

A lone figure sat quietly atop a rock, looking down into a shaded vale high in the mountains as the last light of the sun rose up behind him. He was dressed in a pair of simple, yet well worn pants, a long tunic with slits down the sides below his waist to keep it from hindering his movement and a cloak of unusually exceptional make was clasped at the neck with a simple, yet elegantly designed leaf. His thick, stiff dark hair was shorn almost to the scalp of his deep, brown skin.

The sounds echoing up from the forests and fields below slowly changed as day turned to evening. In the distance lights could be seen as torches or lanterns were lit inside the few small buildings present in the vale. Most of them were built to blend in with the nearby forest, but the large stone building stood out from the meadow it was built in. A single torch was lit outside the main entrance to the stone edifice.

Time to return home for another evening. Akil stood up and stepped off the boulder. In front of him was a long fall down a cliff-side ending in a large pool of water. Focusing his mind, Akil could feel the energy within him building and shifting from his center out through his limbs until his body barely stayed in contact with the ground. He stepped off the edge and just let his body drop towards the pool. The rush from the rapid descent filled his mind as he timed the approaching watery grave.

With just a subtle shift in his thoughts the pull in his limbs increased. He found himself just barely above the surface of the water. The edges of his cloak were just floating on the surface, but as the seconds ticked by they slowly started to sink in as they took on water. Again, he focused his thoughts and the pull of his body disappeared. He splashed into the water and sank a few feet below the surface before he started to kick for the edge. Soaking wet, he climbed from the pool near one of the streams that fed it. The water was a nice cold temperature as spring hadn't yet fully settled in this high into the mountains.

Steam started to drift off his clothes as he poured his internal energy into his soaked clothing. It took several minutes and careful concentration, but he was able to dry himself off without accidentally setting his clothing on fire. He followed a narrow track across the meadow and into the light woods nearby. The woods were nice and quiet and the walk was relaxing even as the air temperature fell without the sun out. He arrived in the clearing near the large stone building a while later. The single torch beside the door lit the doorway into the granite structure, but not much else. Inside could be heard the quiet chatter of people and the faint clinking of dishes and cutlery.

Akil opened the main door and stepped into the large open chamber that made up the heart of the structure. The interior was lit by just a few lanterns that left quite a bit of the structure in shadow. Gathered around a low table in the center of the room was about a half-dozen people of various races. They sat on the floor or on cushions talking genially with each other. The clatter came from the dishes and plates as they served themselves helpings of the various simple fare that was laid out on the table; Berries and oatmeal, simple biscuits and butter and greens from the recently spawning plants around the vale.

As Akil came up towards the table, two of the people shifted aside to make room for him. He smiled at the group around him and then took an empty plate and laid out food for himself.

"How was today?" He asked before taking his first bite of the meal.

"It went well, Master." Came the lilting voice of Nerisella beside him. "We finished the frame of the last house for the Vale."

"That's good to hear. And your studies? You weren't neglecting those just because you were trying to finish too fast." Akil glanced around at the others with a small smile on his face.

"No, Master." The voice of his youngest student, Frukas, squeaked when he spoke. "I could sense what you've talked about when I

felt for the wood with my mind as we lined up the beams.”

The conversation continued throughout the meal as those gathered there talked about their studies or shared jokes from their various homelands. Akil mostly just sat quietly and listened while eating. The talking and the laughing continued late into the evening before the group broke up for the night.

Akil retired to his own small cabin. It was a mostly barren space with simple rugs on the floor and walls and a few pillows on the floor. A wardrobe stood in one corner of the place. The clothes inside were simple looking affairs, but well made. A metal shield was hanging from the back of the door. Painted onto its surface was a design of a tree with the roots twisting around the border of the shield to meet up with the branches above, creating a complete circle. Obscured behind the tree, two crossed falchions could be seen, standing with their blades up.

Akil reached into the lower area of the wardrobe and withdrew a rough stone about the size of one closed fist. Part of the stone was faceted and colored a smooth, deep red that faded to the mottled brown and grey of something like granite. He set the stone in the center of the floor and then, sitting cross-legged facing the stone, he stared into its heart. He started to mentally reach for that reserve of power that controlled his gifts when a knock came from the door.

“Come in” Akil answered.

