anyone else but him so he proceeded to take a look inside the wagon.

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

Getting up on shaking legs Keal covered his mouth with his hand and looked once more into the wagon to see what caused the stench. A horrific sight met him: two hacked up bodies had been thrown inside the wagon, obviously after it had been tipped over. The damp air of the forest, helped by all kinds of crawling insects, had rotted the flesh of the bodies and left them dripping foul looking and smelling goo onto the canvas. Even as Keal watched a large piece of flesh fell off what had once been an arm and landed with a sickening sound among similar pieces of flesh. Where the piece of flesh had been Keal could see maggots and worms crawling around surprised that their meal had suddenly been taken from them.

Again Keal's bowels upended themselves and he staggered away from the scene. Whatever was left inside the wagon would be covered in blood and pieces of rotted flesh and Keal

2 *Young Keal*

had no intentions of even looking at it again to see if he could find anything useful. Coughing he walked back onto the road and started stumbling onward.

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

The rest of the day and quite a while into the night he kept pushing on as hard as he could and when he finally crawled a short distance into the forest to hide for the night he did not get much sleep. Throughout the night he was haunted by nightmares of what might have happened to the people in the wagon. The more he thought about it the less sense it all made to him. He could not understand who would have gone through all the trouble of flipping over the wagon, killing and dismembering whoever those two people had been and then stuffing the body parts back into the wagon and closing the canvas cover. It was not as if the wagon had been hidden so the bodies would soon have been found no matter what. A slight trembling went through him every time his mind went back to the horrific scene. Lying in the darkness he wished

2 *Young Keal*

he had at least attempted to see if there had been any tracks leading away from the wagon. If he had found any he might have had an idea of whether he was travelling towards or away from whoever had done this. Every few minutes he would be startled by the tiniest of sounds in the dark forest. Even though he was used to the night time sounds every rustling leaf, every crawling rodent, every bird's call would jerk him back awake until he finally collapsed into troubled sleep not long before dawn.

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

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

The rest of the night the figure kept sitting crouched by Keal's side watching as his sleep calmed and his breathing slowed to a steady rhythm. As the singing of birds heralded the coming of dawn the creature rose silently and slipped back into the forest. As soon as it had withdrawn completely of out sight Keal sat up with a sharp intake of breath. His head spinning he dropped down on his back trying to get his bearings. Images from the day before still danced in his mind, but they now seemed a little distant making the scene seem more like something out of a nightmare than from reality. Sitting up again he listened to the forest's sounds and now found them soothing. Where the darkness of night had turned the scuttling of animals into approaching madmen they now seemed to indicate that everything was in order and that life went on

2 *Young Keal*

as always.

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

Both the day and the miles went quickly and in the late afternoon he began thinking about finding somewhere to rest for the night and gather a little food. He looked from one side of the road to the other trying to decide which side he should go into. Again a small smile spread on his lips as he felt butterflies fluttering around in his stomach. As strange as the feeling was it was still a small thing to be able to choose to go left or right and when he became conscious of just how ridiculous it really was he gave a small laugh and headed off to his left in the direction of the slowly setting sun. Just as he had hoped he soon had a small collection of berries, roots and nuts and he sat down cross legged in a small clearing near a slow flowing stream he had also found. The fresh food and clear water filled his stomach nicely and before the sun set completely he had crawled off to hide behind some bushes and fell asleep. If

2 *Young Keal*

he had any dreams he could not remember them. So sound did he sleep that a squirrel had crept close to steal a couple of the nuts he had carelessly left wrapped up in a small piece of cloth next to him.

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

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

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

It was not so much a question as a statement of fact. Keal slowly rose and took his time looking at the stranger before answering. On the other side of the stream stood an old man dressed in loose, white breeches and a dark blue tunic that looked like it had seen better days. The man was leaning a

2 *Young Keal*

little on a long walking stick and as he took a half step towards the stream Keal noticed that the stick was probably necessary as the man seemed to limp slightly on his right leg. With what he hoped was a strong, yet non-hostile, look Keal looked straight into the man's kind eyes and spoke warily.

"Indeed, sir. Something we have in common."

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

He shrugged.

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

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

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

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

“Ah, lad, where are my manners?”

He gave a small smile and a nod to Keal.

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

Keal just shrugged.

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

kind of respect that had not waned so much that he had been thrown out. It definitely had not seemed like the tribe's elders had been much fonder of Fredic than they were of Keal.

"Definitely can't be harsher than the tribe. But what's this monastery place you come from?"

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

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

"Well, can't sit around here all day, can we?"

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

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

The last question was asked with a wink of the eye and Keal could not help laughing. A slow stream that could be crossed with a long stride could hardly be called a mighty river. Or

maybe it could. Keal's laughter stopped as he reflected upon how easily he could have jumped across but how difficult it would have been for Metobaph to cross it on his own without stepping in. His musings did not go unnoticed by the old man.

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

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

2.2 Finally Some Gods

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

The merchants had been very grateful and had even asked if they would like to join them as they were headed towards Porbuyat hoping to sell their wares. Before Keal could even begin to voice his objections Metobaph had kindly declined

2 *Young Keal*

the invitation claiming that they were heading in the opposite direction. While it was actually the truth Metobaph had never actually mentioned any specific destination so Keal had been left wondering if the old man really was just travelling aimlessly or if there was some kind of other purpose with his journey. As they shared some of the meat for dinner he decided to ask.

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

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

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

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

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

“Before I left I held the position of, well, the title will mean nothing to you. Suffice it to say that it was fairly high up in our hierarchy. You see, the order I belong to, the Order of Peace, may both preach and believe in equality and treating people alike. But as always some kind of structure seems to

2 *Young Keal*

be necessary. And so it is that we eventually created different levels of influence, power really, within the order.”

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

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

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

“Don’t they teach anymore, then?”

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

He sighed.

“The original idea behind the order was far different and I must admit that I’m not entirely pleased with the way things

2 *Young Keal*

are now. Hence the delay in returning to the monastery. It's been several years since I was there and I fear I may not get an overly warm welcome."

"Then why are you going back?"

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

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

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

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

Metobaph sat watching Keal for a moment. It was plain that Keal felt uncomfortable about the direction the discussion was headed which intrigued him. Normally, Keal had a very well balanced mix between wanting to know more and not wanting

2 *Young Keal*

to ask too many questions. This particular topic was different. It was almost as if Keal neither wanted to know more or even talk about it. He decided to abandon the topic of gods and take their discussion in another direction.

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

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

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

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

“Do you believe the gods walk the earth?” he asked.

