

The Guardian

Day 271 of my trip and I was traveling through the rainy country. My timing was lucky—it was in between the rains so the forests were merely be dank and muddy, rather than flooded. Finding the path is difficult enough for the inexperienced. Doing that while trying to avoid all of the dangers was more than my group could handle. It might be more than I could handle alone, and impossible if the others were to travel with me. We would need a guide. Upon reaching the last outpost at the edge of the forest, we set about making arrangements for a guide.

I needed to get to my destination, and at this point crossing the forest was my only option. I had spent too much time getting here simply to turn around, backtrack, and try another route. And I had a suspicion that others might be waiting for us to emerge from some of the more likely routes. No, the forest was the only way, and that's based on my hope that it's not too late already. But without a guide, it would be suicide.

To say that our negotiations went poorly was putting it mildly. It was clear that the locals had no interest, nor trust, in us. And it seemed that they had no interest in anything we could trade: supplies, animals, art, knowledge, stories, or even money. They did not gamble, thus my hope of winning the service of a guide through a wager was dashed. They were an odd combination of pious, yet not overtly religious. After three days of futile conversations, a man walked into the common area where I was eating. He wore the traditional local clothing, which is to say a mishmash of whatever happened to be available and fit, more or less. He approached me and said that word had spread that Others had been looking for a guide to cross the forest. His name was Tomolo and he offered to be my guide. I had thought I was prepared for all the unacceptable terms he could throw my way, since it was very apparent that he held the cards. But I must admit, he surprised me.

He said he would be *my* guide. Alone.

He insisted that, for the first segment, the two of us travel alone to the next forest station and back. After that, the rest of the group could join us. I tried to make him to understand how much time it would waste. He did not care. Thinking he might have been afraid of me or the group, I suggested he could bring as many of his comrades as he wished and we would pay the costs. No, only the two of us for the first crossing. I suggested that once at the first stopping point, we could signal the others to join us, rather than go back-and-forth again. No, the first journey must be there and back. And so on. This

was not a culture of haggling. His offer was non-negotiable. And it was all I had.

I set off with him, the two of us on foot, carrying our packs on our backs. And for the last five days it had been just the two of us hiking while the rest of the group waited back at the outpost, probably sitting around getting drunk and playing cards.

The trails were nothing more than paths that a few rare people had used before, no markings, no sign-posts, no milestones. Sometimes the path was wide enough for both of us, while other times there was no real path, and we had to traipse through wet undergrowth. The high trees blocked most of the direct sunlight, so it was relatively cool and pleasant, and the insects were no worse than I had expected, which is to say they were ever present. I could never tell how Tomolo knew how to follow the path, and at times it seemed like he intentionally veered off of one path, through wild undergrowth until eventually intersecting a new path.

Tomolo was different than any guide I have had. While not adverse to talking, he was usually quiet unless I asked a question. And his answers were direct and brief. They were complete—I did not have to play a game of 10 questions with him—but they offered little more than what I was asking.

The first day we stopped quite a time before dark. We made camp for the night in a flat, clear area, close enough to a stream to get water when we needed it, but far enough so that nothing in the stream would be tempted to see what was on shore. Our dinner consisted of some dried rations. When I asked about a fire, Tomolo said we would not make one that night, as it would be better not to make our whereabouts obvious. Without prompting, he suggested that I do not wander around this area in the dark. “Hunting animals and plants, Otar” he added. Five words—it was uncharacteristically verbose of him. Perhaps he was feeling chatty or maybe he just wanted to stress the danger to me. Or maybe whatever might kill and eat me would still be hungry and go after him. Of course I had no idea of *what* might be hunting plants and animals alike. In Tomolo’s mind, I probably didn’t need to know, and would only make a mess of the details. The only important part was to stay put that night. The barest hint of *why* was not meant as an answer, merely to stress the importance of staying put. I made sure I had all I needed at the site and stayed put that night. Even though it was not a hard day of hiking, I fell asleep quickly and slept soundly that night.

The next morning, after we had been hiking for a few hours, I asked him about the back-and-forth

route we seemed to be taking.

“Tomolo, I’m not great with direction,” I said modestly, “but it seems like we’ve been doubling back a few times in the direction we came from. What gives?”

He looked at me over his shoulder and said, “So you question your guide’s skills?”

“No,” I replied, “only his intentions.”

He nodded slowly a few times and said, “I do it for two reasons. One: the men who seek you will know where you entered the forest. And they will know the routes and where they come out. They cannot cover them all, and if they do not know where we are, they might not be there when we emerge.”

