

Tuesday, December 27, 2016

The Bringer

Traer opened the door to his small cottage hung his knapsack on a peg beside the door, and sank into a chair beside the table. Papers stood in careful stacks and careless heaps all over the table. An ink bottle and several discarded quills were scattered among the papers. Traer rifled through one of the stacks, extracting a single sheet, covered on one side and part of another with close, cramped script.

"The last to be mentioned here is Traer. He is variously known as The Keeper, The Bringer, or The Teacher. Not a god himself, he is nonetheless immortal, and possesses some powers beyond those of normal men, though these pale in comparison with the powers of the gods themselves."

"No one, not even Traer himself is sure of when, or where he originated. Since he is responsible for keeping the Pilla, the meeting house of the gods, and since he remembers the origin of most of the gods, some believe that he was made by some being who pre-dated the gods. Others believe that he sprang from the minds of the gods themselves, that they created him as a convenience or as a way of creating their own story. If this is the case, however, the gods won't admit to it. When queried, they always reply that Traer has always been The Keeper, just as they have always been a god."

Traer picked up a quill and held it poised over the paper. He thought for a minute, then tossed the quill away with a disgusted look, got up from the table and began pacing the room.

At last, he shuffled the paper back into the pile and stared moodily into the fire until it burned itself down to coals.

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 07:01

Monday, December 19, 2016

An Uninvited Guest

The high peaks of the Blue Mountains form the border between the icy lands of the Normen and the more temperate lands of their brothers, the Harlon. Once, the two lands were one, but the difficult passes, the differences in climate, and more than one succession crisis had separated them. Now they fought as only brothers can, speaking the same language, worshiping the same gods, but hating and killing each other at any opportunity.

Somewhere along that rugged border, a broad circular platform of rough hewn black basalt squatted in the silver moonlight. Animals avoided the place, and the few humans that knew about it did, too; something felt off about that place. No one could say precisely what the problem was, but every one of them felt it, a nagging whisper of wrongness at the back of their mind.

On that night, however, someone was approaching. He was the kind of man that is easy to forget: average height, average build, nondescript features. He walked up the steep trail pushing his way through the undergrowth with a stout staff. He wore a small knapsack and carried an empty bottle on his belt.

When he reached the circle, he sank down onto one of the huge stones with a grateful sigh and lowered his bag onto the stone beside him. For a moment, he just sat there, breathing deeply and staring at the stars. He fumbled with the buckles, raised the flap of the knapsack, and lifted out an intricate marble carving of a strange looking building. It looked a bit like a turtle, circular, with squat pillars around the base, and a domed roof. Seven doors were evenly spaced among the pillars, but each door differed from the others. Grunting, the man stood. He carried the model of the building in front of himself not letting it touch his body. He balanced the building on his finger tips, as if to avoid touching it as much as possible.

At the center of the circle, a cross had been etched into the stone. He carefully positioned the building to cover the cross, then backed away quickly, stumbling over the edge of the circle in his haste. The carving began to glow slightly, then with a grinding, scraping noise, it began to grow. Within moments it had covered the stone circle, and towered over the head of the man who had carried it.

The white marble melted away more slowly, gradually revealing pinkish blocks and pillars of granite, and heavy doors of polished cherry wood. Though the doors were all the same size, each door was different. The man walked around the building once, as if to reassure himself that he had done everything right, then sat down to wait.

He didn't have to wait long. Two men, alike enough to be brothers stepped out of the forest. They were both small and thin and both wore a scheming look on their face. The older of the two was dressed in lightweight cotton; the younger wore heavy wool.

They nodded to the waiting man. "Traer, good to see you."

The man nodded back. "Nero, Ola, it's been a long time."

Nero, the elder, asked "Are we the first to arrive?"

Before Traer could respond, Ola spoke up. "Of course we're the first. All of the others have to show their importance by making others wait."

Two women emerged from the forest moments later. They were identical, from their broad smiling faces to their wooden shod feet. One of them clucked at Ola, then spoke in a cheerful, chiding tone. "Oh come, dear, you have to forgive them their little tricks. They'll be along shortly."