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Metobaph sat watching the boy tossing and turning in his sleep. Over the past couple of days he had noticed that the boy had an interesting knack of being able to fall asleep almost the minute he lay down. Or maybe sleep was not the correct term. Keal’s body was indeed sleeping, but his mind was still very much awake although it seemed to be somewhere else. With a small sigh he said a prayer under his breath and smiled sadly as he saw Keal find something resembling a peaceful sleep. It would not leave him as well rested as a real sleep for even though Metobaph had indeed studied long and hard when he

2 *Young Keal*

was younger he had never learned the finer points of how to take enough of the Supreme's power into his own being to be able to do more than just prodding the world into a slightly different place than where it had been only moments before. As least the sleep Metobaph could offer must be better than the nightmare ridden dreams Keal seemed to have every night.

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

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

"At least tonight you'll have a little company, old man," the voice said.

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

"Mind if I join you?"

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jinx just shrugged not wanting to either admit it was afraid of Metobaph. Or rather, that it was afraid of the old man’s

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

what it was that made Metobaph different from the others. He possessed within him a raw power whose strength Jinx could not even begin to guess at. And that was not even what scared Jinx the most. The truly frightening part was that Metobaph seemed to both understand and control that power. Jinx shivered and shifted his gaze to the fire hoping to escape a line of thinking that could only lead to one conclusion: that the Supreme was, in fact, completely accurately named.

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

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

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

Jinx smiled at some unmentioned memory.

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

“You were there?” Metobaph asked.

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

At this Metobaph raised both eyebrows.

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

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

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

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

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

"He didn't just 'escape' from the play house but actually managed it all the way into the machinery? Or did his parents work

outside it?”

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

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

“How many died in the accident?”

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

Jinx shook its head. It had been in the room, unseen, above the boiler when it ruptured and nearly took the entire building with it. This particular boiler had been a remake of one of the large subterranean machines left over from the time before the Weapon went off and was therefore in a wooden building near

2 *Young Keal*

the docks. If the boiler had been the same size as the original the accident would definitely have levelled the building and done serious damage to the neighbouring warehouses.

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

"Did you see what saved him?"

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

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

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

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

"Could it have been. . . your god?"

Metobaph sighed and poked the fire for a while.

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

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

"So you're all running around after some guy none of you have seen and none of you know what his plans are or what he's

2 *Young Keal*

doing and what he isn't?"

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

"What? Isn't that what you do?" it sneered.

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

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

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

Jinx was about to reply angrily, but Metobaph reached out to grab his walking stick and stabbed it at the god. Just as the stick was about to touch Jinx the god disappeared and the stick only stabbed at the empty air. Metobaph cursed the gods and all their foul doings to all their own false netherworlds and back. As he did this Keal's sleep became troubled once more

and the old man forced himself to be calm. Knowing Keal needed the sleep more than himself he settled into a traditional cross legged position of his order's meditations and crossed his hands in his lap. He took a deep breath and prepared for a night of prayer and meditation to help Keal through his nightmares.

2.3 The Monastery

Slowly but steadily the weeks passed as Keal and Metobaph travelled together. Since there were not many roads through the forests they rarely had to choose which way they were going. Gradually their lives settled into a quiet routine of walking most of the day and then gathering food and firewood, sometimes even hunting a little for rabbits. Most of the time they did not speak much. This suited both of them quite well. Keal obviously needed to make a lot of things settle in his mind and everytime he and the old man did talk his mind seemed to be filled up with new questions and thoughts. The long walks gave him ample time to sift through what had happened back in the tribe and as time passed he came to terms with the fact that he quite simply had seen something that night in the tent. During one of his talks with Metobaph the old man seemed very pleased when Keal had stumblingly come up with the theory that yes, something had manifested itself in front of him, but no, he did not know what it was. It could just as easily be the God of Misfortune as it could be something entirely different.

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

2 *Young Keal*

world.”

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

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

One day, sitting in the last rays from the setting sun, he found himself especially well rested and relaxed. They had made good progress that week and a few days earlier they had emerged from the forest to find themselves at the edge of a wide plain leading to some cloud covered mountains in the horizon. The sudden change from the illusion of shelter in the thick forest to the openness of the plain had started a lot of thoughts in him and as they made their way across the plain he had come to realise that he was beginning to be aware of

2 *Young Keal*

what he wanted to do, at least in the immediate future. So as he and Metobaph relaxed in the fading light with full stomachs he broached a topic he had been thinking a lot about for some time.

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

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

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

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

With a slow sigh and a gentle smile Metobaph closed his eyes and thought for a few moments before answering. Keal could not remember ever feeling so nervous in his entire life. It was not fear or worry that was making his stomach flutter like a field of butterflies. Anticipation, excitement and hope. Those feelings he had not known for most of his life were swelling

2 *Young Keal*

inside him as he had finally found it in himself to ask that question. In a brief moment of clarity he realised that it was the first time in years that he had so directly asked a favour of anyone without trying to make himself as small and subdued as possible. Should Metobaph decide against it and say no Keal was sure he would simply do so calmly without any kind of punishment. Actually, he thought, the worst that might happen would be that he would be allowed to go to the monastery. He sat reflecting a little on the warmth he felt inside at he noticed that the worst that could happen was still very much a good thing until Metobaph cleared his throat and sat up a little straighter.

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

If Keal had heard this before meeting Metobaph he would quite likely just have shrugged it off as the ramblings of an old man. Now he did not. Instead he thought it over for a few moments before giving his reply. He let the words settle for a while and swirled them around in his mind trying to see not only the words and their meanings but also what was hidden between them. In the end, he realised, the simple fact

2 *Young Keal*

that he was considering the words so carefully was more of an answer than what he might come up with in direct reply to Metobaph's indirect question. Still, he had come to like the small, verbal "battles" they had had together so far so he felt some kind of reply other than a simple yes or no was in order. With a short laugh he looked at the old man with a half smile on his face.

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

The smile that spread on the old man's face was everything Keal needed to know that there had not been a right or wrong answer to Metobaph's question. That there had not, in fact, been an actual question. This was the thing that had changed Keal's way of thinking the most, the old man's ability to not ask specific questions but give comments that made Keal ask them himself. As confused as this had often left him it was also something he had greatly come to appreciate because the act of thinking for himself and drawing his own conclusions were worth far more than anything he had ever been taught about the gods, life, cooking or anything else. For a split second it felt as his heart had stopped. The past weeks of freedom and his thoughts about the future suddenly seemed to pale against the freedom his mind had just created inside himself.

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

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

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

"Well, it's true that I was heading in that general direction.

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

Eventually they reached first the hills and then the mountains. And so it was that they found themselves climbing a steep mountain trail several days later. There had been times during the climb where Keal had bitterly regretted his decision, at least temporarily. The so called trail was little more than a few scraped rocks here and there and the past two days, after they had left the foot hills surrounding the mountains, had consisted more of trying to avoid broken ankles than actual walking. For Keal it also did not help that Metobaph possessed an uncanny ability to find the right place to step seemingly without thinking. Almost all the walking Keal had done so far in his life had been on fairly level ground. There had been a few hills, but with the roads they had only been a matter of walking upwards rather than straight out. Scrambling around, over and sometimes under large rocks was something completely different. Not only because the footing was treacherous, the way his back pack shifted back and forth across his back also made things difficult. He had often come close to losing his balance while balancing on the edge of a rock because he had forgotten the weight on his shoulders.