It made sense, but there was something he wasn’t saying, something he was implying, but it was only a fleeting feeling.

He continued. “Two: I test you and your skills, your respect, your harmony with the this place, Otar.”

“And...” I asked, “did I pass?”

“It is not that type of test. And I am not the one who gives those types of tests. So we continue, eh,” he said and turned back to watch the trail in front of us.

Other than pointing out a few hazards to avoid, like rotwood, quickweed, and razorleaves, we had no other conversations that day.

My boots were good—I had purchased the best pair available as we got closer to the rainy country—they kept my feet dry and there were only a few brief sprinkles the first two days, most of which were blocked by the trees towering above us. But still, walking in the wet, damp forest started to wear on me. Given how much I had been through already, and that I had spent months in arid regions, I figured it was just a matter of needing some time to acclimate to the local conditions, and dismissed my discomfort. What bothered me more was something hidden in Tomolo’s few words. Some red flag that only waved in my peripheral vision and disappeared when I tried to look at it head-on.

My trousers were soaked from brushing the dew-laden undergrowth. I wasn’t cold, but I wasn’t warm. And once again, we were heading in a southward direction. I couldn’t stand ignoring the red-flag of warning in my peripheral vision, so even if I couldn’t see it head-on, I would confront it that

way.

“Do you intend to kill me?” I asked my guide plainly.

Tomolo seemed surprised by the question, though I couldn’t tell if it was because it was the last or first thought in his mind.

“Because if so, maybe we could just get it over with quickly and then move on. It’s pretty obvious that I need a guide in this forest. If I were to kill you, that would only sign my own death-warrant. I have nothing against you, either way.”

“Otar Seecher,” he began. He used the “honorific” infrequently. I was never sure if it was because he considered me unworthy of honor or because the word Otar, from “Other,” was a reminder that we were the outsiders here and to some extent a slap in the face. I had never heard him use my name or at least some form of my name. He continued, “I do not kill you. I take you to where you need to go, though the route is not clear to me until I walk it.”

“Maybe there are specific plans to bring me to a specific place at a specific time,” I speculated.

“You know that is not how my people work. We are very ... casual with time and place. Many of the Otar find that difficult to understand.”

It hit me then. “How would you know there are people after me, unless you talked to them? Unless they told you about me. Hell, even I didn’t know others were actually after me, only that the potential exists. Are you on their payroll?”

Tomolo stopped walking and turned to me. As usual, I couldn’t read his expression, but I’d guess there was some frustration in it—either that his plan had been discovered or that I was completely wrong.

“That is very much wrong, Otar. Guide do not do such things,” he said sternly. He continued, “But yes, the men talk to me, tell me about you. You, Seecher, seek things. They seek you. I do not know why, they do not tell me. They say you are a bad person, you seek to destroy the forests. I knew that was a lie, you seek the forest as standing between two places, and the less time you are here, the better. You have no time or care to destroy it. And even so, you would fail. You could not get past guides, let alone Those Who Protect the forests.”

“You don’t think I’m evil, but...” I paused for a moment, not sure how much I should push the issue, “you think I might still be bad for the forests and for the world? That perhaps I should die...soon?”

Tomolo shook his head ever so slightly and said, “No. That is not my purpose. I do not make such decisions. But Those Who Watch the forest do.”

“You’re taking me to be judged,” I said.

“It is the only way. You have no chance of avoiding the men on your own. And if you fail the judgment, then your life is forfeit. If you succeed, you have the aid of the forest.”

“And who shall be my judge?”

“The Watchers of the Forest. That is why I agreed to be your guide. That is why no one else would.”

“What do you mean?”

“Given what was said about you, no one would take you through the forest without the consent of Those Who Protect the Forest. But few would seek them out.”

“But you do.” I said. Tomolo gave a quick nod. “Why?”

“There are things I need to know.” He considered his words for a moment before he spoke. “I seek knowledge of my future, where I should go, what I should do. It is not ‘destiny’ but rather that which best serves both me and the forest. However, such questions come with a cost. Perhaps you are my offering, my payment to them. Perhaps not. At some point, we find them and then we shall know. I have agreed to be your guide through the forest and shall fulfill that duty, after you are measured. As you say, if you try to run from me, you will be dead in this forest before darkness. Many are the hazards here, few of which you know.”

“Well, when you put it that way, how could I possibly refuse. Lead on, Tomolo.”