The latch clicked up and the door swung gently open on the leather straps that were used as hinges. In stepped a young woman with auburn hair that was roughly shorn. She was dressed in a pair of loose-fitting pants and a light tunic. An oversized coat hung from her shoulders like a heavy, wet rag. She was still very robust, but it was obvious that she had lost some weight recently.

“I’m sorry to bother you, Master.” She said in her higher than expected voice.

“It’s not a problem, Aranda. What brings you here this evening?” Akil gestured towards the floor in front of him on the far side

of the stone. Aranda sat down on the floor and adjusted her legs until she was in a relaxed lotus position.

“I was wondering if we could run through a few exercises this evening.” She smiled shyly.

“Of course.” Akil shifted to be sitting on his heels and closed his eyes. He slowed his breathing and heart rate and then opened his eyes. He felt a prickling in his mind and reacted.

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Surrounding him was a large, featureless plain. The sky was a featureless, matte grey and the ground was a muted brown. Even though there was plenty of light, no shadow was cast anywhere around him. Somewhere out on the plain he could hear a strange noise growing and fading.

He turned to look around, but couldn’t find the source of the noise. The sound dissipated and then suddenly grew unbearably loud. He felt the sting of something latching onto his back. A rush of pain flooded his mind before he could react, but with a change of focus he was able to push it back.

A ripple in the air formed into a shield. He reached out and slid his arm through the strap and then struck back at the creature on his back. It fell off his back, stunned. The shield faded back into nothing.

Another ripple appeared in the terrain around Akil and then a wall began to form. It quickly rose over him and then closed off to form a short tower of rust colored iron.

Outside he could hear the buzz of the creature’s wings as it recovered from his attack. The buzzing sound faded and then the wall shuddered as something struck at it. It shuddered and shook a second time and then a third and then began to crack and crumble as the walls gave way under the assault.

Akil planted himself in a defensive stance. The iron walls cracked apart and then faded out as the pieces fell towards the ground. Standing before him was a new creature. It was smaller than him in stature, but with a matte black skin and glowing orange eyes. Long, razor-sharp claws extended from its fingers and saliva

dripped from a mouth full of pointy, serrated-edged teeth.

It crouched down and then leapt at Akil. The shield reappeared in his hands just before the creature struck him. He crashed down onto his back with the shield still held between himself and the creature. Its claws scabbled at the surface of the shield, trying to find purchase to rip through it or tear it away from him. He focused his mind and then kicked upwards with both legs. The creature flew upwards and then started to descend.

The shield in Akil's hands morphed into a quarterstaff. As the monster fell back towards the ground, he bent his knees and then leaped up to meet it. Just before he came into reach of those deadly claws, he lashed out with the staff and sent the creature crashing into the ground. Its body melted into the landscape and all went still and quiet again.

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Akil opened his eyes back in his own cabin. Aranda was still sitting across from him. Sweat dripped from her forehead and her face was flushed as if she'd just been through a long workout in the heat of the day.

"A very good effort, Aranda." Akil said. "I see you have indeed been practicing. Those were some very imaginative attack forms."

"Th-thank you, Master" Aranda said, breathlessly. "I think I'll retire for the evening. Good night." Aranda rose slowly from her sitting position and made her way out of the cabin. The cool, dry air from outside flooded in when she opened the door. The stars could be clearly with almost no shimmer from the air apparent in their resting places in the heavens. The door swung closed behind Aranda and Akil found himself alone again. Focusing his attention back on the stone before him, he slowed his breathing and reached for his reserves.

In his mind's eye he could see the structure of the rock. Slowly that structure changed and realigned, one molecule at a time. This continued until late into the evening before Akil retired for the night.

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Akil came out of his meditation in the early hours of the morning. The air was cold and crisp, even in the cabin. Outside the sky was already a bright blue from the risen sun, but the Vale itself was still fully in shadow as the sun had not yet arisen over the surrounding mountains.

Around the small clearing cloaked or robed figures could be seen moving about. Akil joined them as they all gathered in the center and began going through morning exercises. The slow, simple moves progressed until the whole group appeared to be dancing in slow motion. This continued for a while before everyone reached the end. Most were sweating and breathing fast, but all were smiling.