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

Keal and made him feel like the troubles might be worth it after all.

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

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

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

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

“Keal, get up!”

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

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

As he saw Keal blink his eyes and begin to move Metobaph

2 *Young Keal*

picked up his pack and walked around a large rock outcropping leading further on. Mumbling quiet curses to himself Keal kicked the blanket off him, then quickly gathered it around him as the chill morning air hit him. He wrapped up his belongings and stuffed them in his back before scrambling after Metobaph. It took a few moments for his legs to start working properly after the cold night and the rash/hurried awakening and as he rounded the corner he was staring down at his legs rubbing them with his hands. Then he looked up and saw a sight he would never forget.

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

All thoughts of the cold and the hard climb vapourised and he bounced on along the path wanting to catch up with Metobaph as soon as possible. While he had stood still looking at

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

not notice him, but the procession seemed to hold at least 50 monks. At least some of them were bound to have noticed him, even with their hoods drawn that much down over their faces.

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

spoke again, this time very, very close to Keal.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Keal did as asked and saw that two of the monks had left the procession and were now standing right in front of him. Unlike the other monks these two had normal eyes and Keal let out

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

the monastery as a small boy like Metobaph had.

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

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

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

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

A heavy sigh escaped Arek’s lips.

“But why am I confusing you with all this nonsense. You said you had travelled with one from our order? Well, let’s try and find out who it was. While we’ve lost some knowledge we still haven’t slipped entirely back to the animal state and we should be able to find someone who can give a reasonably

2 *Young Keal*

usable description of the monks who have journeyed out into the world. That we do seem to keep far better records of than other things.”

The laughter in Arek’s voice caused Keal to think that there was some kind joke lost on him in the last bit. They had come nearly all the way to the monastery and as they got close he could see that it must indeed be built on top of some kind of fortress. What had looked like a sturdy stone foundation turned out to be both tall and thick walls made of some strange form of hard pressed earth or perhaps burned clay of some kind. Noticing Keal’s gaze the monk sadly told him that the construction of those walls was also something that had been lost to time. They had been able to expand on the basic foundation with either stone walls or wood buildings like the formidable gate house, but the actual walls themselves they could not reproduce. Before entering Arek pulled Keal over to the side of the wall so he could feel it. The wall felt like stone yet with the same slightly porous finish that he had felt on freshly baked clay pots that had not yet been painted or glazed. He stood there for a while letting his fingers move back and forth over the strange material. For some reason he found it oddly calming to do so and he had to catch himself as his mind began to wander off seemingly to have a mind of its own that he was not aware of. When he removed his hand from the wall it very nearly felt as if some kind of connection between him and the wall had been broken. He was just about to ask Arek about this when he decided against it as he was not even sure if he had felt the connection or not. Somehow it already felt like it had only been something that existed inside his own head. There had been no tingling sensation in his fingers at the touch and neither had there been a lack of it when he

2 *Young Keal*

removed his hand. Giving a mental shrug he decided to put this to the back of his mind and took a few quick strides as he noticed that Arek had started moving towards the gates and was already a few paces away.

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

From the corners of the buildings intricate charms and lamps were hanging, the faint breeze rocking them gently back and forth. Inside the gates, where Keal was walking he could see similar charms and was fascinated with the way several threads of all colours had been interwoven in such a way that more than a single pattern could be discovered in their layout. The mere sight of this rooted Keal to the spot and took his breath away.

2 *Young Keal*

Even though he could remember how things had looked back in Porbuyat even that large city was no match for the monastery when it came to beauty and perfection. Where the city had been impressive in its size and complexity the monastery's simplicity and the care with which it had been built made it far more impressive and left Keal wondering why no one had used this way of building houses.

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

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

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

"Come on," Arek said, "there'll be plenty of time for that later on."

"Okay. I just thought I saw someone. Metobaph told me there'd be children here and I thought I saw one across the

2 *Young Keal*

courtyard. Guess there'll also be plenty of time to see them as well."

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

"Who? Who told you there'd be children here?" Arek demanded.

"Metobaph. He's the old man who led me here."

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

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

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

"Are you okay?" he asked.

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

Just as he was about to change direction and really do run out to find Jamor he stopped himself. Metobaph had not sent anyone to the monastery for decades, maybe more than a century. In the more than thirty years Arek that had passed since his initiation he could not remember even hearing about anyone who had been sent here like this. He should at the very least take a quick look at the records of who had arrived in the past years to see if there were any who had given similarly strange accounts of how they had found the monastery. Normally, the monk would take in children some of their journeying brethren had found abandoned to their own fates, not unlike what had happened to Keal. But usually the children would be so young that they had little other choice than to

2 *Young Keal*

perish and the journeying monk would accompany them all the way to the monastery and begin their basic tuition on the way. It seemed like Keal had not been given more than a brief glimpse at what the monastery was and nothing what so ever about what the order of the Supreme really did and worked towards. In a way, Arek reflected, this made sense as Keal was old enough that he might have decided against going at some point and it would not do to have an uninitiated roaming the realms with too much knowledge.

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

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

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

her way through first one then another thick, leather bound volume.

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

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

“It cannot be,” he whispered.

2.4 When Gods Walk The Earth

The procession moved on down the path towards the sacred grounds where the ceremonial celebration of the coming of Lord Metobaph. Jamor cast a single look back at the receding forms of Arek and the boy as they made their way towards the monastery. In the pit of his stomach he could feel that something was wrong though he could not pin point what it

was. Perhaps it was simply the result of being pulled out of the trance they had all entered before the procession started. Even after this many years he still felt a bit dazed when his normal vision returned changing the world around him from that glowing forms of the spirit world to that of the physical world. He sighed as he listened to the sounds of the monks around him and mentally prepared himself to reenter the trance and continue the celebration ritual. The landscape and people around him wavered eerily in front of his eyes as they clouded over and gradually the greenclad shapes turned into bright beacons, reflections of the strength of their souls. As the last remnants of the dull rocks changed to the dark light of the most ancient of life forms, mountains, his mind pushed away the thoughts of the boy and stored them for later inspection.