Over the next few days we wandered through the forest. Tomolo had provided me with a bit more information, since either I would leave with the blessings of the forest or I would never set foot out of here alive. I was getting impatient, but I also realized that if we didn’t do it his way, he would simply walk off without me, and I’d probably bumble into a patch of necrotic tree sap or narcotic flowers or maybe a flopsy-eared bunny rabbit that would somehow be able to disembowel me. The men who had been looking for me relied mostly on rumors. They hadn’t been able to track the different names I had been using, and for most of the places I passed through, I seemed like just another merchant, trader, or slightly out of place traveler. Not someone with a grand quest. Not that they really knew what I was seeking or “seeching.”

It was several weeks back when they started to put the word out about someone coming who would

seek a passage through the forest, possibly with a group, and how he should be avoided. They specifically said to Tomolo that the others in the group would simply be recruits for their specific talents which would be needed later, they had nothing against the forest. I was the only villain among them. They asked where the normal routes might emerge from the forest, given that we were heading towards the port. Tomolo said the men were provided with little information, but their words were heard, even if they were not trusted. So we would find no guides. He also said that our group was the third to seek passage through the forest this month. There are not many who need guides, but it is not an uncommon thing. The other two had also been refused passage; both left after a few futile days at the outpost.

I had, subtly, tested Tomolo to see how he responded to threats—hurting or maiming, instead of outright killing. He also, subtly, indicated that it would be quite likely that in most situations, he could find something within arm's reach that could be used in a lethal fashion—if not on me, then on himself, for without a hostage or a guide, I would surely not survive the night. At best, it was a stalemate. To him, death in the forest was a natural end to life's journey. To me, it was more unpleasant and graphic.

I didn't like waiting, but at this point, if she had lasted this long, a few more days either way would have little consequence. At least that's what I convinced myself, so I would keep going towards this inevitable meeting and judging.

Three more days stretched out of wandering through that damnable, humid forest. Occasionally Tomolo would point out some new deadly hazard masquerading as a dead branch on the trail or a brightly colored berry on a bush. My general rule was to avoid everything as much as possible. I think Tomolo enjoyed when he could point out how, by the act of avoiding one pitfall, I'd risk foolishly stumbling into something worse. By the fourth day I didn't care. It became a sort of game for me. While I wasn't deliberately trying to kill myself, I would simply not worry all that much about whether something was dangerous or not, and would take the "normal" precautions. Generally, my guide would admonish me if I approached too close to a tree or bush that had some sort of poisonous neurotoxin, but on a few occasions, he was forced to move swiftly, sometimes swooping in with his machete and cutting a branch before it could get to me, or batting away an errant thornberry. I did nothing to intentionally surprise him, beyond consistently acting like a stranger to this jungle. He was never angry

or even that surprised, merely denigrating and derisive, as if he expected no better from an ignorant Otar. “That kill many Otar. Without me, one more die.” Or “Blind man sees with his hands. Not good here. Worse when you deaf, mute, no smell, no taste, no balance, and no heart-feel.” I think the last bit was insulting my ethos, outlook, or general potential for compassion.

I came to understand what he meant the first night, when he warned me of “hunting animals and plants.” In this forest, both the animals and plants hunt for foolish Otar (I have never heard the term used as a plural). I don’t know whether they hunt for food, for sport, as a host for part for part of the breeding cycle, or reasons I cannot fathom. But clearly, everything in this place is hostile to the Otar.

On the afternoon of the fourth day, we encountered the first signs of a Guardian. I noticed Tomolo staring at a small pile of stones sitting in the middle of a shallow stream we were following. It looked like a cairn that had been knocked over, perhaps by a branch or small log floating down the river. I walked up to Tomolo and looked at him.

After a few moments of silence, he said, “That means we are close. A Guardian was here. Recently.”

“Is that where you’re taking me,” I asked, “to see a guardian?”

“I do not bring you to see a Guardian. I bring you so the Guardian can see you. The Guardian will judge you. The Guardian determines your next step.”

I asked a few other questions about Guardians (apparently it was a proper name or a title), but none of them he answered. Nor did he answer how close we were. My last question, “how do we know which direction to go?” he did answer, but it did not help me: “We follow the stones.”

The second ruined cairn we saw was bigger, and just off to the side of the trail we had been following for several hours, after crossing the stream and heading up and down some minor hills. The rocks, only about five, were bigger than the previous one, the size of a man’s torso. Again, they had been toppled. Upon closer examination, it appears that one or two other nearby stones had been part of the cairn, but they must have shattered when they fell, with some of the rocks rolling three to five meters away. Tomolo glared at me when I took a step closer to the cairn than he was. This was not some mortal peril I was about to blunder it, it was some sort of taboo. I placed my hands in my pockets, to show I was not about to disturb anything or touch anything. Tomolo’s posture indicated just a hint less agitation.