They all headed into the main hall for a simple breakfast and to discuss the week's plan before getting into the hard work for the day. A building was still under construction at one edge of the clearing under a large pine tree. It was looking like it was going to be a nice and peaceful day.

Around midday a group of animals, laden with goods was seen making its way down the trail at one end of the vale. Akil and Nerisella met the caravan as they made it to the bottom of the winding trail down the cliff face. Leading the group of mules was a gnome, Victanys, a female from the gnome village of the Yattil Mountains that Akil and his friends had helped in the past. At the back of the train was another gnome, Horian, guiding the animals so that they stayed together.

"Greetings, Victanys and Horian. How goes things in the outside world?" Nerisella asked as the two approached.

"Good. The thaw has almost given us a route out of the mountains again."

"We brought you some supplies for the coming year, and a letter."

"A letter?" Akil asked.

"It arrived just before the paths closed off last winter. We held onto it until we could bring it to you." Horian pulled an envelope from inside his coat and handed it to Akil.

“Thank you. Nerisella, would you please get the others and help unload the animals and see to our guests?”

“Of course, Master.” Nerisella nodded to Akil and then gestured up the path that led to the clearing. “This way.”

Akil waited until the caravan was on its way before turning his attention to the letter. The seal was familiar to him. He broke it open and read the contents, then reread them to make sure he understood what was being said. He headed up the path and when he got back to the clearing he spent the day helping the group unload the animals and making their guests comfortable. That evening he announced that he was going on a trip for a while to meet up with some old friends. He'd be back as soon as he could. The next morning, with his meager belongings packed away into what looked like an old burlap sack, Akil left his sanctuary and headed to Verbobonc to meet up with some old friends.

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The inn wasn't very crowded, but a decent number of locals and others were scattered around at the various tables. Akil and Aminah were sitting at one table, along with a few others that had arrived in the past day or two. Vres, a dualist from Oerth; Gunthar, a Garreth from the far desert; Nash, a strangely tattooed warrior from some unknown place. Tales of the past few years were being told by those present, but through it Akil remained silent and contemplative.

Galeyna, a druid of the old faith and her brother, Myrdon, Ranger of the elves arrived along with several others. They stamped the road off their boots and joined the group at the table. Introductions were made and greetings exchanged amongst old friends and new companions. One of the elves was Corrigan, a Garreth of Tritherion, the others were his followers, both female elves.

The barmaid brought plates of cheese, meat and bread, tankards of water, wine and ale, and then walked away. The party enjoyed the food, until the first surprise hit. The barmaid

came back with refills and then asked for payment for all the food and such.

Everyone glanced around at each other in surprise and then a few started to reach for coin purses or pouches. Instead of coins, the purses were full with dead rats or mice. In a scramble, several party members rushed out to the stables to check on their packs with their animals, but found that nothing had been disturbed. Payment was made and then everyone packed off to bed for the night.

The next day the party was given an invite to meet someone at an inn in another part of town. The party headed out and was wandering through a market when a man came up to Akil and accused him of stealing from his stand. It took a short while, but he was convinced that he had the wrong man and he wandered off confused.

The inn the party came to was in a seedier part of the city. Built out over the river it was a rundown wooden building that had seen far better days. The party went inside and found a table that wasn't in use. While the group chatted and waited for the mysterious letter writer, a group of thugs from across the inn came over. A fight ensued that eventually involved the rest of the inns clientele. They tried to push both parties involved in the fighting out the windows into the river below.

Everyone returned to the original inn and sat around discussing what had happened and why. During this, the town constables showed up. Akil was taken into custody and spent most of the evening being questioned about his involvement in a theft at a local establishment, the same one whose owner accosted Akil earlier that day. It took most of the evening, but Akil was eventually released from custody and returned to the inn.

In the time that Akil was gone, the innkeeper of the establishment evicted the party from his establishment. They eventually found a new inn to stay at. Corrigan went out to find Akil and by sheer chance they ran into each other in the streets.

The next morning the party received another missive. This one apologized for the

mix-up the other day and wanted the party to meet the person at a different inn that might be safer than the last. Everyone headed out to the new location. The inn was definitely much nicer than the riverside locale of the last one.