For hours the ritual went on with the monks performing several reenactments of the works of Lord Metobaph from his levelling of the mountains to make room for the monatory to the way he had thwarted the young, mortal race of Humans as they sought to conquer the nature around them. Though Jamor knew he was supposed to feel equally elated by, yet detached from, every single part of the ritual he could not help take special pleasure in the part that signified how Lord Metobaph, the right hand of the Supreme, had created the Human race to begin with. This direct link between all the monks' living beings and their origins always seemed to made the very air around them crackle with living energy. With the sun baking down directly from above the monks were all spread out kneeling in several concentric circles with Jamor standing up in the middle. His head throbbed from the force of the energy the monks were directing towards the representation of their beliefs and he felt larger than ever before as he threw back

2 *Young Keal*

his head and looked straight up at the sun. Seen through the spirit world there was no sight as impressive as the sun's spirit. What would have burned normal eyes to blindness in the physical world now seemed to pour even warmer and more powerful energy not into Jamor's eyes, but into his entire being and that of the monks around him. The longer he kept his mind's eye open to the power of the sun the more he felt himself swell.

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

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

Anyone looking at them in the physical realm would see each

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

That was when he felt something he had never felt before. Something was not quite right. At the climax of the ritual all the power should have been grounded and returned to the

world around them through the ancient rocks they were standing on. Now it seemed like there were remnants of the power lingering in the air around them. Quickly he looked around him and saw that several of the others were also glancing around with everything from incomprehension to confusion to outright fear showing in their eyes. His mind raced as he tried to replay as much of the ritual as he could remember in search of something that had gone wrong. Nothing. Nothing had gone wrong. And yet he could feel the tension of the monks around him as if they were still linked as they had been during the ritual. The tension grew rapidly and he realised that if he did not do something very fast the entire procession was likely to collapse so he took a deep breath and began letting out a deep, rumbling sound powered by his beliefs in the Supreme and his hopes for the future. As he felt the sound resonate in his body he gently shaped it into a strong note not unlike that of a great horn.

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

The last word in the final prayer to the Supreme left his words and the courtyard fell completely silent as Jamor gathered a few deep breaths and prepared to turn around and thank the others for their devotion to the Supreme. That was when it struck him as if he had been slapped in the face. Until today

2 *Young Keal*

he had not known that the last words he recited had been a prayer to the Supreme. Unwillingly he started trembling as he let those words sift through his mind and realised that he understood them. Taking another deep breath he straightened even more than he already was before, in a break from tradition, he knelt down before the temple and spoke the last prayer again in a high, clear voice. This time it felt completely different. While he realised he must have understood the words as he had set them just before kneeling he was now conscious of the way each word made sense, how the words served as a link to the energy inside him and how, at the very end of the prayer, that energy contracted inside him making both his body and mind firmer and stronger.

He stood up again and turned to face his brothers and sisters. The closest four looked at him with far more respect in their eyes than what he had ever seen while at the same time appearing confused as if they did not understand what had happened and why he had spoken that additional prayer. He wondered whether they had been able to understand the words or not and made a mental note to invite them to discuss the morning's events later in the day. Before that, however, there was the matter of finishing the ritual according to tradition. If the four highest ranking monks, next to himself and Arek, had not understood the words he had spoken it seemed unlikely any of the other monks had. In a strong voice he thanked the monks for their attention and ensured them that with this level of dedication to the Supreme they had all grown not only throughout this ritual but also during the hard work each of them put in every single day. Then he dismissed them while motioning the four at the front to follow him into the temple.

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

“You felt it too, then?”

“Felt it?”

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

“I didn’t feel anything. It’s about Keal, the boy who came here.”

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

“The Lady and Lord protect us,” Jamor whispered.

“I remember hearing about some of those things a long time ago,” Arek said, “but had not thought much about how they were related to each other before now. I’m still not sure what it means. There are a lot of books from those days I have not had time to read through yet. So far, though, it seems like Keal may very well be the cause of either good fortune for the entire world or something truly horrible.”

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

"So they walk the realms again?"

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

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

"Where's the boy?"

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

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

"Come with me," he said, "there's something else we need to discuss. In private."

He led the way to his study in the building next to the main temple and waved his hand at one of the two arm chairs near the fireplace gesturing for Arek to sit down. Before sitting down himself he went to a small cabinet and retrieved two cups and filled them with a golden liquid from a tall carafe. Passing one to Arek he sat down heavily in the free chair and gave a sigh of pleasure as he felt the strong, but sweet, mead flow

inside him. Slowly and from the beginning he began recounting his experiences from the morning's ritual. Arek listened intensely without interrupting though question after question leapt into his mind. Once Jamor had finished talking they both sat in silence for a while as they emptied their glasses.

"I think a refill is in order," Arek said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Yes," Jamor said.

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

least some of what Jamor had felt. Suddenly they heard the deep ringing of the bell as it summoned all the monks to the evening prayer and the following meal.

“Keal!” Arek said.

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

the fields or talk to the younger monks about things that was outside, and sometimes even went beyond, their curriculum. Arek had the freedom to do this because most of his duties were practical matters rather than the formal rituals Jamor did every day.

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

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

"Greeting, Keal," he said, "first, let me apologise for the curt reception you got this morning. As you could no doubt see we

were not really expecting guests so your arrival took us a bit off balance.”

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

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

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

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

“Yes, sir.”

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

“Thank you, sir.”

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

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

Jamor smiled at this.

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

“Oh.”

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

After the meal Keal was asked to follow a woman named Nica who would find a place for him to sleep and take care of getting him introduced to life at the monastery over the next few days. She greeted Keal with a warm smile and surprised him by

2 *Young Keal*

lifting his pack as if it weighed nothing at all. The women back in the tribe had not been weak, far from it. But none of them would ever have picked up a pack, especially Keal's. Still, he had had far worse surprises in his life so far so he simply thanked her as she gave no indication whatsoever of being offended he did not try to stop her.

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

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

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

Outside the door Nica waited patiently for a few minutes be-

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

As she had so often done before she paused for a while and stood under the protruding roof of one of the monks' sleeping quarters patiently waiting to see where Arek would go next. To her surprise his route this evening brought him meandering towards where she stood and she quickly looked around. She was the only one here, apart from Arek, and she was sure she had walked as quietly as possible to avoid disturbing those who used the quiet hours of the night to meditate. Even so he must obviously have heard her or he would not be walking towards her, she thought.

Closer and closer Arek's steps took him until he was finally standing right next to her. His last steps had taken him a bit to the side so he was not facing the building, but stood beside her.

2 *Young Keal*

That was when she noticed that his eyes had turned completely misty just like all their eyes did during the celebration to the Supreme. As far as she knew that was the only time their eyes did this and it was generally believed that it was because the monks' combined devotion together with the specific day made the Supreme be as close to them as possible. Not even a rumour had she heard about a monk who's eyes had been changed like this outside the ceremony. And yet here was one standing right next to her.