Without prompting, he offered, “Otar Seecher, gazing at the stones is acceptable. Touching or disturbing them is disrespectful of the Guardian and the forest of the Guardian. The phrase you use

would be ‘to start out on the wrong foot.’”

“I understand. I just want to look.”

“Three paces, no closer, to show respect.”

“Are we being watched?” I asked.

“You are in the forest, what do you think, Otar?” he said with a chuckle. “Tomolo is here and watches you. As does the rest of the forest! If you mean to ask whether any guides or guards or my people around, I surly do not know. Nor does that matter.”

I slowly walked around the fallen cairn, standing three paces away from it. I looked at the large rock that had been part of a larger rock. The crack pattern was unusual. It wasn’t a jagged fault line, nor was it a straight line following the crystal structure. It looked as if it had been broken apart with a tool. That was when I noticed several small rocks, no bigger than my fist, lying on the ground, in the mud or the leaves, that must have been part of the original rock. From my distance, I could not tell if the sheered surface was smooth or rough. It was fairly straight and shadowed.

Looking around, I realized there were not very many rocks visible in the ground. Some of the hills we had climbed up and down were mostly shale, flat layers that easily flaked off. Months, or maybe years, ago, a guide who taught me the rudiments of climbing used to refer to it as “shit-rock” since it was completely unreliable and trying to secure a piton in it would shatter and fragment it. Not good for rock climbing. These rocks were different. Good, solid rocks. Not necessarily “pretty” in the sense of having glittery bits or crystallized minerals, but solid. I had no idea how far away they came from or how someone would have lugged them out here in the middle of nowhere.

I nodded to Tomolo and said, “Impressive. Even as a pile of rocks, it’s impressive.”

He gave me a quizzical look, as if trying to gauge what about it I was complimenting, whether it was the perspective of an Otar that simply looked at how to exploit resources or if somehow I had some kernel of appreciation for something in the forest.

We continued.

The forest was quiet, yet filled with noises. I never felt the wind, but at times the breeze was enough to make the two leaves, on a bare branch that had managed to survive the previous winter, vibrate and rattle. It was a strange buzzing noise, and in its own way, beautiful. It presaged the sudden dancing

and bowing the the tree tops beyond us, as the gusts brushed through the upper canopy layers. Tomolo had us stop and wait for a minute or two. At first there was nothing, and then there was the buzzing, and then the breeze that shook the treetops. That's not entirely correct. There *was* something at first; it was just that Tomolo noticed it but I didn't.

By the same token, I'm sure he knew exactly when we would encounter the Guardian.

The path turned, and off to the left side was a small clearing, at most 5 meters square. It was mostly dirt, and looked like, at some point in the past, it had served as a quick overnight campsite. There was a small tree trunk on the ground, about 3 meters long, that served as a bench. And beyond it was a stone cairn.

However, this cairn was distinct. It was oval, bulbous on the bottom, taller than me and about as wide as my outstretched arms. It was composed of many small pieces of shale, all stacked in a circular pattern that grew wider and then narrower. It had the look of a pine cone, if a pine cone were made of stone, and could occupy the space of four men. The detail in the design, the intricacies of how all the pieces fit together, all pointed to a project that would have taken a significant amount of time to build.

It is slightly foolish to say, but the place had a sense of peace, while at the same time a certain severity to it. Perhaps my mind was on courthouses, since I knew this would be a place where I would face judgment. I understood that we had arrived at a place of a Guardian.

Actually, I had no idea if there would be more than one. Nor what to do. I turned to Tomolo and asked him what I should do to show respect, and if there were things I should avoid doing. He said, simply, "Do as you will. You are to be judged on your own actions, not mine." I considered punching him. It would be my last chance before the Guardians arrived, and maybe my frustration would be understood and forgiven. But even I am not that much of a foolish Otar.

I studied the enormous rock pine cone, walking around it. I kept three paces between it and me, and never attempted to touch it. The stonework was beautiful. I could see that each piece of slate was unique, its shape, its cut, its design fit perfectly into its spot.

After walking around it a few times, I stepped back and sat down on the log and closed my eyes. "So what's next?" I asked. "Can you tell me anything useful, or maybe just anything, about what I'm supposed to do and what happens? Will there be a trial? Will you just walk up behind me quietly and when I'm not looking..." I made a sudden chopping motion with my arms, pantomiming coming down hard with a heavy ax, the type of weapon the Taloori use in inter-tribal wars, adding a "whoosh"-ing sound as it cleaved through the air. The weight of my pack put me a little off-balance, as I leaned

forward.