Again, the party found an open table and sat to wait for the arrival of the mysterious letter writer. After just a few minutes sitting at the table a group of ruffians came into the inn. The same group of ruffians that had accosted the party the previous day. Not surprisingly a fight broke out and the party fled. It was now clear that something was not right and the party was being targeted by someone. As a group the party decided that the safest bet would be to leave town and find a new place to stay. Just a day or two South was an inn that Vres was aware of as he'd had dealings with it while he was in charge of the land around Hommlet and the swamp nearby.

On the road south it became clear that the night was not going to be a calm one. A storm was brewing on the horizon and shortly after the party made the inn, a storm broke. Thunder crashed, lightning blazed and rain poured down out of the sky in a near torrential flow. Inside, the fire blazed bright and hot. The party was gathered around several tables enjoying a decent meal and drinks while waiting out the storm and the night.

During the meal, the front door slammed open, revealing a figure in shadow standing out in the storm. Without warning the world tilted and everyone fell to the ceiling. Akil barely managed to get his feet under him before the new floor rushed up. Akil reached inside himself and tried to touch the core power that he nurtured inside, only to find that it wasn't there. None of his gifts were available. Before he could ponder this, gravity changed again and the old floor was restored, and the party returned in a heap back to the ground.

Chaos ensued and in all the confusion the shadowy figure appeared near Akil. A deep chill ran through him and he felt his strength drain away. He shifted his position and made it to the door of the inn. Again he tried to reach for his gifts and this time found that he could

touch them again. He tried to take out part of the floor under the cloaked figure, but something else was absorbed the energy he tried to pour into the wood. He was shocked and horrified. Not only had he briefly lost complete access to his gifts, but something else was also countering his attempted use of them.

The fight was still raging around the inn and even outside. Akil ran out into the storm and felt warmer and stronger again. He didn't look back, just picked a direction and headed off with his bag over his shoulder.

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The storm continued to rage as Akil headed north from the Inn. His cloak was quickly soaked through, but he didn't really feel the change. Being cut off from his gifts was a new experience for him and one he realized he'd never want to face again. His pack contained enough food and water to last him a few weeks, but worst case he could resupply in any of the towns along the way. With any luck, most of the students that he'd left behind at his monastery would still be there working on their studies and awaiting his return. If not, then he would just work to maintain the grounds and enjoy the surroundings that he'd found years ago.

More than two days passed before he found himself outside the city of Verbobonc. Given the last reception they'd had in the city, Akil chose to bypass it and follow the river as it coursed down from the Yattil Mountains. Several days outside of Verbobonc he came upon a small town and waited there for the arrival of a merchant river boat going upstream towards Bissel and Ket. Given the time of year, it wasn't long before one came along that he was able to pay for a ride. The accommodations left a lot to be desired, but a hard and plain life was something he was used to. It took a few weeks, but the ship eventually arrived in southern Yattils. He disembarked at a town near the foothills, and after some minor trading with the locals to pick up supplies, he proceeded into the mountains. Eventually he returned home.

Aminah,

I have chosen to return back to my retreat as I have obligations there to deal with that I can't put off while traipsing around from trap to trap that some megalomaniacal person is setting up to try and get their revenge on us for past grievances.

Keep yourself safe, and try to not allow Vres to get under your skin.

Akil Abu Khalid

Galena,

I know this will be a difficult task for you, but do try and keep your brother safe and watch over my sister. I hope that Tobi is doing better since that fight, but if not, then I'm sorry for your loss.

I'm returning to my vale to continue my teachings. Should you need anything, please don't hesitate to contact me there. The gnomes of the Gatil Mountains know how to reach me.

Akil Abu Khalid

Vies,

I know my sister can be difficult at times, but please try and respect her. Either that or the two of you need to find a room and deal with your latent frustrations in that manner. Watch out for Galena and try to not let Myrdon put the party at too much risk.

Akil Abu Khalid

Akil Abu Khalid (Male Human Psion)
Frukas Songsteel (Male Human Psion)
Aranda Carter (Female Human Psion)
Petgeon Hawkligh (Male Human Psion)
Yllarath Armorsmith (Female Human Psion)
Nerisella Soundinghorn (Female Elf Psion)
Horian Alerteyes (Male Gnome)
Victanys Shortcloak (Female Gnome)