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

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

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

When she woke up she found herself alone in the dormitory and gasped as she realised the sun was high in the sky. Hastily

2 *Young Keal*

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

After the midday meal, which she skipped, she decided to keep things to herself and try to find out more about them by spending as much time with Keal as possible. She was sure he was not just another child to seek out the monastery. What she had felt after showing him his room and the strange meeting with Arek made her feel certain that the young man held secrets none of them, perhaps not even himself, knew about. She was determined to do her best to uncover them and, if need be, protect Keal from them.

2.5 Going For A Walk

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

That last part was something Keal was very intrigued by as he had so far seen the monks as reclusive people who would, on the rare occasions they did interact with the rest of the world, be humble and full of self sacrifice. After speaking with several of them he got the impression that while they did strive to help others they almost never did so if it meant they would have to pay a too high price, either physically, mentally or emotionally. Instead they would do their best to turn any situation into something that everyone benefitted from. Something about this made an enormous amount of sense to someone like Keal who had spent the better part of his life being subdued and not having any way of improving his situation. He knew from

2 *Young Keal*

hard experience that there was nothing glorious about doing thing only for the benefit of others.

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

One of the larger mistakes he had made was the morning he was put in charge of making the gruel for the monks' morning meal. He was not working on this alone as preparing food for the more than eighty monks could not realistically be done by one person. He and four of the children had simply been pointed at the large pots and the ingredients and were then left on their own. It had seemed like they had plenty of time to prepare the food, but Keal had horribly underestimated how much longer it took to get the water to boil. After some difficulties getting the right amount of rice and, especially, salt for such a large portion he had eventually served not quite cooked, over salted gruel to the monks. Much to his surprise none of them had berated him and once the initial coughing because of the salty gruel had died out most of them had

2 *Young Keal*

simply taken it with high spirits. A few of them had smilingly told him about what a mess they had made this and other things when they had been younger. One even laughed loudly as he told Keal about how the gruel he had once made had been more black than white and how that had earned him a terribly long lecture on black and white, right and wrong, light and darkness and so on with everything being described by making patterns in the burned food.

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

One day, as he and the carpenter monk was carving a new flagpole to replace one that had broken in a strong wind, they talked about how valuable the wood they had in their hands

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

The monks took a different approach and simply started with what Keal already knew and moved on from there. When they found out he did know a little about adding numbers they moved on to multiplication by having him return to the kitchen and cook up another portion of gruel, only this time they gave

2 *Young Keal*

him the right proportions for one person and told him for figure out how much he needed for twenty. Through exercises like this he had slowly begun to figure out that instead of simply adding a single ration of rice twenty times he could add it ten times to a separate bowl and then take that same amount again in one large scoop. After this his teachers had gone on to show him how to do these calculations more formally in the sand or on wax tablets. And from there they had moved on to even more complicated topics such as geometry where his carpentry skills had been applied and, indeed, improved by his theoretical knowledge.

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

From time to time he would mention this to Nica who seemed to have become his unofficial mentor even after the first couple of days. She had really gone to great lengths to make his introduction to the monastery as pleasant and warm as possible. The first few days she had held back to allow him time to rest, but whenever he had found himself wondering about something she had always been nearby and ready to answer his questions. Of course, there were things, particularly about what happened at the meetings held only for monks, that she

2 *Young Keal*

avoided answering. Upon reflection of this Keal found that he could not expect everything to be answered at once and with simple answers. And to be honest, he thought, it really did not mean all that much to him. There was plenty of other things to keep him busy.

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

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

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

Nica nodded and kept walking while waiting for his question.

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

When Nica did not immediately answer he quickly stopped

2 *Young Keal*

her from giving him the one answer he was beginning to be tired of.

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

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

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

“And the tasks you’ve given me?”

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

“Don’t worry,” she said, “the only thing that got hurt, I think, was brother Rhic’s ego. She’s always taken our duties to the Supreme extremely serious so she probably had a hard time dealing with how you can so easily tell the stories about all the other gods.”

“Yeah, well. . .”

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

As he looked around his eyes spotted movement some way from where they were sitting. It appeared to be a single figure walking slowly and labourishly down the side of the mountain. This struck Keal as odd since he had so far not heard about any of the monks working or travelling in that direction. Turning his head he saw that Nica’s attention was elsewhere and,

2 *Young Keal*

feeling curious, he decided to keep an eye on the figure while they kept talking. The topic of the other gods was always interesting to Keal not only because of his meeting with Jinx, but also because they had been a fundamental part of his life before joining the monastery.

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

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

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

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

“Nica?” he asked.

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

“Nica?”

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

Images of two mutilated bodies in the back of a wagon danced before his eyes and details he had never before thought about stood out as clear as anything he had ever seen. With his hands clasped to the sides of his head he fell to his knees. The images no longer stayed in his mind but spilled out on the rocks around him until pile upon pile of bloodied flesh surrounded him. He screamed, unable to close his eyes or block out the thoughts and images from his mind.

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

Stumbling to his feet he tried to get away from the horrors surrounding him. First one step, then another. Then he slipped in the greasy blood and fell hard on his side. Once more he got up and managed to get a little bit further only to fall again, this time in the middle of all the blood. Horrified he lifted his hands before his face only to find that the blood was nowhere to be seen. It was still all around him and he could feel how it must cling to his body and clothes. But when he looked down

2 *Young Keal*

at himself it was not there. He scuttled backwards, away from the blood, until his back hit something solid.

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Keal? Keal!"

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

"Nica?"

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

“What happened?” she asked again.

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

“I don’t know,” he said. “It was...strange. Ah, my head is spinning.”

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

“Too tight?”

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

“Thanks, Nica.”

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

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

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

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

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

“It’s beginning,” he said.

“What’s beginning?” Nica said.

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

“As well you should be,” Jamor said. “To cut a long story short: Keal was brought here by Metobaph himself. Yes, the

2 *Young Keal*

Lord, the Supreme's direct vessel here in this world, decided to send Keal to our monastery."

"What?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

We frankly didn't know what to make of the situation so we

2 *Young Keal*

told Keal that Metobaph had indeed been a monk but that his opinions had made him somewhat unpopular among the other monks so he was in a form of unofficial exile.”

“And Keal bought that?”

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

“We can all agree,” Jamor put in somewhat grumpily, “that Keal is a gifted man. It doesn’t help us decide what to do. Quite the opposite, in fact. The more gifted he is the greater the risk that he’ll sooner or later discover that we’re hiding something from him. And it’s not just the fact that our god most likely brought him here. Our secrets within the monastery may also be at risk. That, to me, is unacceptable.”

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

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

Nica nodded.

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

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

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

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

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

“True,” Arek said, “but when going over the records again a few months back I managed to discover that the monks had at first ridiculed the Dark One and set him to do the lowliest tasks. The leader of the monastery back then was reputedly(?)

2 *Young Keal*

a vain man who could not believe that anyone but him could have been in direct contact with the Supreme, the Lord or the Lady.”