Each of the women took one of the men by the arm, then dragged him over to where Traer was sitting.

Even sitting, Traer was taller than the two little round women. He grinned down at them as they approached, and turned his cheek as they stood on tiptoe to greet him with a motherly kiss. "Oga, Asa, I've missed you."

Nero responded before either of the women could, "He missed them, brother, but not us. Why do you think that is?"

Oga elbowed Nero. "It's because you're always such an ass. If you weren't always looking for slights, people would like to be around you more." Nero grumbled, but gave no audible reply. Traer grinned in spite of himself.

A tearing sound split the air; a lightning bolt smacked the ground. In spite of himself, Traer jumped. Nero grimaced.

"Here comes drama, and it looks like she's in one of those moods."

A second lightning bolt crashed down. Two women emerged from the binding flash. Their faces were identical, one's clothing a mirror image of the other's. In strange unison, the women stepped forward and looked around before settling an icy stare on two large men who were stepping out of the woods.

"Secha, you left your cups long enough to join us tonight? How wonderful." The two women spoke with the same strange unity that they moved with, their indistinguishable voices dripping with icy sarcasm.

One of the big men raised a wooden cup high, grinning broadly and winking at the others. The other spoke, his voice a deep rumble. "Come off it, Lima. Nobody needs to hear your sermon tonight."

Without a word in return, Lima and her twin walked to the heavy door carved into billowing clouds and lightning bolts, wrenched it open, and disappeared into the building.

Ola spoke trying to hide the quiver in his voice. "Should we go in, too?"

"Give her a moment to cool off," said a deep feminine voice behind them. Everyone turned to see four figures emerging from a black shadow in three forest. "She'll be herself in a minute."

Those who had arrived earlier regarded the new arrivals with caution bordering on fear. The new arrivals, two men and two women, seemed to be trying to defuse the tension when when one of the men spoke. "So now we're just waiting on their majesties, the Queens of the Night?"

Asa replied, the scorn evident in her tone, "They're probably out dallying with some mortals." She snuggled closer to Ola, who put his arm around her protectively.

The Queens of the Night arrived from opposite direction, gliding smoothly along silver streams of glittering stars. They stepped to the earth face to face, greeted each other with a kiss on the cheek and a warm embrace, then turned toward the building. "Well then," said the taller of the two, her voice breathy and musical, "shall we begin?"

The couples separated then, each person selecting their own door, and entered the strange building. Traer was left outside. When the last door closed, he heaved a deep sigh, shouldered his now-empty knapsack, and disappeared into the forest, leaving the gods to their own business.

If he had stayed a moment longer, he would have seen a rat run out of the forest and wriggle its way under the nearest door.

Posted by Johnny Elbows in The House of the Rat at 09:50

Friday, December 16, 2016

0.5: Being Heard

Johnny Elbows reminded me of this old series I started a long time ago, and said he would be interested in another entry, so here one is. I've also given it a title now.

Leaving the airport, Jack knew what his next move should be, but he dreaded it, and hated himself for the necessity that compelled him to drive to the Community Center. Parking in the rear of the building, he entered the double doors and squinted through the dim lighting to find Room 13. Pausing for a deep breath, Jack entered the room and took a seat. "and I was just SO ANGRY. I mean, how could she HIDE that from me?" the middle-aged woman finished as Jack took one of the empty seats in the circle. A few people glanced at him as he entered, and a one man even nodded in recognition, but most of the group kept their attention on the speaker. "I gave her everything, worked both of us near to death to GET her in that overrated Boarding School, and then took on a second job to pay their outrageous enrollment fees, and she decides to drop out and tour with that filthy boy and his band? What do I do?" Imploringly, she looked around the circle, seeking advice. Jack put his head in his hands, not wanting to face what he knew was coming. Flashes of cities, stages, tour buses and hotel rooms burst into a spray of color behind his eyes...