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

Arek gave an apologetic smile and shrugged.

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

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

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

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

“I really don’t know,” Arek said.

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

“I know.”

Arek’s voice was hardly more than a whisper.

“Again,” Jamor said, “I would prefer it if we could wave our hands and make it go away. This is just too big. And if we

tell Keal any of the things we have discussed here he's bound to start asking questions."

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

"Do we have a choice?"

"No, not really. Looks like it's not exactly the Supreme we'll be talking to this afternoon."

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

2.6 Secrets in the Night

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

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

"Oh," he said, "it's you. Quick, come inside."

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Jamor led them to the back after closing and, Nica was astonished to see, bolting the door from the inside. He then pulled

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

The stairs led them down below the monastery. Nica tried to keep track of how far down they went but at some point it became impossible for her. She was sure that they must be at least two or three stories down and still more or less below the store room. At last they came to the end of the stairs and

2 *Young Keal*

stood in a small antechamber with a single door leading to some secret room. There was a square hole in the door with bars in it. Through it the light of the torch fell on what to Nica looked like some kind of small study chamber. She was leaning closer to the to get a better look when Jamor's hand on her shoulder stopped her.

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

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

In all her life she had only seen one book that had something

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

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

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

“Corrim?” Jamor said. “Corrim? You have visitors.”

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

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

Again came the hissing sounds.

“Corrim, please.”

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

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

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

With a heavy, lisping voice it spoke and this time the monks could understand its words.

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

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

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

He gestured back at Nica who felt her heart miss a beat. She

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

“But how?”

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

“Easy. He called upon the gods to help him.”

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

“Yes,” she said.

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

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

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

“Ah, finally they left with that blasted light.”

Its voice had changed noticeably and even though Nica had been rooted to the spot, frightened at the prospect of not only being left alone down here but being left alone in pitch black darkness. When Jamor had started to leave with the torch she had desperately wanted to grab it out of his hand, yet she had not dared to for fear of angering him or, worse, the creature. It seemed very determined and sure of itself and who was she

but a lowly monk who, obviously, had no idea of what was really happening?

She pushed the thought from her and berated herself for abandoning the self certainty that had apparently made the creature choose her. While she was still not pleased with the situation she imagined she'd be far more displeased with what might happen if the creature decided she was not worth teaching after all. And, she wondered, there must be something quite valuable to be learned here if the creature guarded its knowledge to such a degree that not even Jamor had been good enough for it.

"Where are you?" she asked.

"Behind you," the creature said.

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

"Very good," the creature said, "you are learning already. Very good."

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

Nica said nothing since the creature was right.

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

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

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

“Good. You learn.”

Nica’s head twisted around to where the voice had come from. While she had been walking around the obstacles the creature must have moved around silently and was now behind her

2 *Young Keal*

somewhere. She turned and was just about to start walking again when she remembered the table that was now in front of her. Nimbly she stepped around it only to hit her shin, again, against the low object she had walked into before. This time she could not stop her cursing before it flowed through the room.

Somewhere in the darkness the creature laughed again.

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

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

A quiet laugh escaped him again as he admitted to himself that that part of it he did enjoy. Humans were always so sure they knew how things really were yet here she was getting

frustrated and angry simply because an object as mundane as a chair was moved less than a meter when she was not looking.

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

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

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

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

There. That was what Corrim had waited for. He had been right after all. The woman did not call out to him or ask where he was. She simply stated how things were rather than putting herself in a submissive position. Once more he let go of the temptation to continue the game. It was one thing to

2 *Young Keal*

prove a point, something far different to be disrespectful and humiliate her. She did need to understand the seriousness of things, but there were limits to what he wanted to subject her to out of fear that she might turn hostile. There was no time for hostility between them.

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

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

“Why can you not see, Nica?” he said.

“Because of the darkness.”

“If darkness prevents vision, why can I see?”

Nica thought about this for a while before answering hesitantly.

“Because you are not human?” she asked.

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

“Yes,” she said.

“Then what is darkness?”

“Darkness is. . .”

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

“Take your time,” Corrim said.

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

“Darkness is what prevents us from seeing,” she said.

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

“But. . .”

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

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

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

“In short?”

“It tells us nothing.”

Corrim kept silent.

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

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

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

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

“Not stick my head in a bush?”

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

“Are you in darkness?” he asked.

“Yes.”

“What can you do about it?”

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

“Are those the only lights you know?”

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

“I...I...”

Nica’s voice trailed off as she began to see shapes in front of her. At first it just seemed like some parts of the darkness

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

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

It was just a matter of time before Nica remembered that she was not alone. By then her arms were almost clearly visible and their grey shapes had begun to hold a little colour. Curiously enough, she could not see the green colour of her robe, instead it simply seemed dark. Not really black or dark grey.

2 *Young Keal*

Just dark. Her hands were completely different. They had been the first actual shapes she could see and now it was almost as if they were giving off light of their own, as if they were shining.

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

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

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

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

“Who are you?” she asked. “What are you?”

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

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

“Who am I?” she said.

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

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

“Who can you become?” Corrim asked.

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

“What is on your mind?” he asked.

“Everything,” she said. “Nothing.”

“Good answer.”

Nica looked up at Corrim’s face again and noticed that his lips did not part in a sneer but a smile. Again it struck her that if she had merely seen this strange creature rather than speak

with it she might have felt frightened by its appearance. As it were there was nothing intimidating about the way Corrim simply sat there smiling at her with her hands in his claws.

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

2.7 Sneaking Around

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

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

A while before he got out of bed he had heard the bell that summoned the monks and children to the evening prayer and

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

The monastery always felt a little eerie when the monks were

2 *Young Keal*

at prayer or dinner. At night it was not so bad since Keal knew they would simply be sleeping somewhere. The thought of all of them gathered in the same room talking, eating, praying or meditating somehow felt more imposing to him. It was as if they might appear out of thin air with no warning. Sleeping monks, at least, would not all wake up at the same time. He sometimes wondered if he was still influenced by the strange sight of the procession that had been his first impression of the monks when he arrived. With a shrug he stopped thinking about this as his stomach once more complained about its lack of food.

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

None of the three monks said anything which only made Keal feel even more uncomfortable. He was afraid they would find him if he made even the tiniest sound. Suddenly he heard a scraping sound. It was not very loud, but it was loud enough that he dared shift a little so he could see what was going on.

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

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

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

The door back to the monastery was indeed bolted. He briefly toyed with the idea of simply unbolting it and going back to his room. Curiosity got the better of him in the end and he went back to the shelf and tried to figure out how it could be opened. Searching his memory he tried to recall how the jars

2 *Young Keal*

on the shelf had been placed when he had looked at them. He closed his eyes and forced a mental image of the shelf into his head then he opened his eyes and tried to see the differences between what was in his head and what was before his eyes.

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

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

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

As he pulled the shelf back into place he suddenly realised that the latch was not accessible from where he stood. It must have been set into a part of the wall next to the actual doorway and now he had no way of closing the shelf completely. He cursed

himself, but rather than going outside again he simply decided that he would have to close it as best he could and hope for the best.

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

Fearing the worst for not only himself but also Nica he kept completely still as he listened to the sounds from the other

2 *Young Keal*

room. With growing tension he heard how Corrim made Nica walk around in the room and he winced everytime he heard her stumble into things. As time passed he had to fight harder against the need to get up and stretch his legs. His legs cramped up and his stomach began to complain about the lack of food. He had had nothing to eat since early morning and as far as he could figure out it was close to midnight.

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

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

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

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

A loud thump carried clearly through the darkness as Keal’s jerk of surprise brought his head far too close to the underside of the desk he was hiding under. For a few moments he did not move, but simply stayed still hoping that the last few seconds had not really happened. Then he warily crawled out from underneath the table and stood up. He could still not see anything and decided against fumbling through the darkness.

2 *Young Keal*

It was bad enough that the creature Corrim had known he was there, presumably all along, he did not also want to make a fool of himself by stumbling over something or walking into a wall.

“Keal?” Nica said. “Are you here?”

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

“Yes,” he said.

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

"That better?" Corrim said.

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

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

“I’m sorry, Keal.”

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

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

“What did you say?”

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

“Keal! What are you doing?”

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

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

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

“She is human.”

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

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

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

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

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

With no further delay he walked through the door followed by Nica and lastly by Keal who simply refused to go ahead of

Nica. Behind them the door close with a booming sound that echoed through the abandoned chambers.

2.8 Missing Monks

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

“We’re talking months, not weeks,” Arek said.

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

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

Jamor winced as Arek touched upon one of the things they feared most. After they had left Nica in the cellar they had returned up the stairs to find that the door to the store room was open even though they were both sure they had closed it before going down the stairs. They had briefly thought about going back down to check that things were well downstairs, but, they had agreed, they probably would not know what

2 *Young Keal*

“well” meant when it came to Corrim. And, besides, if someone else had entered after them and managed to avoid being detected they were likely to still be hiding. Or, worse, the two monks would risk angering Corrim when they told him someone else might or might not know about the secret cellar. Neither of them had been too interested in that so they had simply closed the secret door securely and went back to check on Keal. When they found him missing, his clothes and other things had still been in his room, they had guessed that it must have been him who had followed them. And when he did not show up they had concocted some elaborate story about how Nica and Keal had, as part of Keal’s hurried training, gone into a recluse(?) to pray for guidance from the Supreme.

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

“Well, it hasn’t been easy and the way I was told about it made it quite difficult for me to reveal it without risking bringing down the entire monastery. Unlike you I was alone when I first met Corrim. My predecessor as leader of the monastery gave me a sealed letter that simply held the instructions on how to find the staircase down to the cellar and where the key

to the door was hidden. But he didn't give it to my until he lay on his deathbed and even then he only gave it to me after making me swear that I would not read the letter until after he had passed."

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

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

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

"Ah," Jamor said, "that's better. Now, for many years I did not think too much about the secret study. Once in a while I would go down there to escape the routines of running the monastery. As you know it can sometimes be, how shall I put it diplomatically, it can be a bit taxing on the nerves to be responsible for feeding more than fifty people. Especially in those moments where a large part of them will insist that prayers and meditation rather than hard work in the fields is the way to the Supreme. That's all well in spring or early sum-

mer, but once you reach the fall without more than a handful of people to take care of the harvest thing get. . . interesting.”

He sipped a little more wine before continuing.

“But I digress. One night when I was relaxing in a chair down in the study it suddenly felt like I was not alone. Just as I was about to get up to see if someone else had found the secret door the candles I had lit went out. All at the same time. I take it you can guess that I suddenly felt very much alone and very much like an intruder in someone else’s domain. With fumbling(?) fingers I managed to lit one of the candles that was within reach and that’s when I saw Corrim sitting calmly in one of the other chairs. Well, I say calmly, but to this day I honestly don’t know if he has feelings like the rest of us. Either way, he was just sitting there for a while without saying anything.”

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

“To this day I have no idea how long we just sat there looking at each other. Eventually he broke the silence and gently explained the very simple rules that governed his study. I was free to come down here and use the room when the door to the next room was locked. If it was open or if Corrim was there I should simply leave. It was strange how he said it. Perhaps it’s his voice, that hissing voice of his, but to me it didn’t seem as if he was surprised that someone other than Naut came

2 *Young Keal*

down there. And once the initial shock had settled I didn't feel threatened by him. Oh, he has an air of power around him like I've never felt in another living creature before or after. Make no mistake, I believe that Corrim is very capable of... of..."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"When? Did you go back?"

"Not for a long time. Before we come to that I think I need to point out that when this happened things were not going too well for the monastery in general. And, in hindsight, I was probably too young and inexperienced to be put in the position I was in so my days were filled with trying to figure out what was really going on, what resources we had available,

how to plan for the next winter and so on. Naut's decision to appoint me his successor was as much a surprise to me as it was to everyone else. So I spend every day, from before sunrise to after sunset, trying to figure out what to do. This made it pleasantly easy to push the thoughts about Corrim to the back of my head and completely ignore the secret study."

"Yes, I can imagine that," Arek said.

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

"What?"

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

he had brought and cleaned up after himself.

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

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

“But you did meet Corrim again?”

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

“And?”

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

“Alas, my friend. That I cannot, and will not, tell you. Not because of any promises I made to Corrim. It’s simply because it’s his tale to tell. And, frankly, I think that not even you would believe me if I told just a fraction of what he told me.

2 *Young Keal*

You'll have to wait for that story until he chooses to tell it to you."

Arek sat back with a disappointed frown on his face.

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

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

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

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

under and went inside to find his bed and try to get a little sleep.

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

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

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

Once his immediate shock had passed he started taking in the details of the drawing and saw that it showed the monastery. As the drawing changed he felt himself being drawn into it and it seemed like it was him that was slowly walking toward the large building even though his body still remained in the chair

in his study. As he came closer he could see a procession of monks leaving the gates. This intrigued him and he watched with a growing sense of interest and anticipation.

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

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

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

2 *Young Keal*

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

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

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

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

This time he could see a man walking across the courtyard. No one else was around and the lonely figure walked to one of the buildings which Jamor recognised as the one holding the sleeping quarters of the senior monks, including Arek. Briefly the figure stopped in the doorway and look around its gaze seeming to rest on Jamor himself for a split second. After that the figure walked inside and the drawing came alive and again Jamor had the feeling that he was inside it.