The lighting was poor and the carpet was filthy. Jack could smell the combination of sick-up, unwashed teenagers, and illicit drugs. A lamp lay tilted on its side near the door, and EMTs were loading the young blonde on the stretcher. She looked up and made eye contact with Jack.

"Please," she begged. "Please tell my Mom I'm sorry. Her name is Caroline. I don't know why I felt compelled to hurt her...please tell her that I love her."

"Sure thing, kid." one of the EMTs responded. "Now lay back. Everything's going to be fine."

But girl wasn't looking at the EMT - she was looking at Jack. "Tell her, Jack."

Shocked, Jack snapped from the vision, jerking backward in his chair so violently that he tipped over backwards in the metal folding chair, crashing to the floor. Some members of the support group glared at Jack, and he gathered himself from the floor, embarrassed. It must have looked as though he had dozed off - this wasn't his usual group, and he wasn't making a very good impression. Desperate to show he'd been listening, he reseated himself and then looked to the speaker.

"It's going to be OK, Caroline. Remember step 2 - come to believe that a Power greater than us can restore sanity. I know your daughter will be OK - he's watching over her." A few heads around the circle nodded, and the man sitting next to Caroline put an arm around her as tears welled up in her eyes.

"Yes, you're right. Of course. Thank you." Caroline smiled weakly, obviously torn between skepticism and her own desire to believe.

"All right," the man with his arm around Caroline said. "Good share, Caroline. Thank you for letting us in. Let's have our new guest introduce himself."

Jack fidgeted with the pen in his shirt pocket. Getting started was always the hardest part.

"Hello, my name's Jack, and I have an anger problem." A chorus of "Hi, Jack" echoed through the hall. "It's been a rough day - I got fired from my job at the software company I founded 4 years ago, and I'm pretty sure I just disappointed my girlfriend for the last time. She wanted me to meet her parents, but I was too busy getting fired to make it in time. And she's right - I'm always too busy. Deep down inside, I was glad I missed them, and angry with her for trying to force me to meet them before I was ready. That is, until I saw that look on her face." Jack's words faded to silence, and he stared sullenly at the floor.

"Thanks for the share, Jack." the group leader said. When Jack didn't respond, the man continued. "Today we're discussing Step 10: We continue to take a fearless moral inventory of ourselves, and when we're wrong we promptly admit it. I remember one time..."

The words of the group members faded to a dull buzz in the back of Jack's™ mind. Unbidden, the words of that strange email came back to his mind.

For over four thousand years, I have protected your world from the gibbering madness that lies just beyond the edge of your perception.

Gibbering madness, indeed. Jack was CLEARLY going mad, to be so focused on such an obvious prank as his entire life fell apart around him. He noticed the meeting was wrapping up, and he robotically stood and helped put away the chairs, then took a donut and paper cup of milk from the folding table in the corner. He was so wrapped up in his thoughts, it took several minutes to notice the small, dark-skinned man standing next to him, staring intently.

“Hi,” Jack started to say, but the man cut him off.

“Eeeoo have never been here before, no?” his accent was thick, but unplaceable. Just as Jack managed to internally decipher the question as “You haven't ever been here before, have you?” and shake his head, the man once again put Jack on his heels. “How eeeoo know her name Caroline?”

“What?” Jack asked, confused.

“Eeeoo said to her - eeeoo called her ‘Caroline.’™ How eeeoo knew her name?”

Jack thought back - he had indeed called the woman Caroline. He thought again of his vision - the young lady had interacted with him. That had never happened before. “Uh...she said her name, when she introduced herself.”

“Eeeoo were not here when she introduced. Eeeoo some kind of crazy man - eeeoo peeper or something? Eeeoo hunter?”

Jack furrowed his brow - hunter? Oh. He thinks I'm stalking Caroline. “No, no, it's™ nothing like that!”

“Listen, eeeoo.” the man said, moving forward menacingly. “Eeeoo just get out of here, and eeeoo never come back. Eeeoo hear me?”

Jack didn't™ wait to be told a second time. He left the Community Center as quickly as he could without drawing attention to himself.

Posted by Ancient of Days in The End is Near at 08:53