Slowly he crept along the walls of the monastery. Without

2 *Young Keal*

really knowing why he had the distinct feeling that it was night. There were no real shadows in the drawing yet the quiet eeriness of it all just seemed to scream “night” at him.

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

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

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

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

“We,” Keal said, “need to talk.”

3 Young Assassin

3.1 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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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?”

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.”

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 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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

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 to the memory of their Human lives and therefore unable to control their movements. A few of them never got to terms with their new existence 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 transformation. 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?"

3.2 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 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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!”

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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?”

His voice had taken on a strained note. Metobaph sighed and sat down cross legged gesturing for Keal to do the same. As

3 *Young Assassin*

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 it was not cryptic and strange and

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

Metobaph looked at him and then closed his eyes hard.

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

“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,

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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,

3 *Young Assassin*

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. 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.

3.3 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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!"

"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

3 *Young Assassin*

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)

3.4 **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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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 been eaten by the animals in the forest it could not have been there for more

3 *Young Assassin*

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 ruccus 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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 site 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

"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 to-

3 *Young Assassin*

gether 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 curtesy.

"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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.”

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

3 *Young Assassin*

your bottocks 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 Fredíc'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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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...”

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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,

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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.

3.5 **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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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 vicious, 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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. Anticipa-

3 *Young Assassin*

tion 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 to the Gerroth’s tent. As such she did not need to sleep and had 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 stumps left

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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!”

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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?”

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

“Hrmp! 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.

3.6 Claw Marks

Early the next morning Keal woke up before Dorga and Lon-aer. 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

"What am I looking for?" he said.

"Don't look at the bodies," Apa said.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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 grandfather. 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."

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

dead 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.

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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?!”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 say 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, wounding her. After that she had little trouble relieving Kari of the knives.

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

Somewhere deep in his mind he remember some of the other kids in the tribe talking about guns and revolvers late one

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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."

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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 dis-

3 *Young Assassin*

cussions. 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

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,

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

“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 a least a little information at hand.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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?”

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3.7 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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!”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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?"

"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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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?”

“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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 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.

3.8 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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 grumpled 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.”

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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."

"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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 the 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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."

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,

3 *Young Assassin*

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

“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.”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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.

3 *Young Assassin*

“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 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

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

3 *Young Assassin*

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 organised

3 *Young Assassin*

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?”

3 *Young Assassin*

“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’ delicacies 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 people 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.

3 *Young Assassin*

With a full stomach, though, that seemed to be far out in the future and not really important.

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."

3 *Young Assassin*

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?"

3 *Young Assassin*

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.

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

3 *Young Assassin*

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!"

3 *Young Assassin*

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!”

4 Epilogue

A cloaked figure walked slowly through the mist just outside the large gate. It gave off an eerie glow that lit up the mist before the figure itself became visible. The area in front of the gates was barren and littered with dark rocks on either side of the hard packed dirt road leading up to the gate.

“Shhhh,” Tosco said, “here he comes. Quick, hide.”

Rayd, Literfe and Jinx humoured the old dragon and moved behind the large form of the dragon. They exchanged looks and for the first time all three of them were actually smiling content smiles in anticipation of what was to come. All three of them had different reasons for smiling, but in just that moment they agreed on one thing. This was best for everyone.

Keal, the cloaked figure, walked up to the gate and looked up at Tosco. He let his hood fall back and crossed his eyes just standing there with a tired expression on his face. He briefly nodded to Dragling at the other side of the gate before talking to Tosco, his head giving a slow shake from side to side.

“Go ahead, Tosco,” he said, “let’s get it over with.”

Tosco nodded at Dragling who’s voice boomed in the gloomy mist.

“Attention!”

4 Epilogue

Both dragons snapped to attention, much to Keal's bitter amusement. As usual he sat down on the ground and started looking through the rocks on the ground to find a particularly nasty looking one. It came as a great surprise to him that the dragons had finally seen fit to actually get the largest rocks out of the way. Only small pebbles were left. He picked up a handful and let them slide from one hand to the other.

"Ah, uhm, yes, Keal," Tosco said, "we decided to get, ahm, a little cleaning done for the, uhm, great occation."

A small shower of pebbles rained off Tosco's scales. The old dragon chuckled and motioned to Dragling who moved forward and lifted itself off the air on its great wings.

"Now what, you dimwits?" Keal asked, "Where the hell is he going now?"

Tosco chuckled and cleared its throat loudly before pulling out its ledger and a large scroll. It sighed as it put the ledger away not needing it this time. Then it unrolled the scroll and began in a deep voice that quickly reverted to its lighter confused sounding voice.

"On behalf of the, ahm, uhm, never mind that bit. It gives great pleasure, oh, obviously not to you Keal. Don't look at me like, ah, that, please. Oh, here it is."

It cleared its throat again.

"It is hereby decreed that on his one hundreth visit to the gates to the beyond Keal is most graciously welcomed as an honorary member of the Guardians of the Gate..."

Keal's jaw dropped and he just stood there gazing up at Tosco wondering if the dragon had finally lost its senses completely. The dragon continued.

4 Epilogue

“Due to services rendered to, ahm, certain parties, that’s also not important. Let’s see, ah, here at the bottom. This honorary position entitles Keal to a full dress uniform, blah, blah oh, this is my favourite part: and a permanent position outside the gates themselves.

“Welcome, Keal. You, ah, can take Dragling’s place for now. He’s got some, ehm, training and tail polishing to do, I think.”

“What?”

“Go on. See? Here’s your uniform. And then you just, well, sort of stand over there. Not much to it, really.”

“You mean... stay here? Not go through? Not go back? But why?”

“Well, isn’t it obvious? Someone thinks you would be tired of, ah, all this going back and forth so they decided to give you a break.”

The three gods stepped out from behind Tosco. Keal rolled his eyes at the sky.

“I should have known.”

“Relax, Keal,” Rayd said, “consider this a vacation. Tep will not be able to touch you while you’re here. Just relax and don’t listen too closely to what the old fool here says.”

With no more comment than that all three gods nodded to Keal and left leaving him looking confused and bewildered. It took a few moments for him to gather himself and look at the uniform Tosco had pointed out. It was not a bad uniform. Well cut, comfortable looking. It was even in his favourite colour: black. While Tosco discreetly looked away he put it on and then went to stand on the other side of the gate.

4 *Epilogue*

He shuffled around a bit and eventually settled for a casual position leaning his shoulder against the stone wall beside the gate. Tosco nodded approvingly.

Keal shifted a few more times just to be sure he was really comfortable. Then he looked out into the mist feeling the worries of the mortal realms and the weariness from the last couple of years slowly seep out of his body. The landscape around him shifted before his eyes. Where he had seen it as a bleak, misty place before it now looked almost as if green meadows spread out before him, the sky turned blue and he swore he could hear birds singing in the distance.

“Yeah,” he said, “I could get used to this.”