Even with my eyes closed, I could tell that Tomolo was still looking at me curiously, trying to understand me, in almost the same but opposite way that I was trying to understand him. I sighed, took off my backpack and set it behind the log, next to me. My arm caught a little on some vines that were behind the tree. Before I could think about it, I heard the sound of metal, saw a glint of light catching on something, and then heard a swoosh and felt the breeze from something passing just over my head.

The quickweed vines barely had a chance to reach me, but my pack already had three vines wrapped around it. The thorns had barely broken my skin before Tomolo had severed the vines. That's not how they kill. The thorns merely anchor the vine to an object and get a grip. Then they start to constrict, strangling the unfortunate victim. Trying to tear the vines off of a someone wrapped two or three times by a vine will do a lot of damage, both to the prey and the rescuer. At that point, even if freed from one vine, the prey, mad from pain and blood loss, will often blindly blunder into another fold of them. They don't survive a second time. The rescuers are often in peril from their wounds, if they tried to remove the vines by hand, but most tend to be alert. Quickweed moves quickly, especially when not noticed, but it not blindingly fast. It can be avoided.

Carefully, I removed the severed vines that wound around my pack, prying them off with a stick. The thorns tore several good size holes in the fabric. Fortunately, this had been cross-weaved so that a few dozen quickweed thorns would not be enough to cause the fabric to fray and unravel. My shirt sleeve had a few tears where the weed had touched it, and I had a few scratches. Considering how quickly they could have sank into my flesh, I was once again amazed that Tomolo could move that quickly. He was carefully examining the result of his handiwork, looking closely at the thick, wide thorns. His eyes narrowed and he shook his head slowly. I couldn't tell of what he disapproved, but I'm sure it involved me.

"You bleed from quickweed," he said, or perhaps asked.

"It barely scratched me." After a moment, I added, "thanks to you. Once again you saved my life." I might as well admit it.

"The Guardian decides that now," he said. He looked up at the rock acorn and then back to the quickweed vine and then nodded slowly. "I understand the task I must do right now. I must gather some sacred herbs. You have your task: whether you live or die is not my decision." Again the pause and the glance. "But I will do what I must and in good faith. You stay. I go. And I will learn of my sacrifice when I return."

He made less sense to me than usual. I asked, “Tomolo, what should I do? If there’s quickweed this close, it’s likely that you’ll come back to nothing but a clearing scattered with my rent, bloody flesh.”

“No, Otar. The Guardian will not permit the quickweed, nor anything else, to come any closer. But you *must* remain there until I return.” His tone suggested there was no alternative, at least not if I wanted a chance to make it out alive.

I moved my backpack to sit at my feet, after first checking to make sure the area was clear. “Very well,” I said, “I shall await your return.” If the Guardian or his thugs would keep the quickweed at bay, that means I was already out armed, even if they only had machetes.

Tomolo turned to head back to the path, and then paused for a moment. “Otar Seecher,” he said, “if you can, you may wish to meditate, to consider the Guardian, the forest, and your need. You *can* do as you wish. You *could* desecrate the forest, the Guardian, anything, and I would not know or be able to stop you. But that is not the path to take. If you wish to reach the city, you must first understand the forest.”

And with that, he turned and left.

I’m sure he expected me to fail and it’s possible he even hoped for that. He never conveyed a sense that he ever thought I would be able to manage anything on my own. I had studied some of the ways of the Taloori tribe, their ways of communing with the forest and I was familiar with meditation techniques, though not theirs specifically. Tomolo was right. I could do anything while he was gone. But I think he expects the worst from me. Perhaps it was spite that motivated me, but I decided I’d show him that an Otar can connect with the woods and forest as well as a Taloori.

I sat on the bench and looked around. I could sit cross-legged, but I decided how the meditation is approached is more important than how I sit, be it on a bench, on the ground, cross-legged or not. I looked around. I would need an object to focus on, even when my eyes were closed. The bird song in the forest would take care of the auditory component, but I’d need an image. I looked around again.

The pine cone. It was obvious. If I wasn’t going to knock it over, I could use it as a focal point. I settled back on the bench and took a deep breath. I turned and faced the giant stone pine cone. For a moment, I felt a little dizzy, as if my balance were off. No matter. I wouldn’t be moving for a while. I stared at the pine cone, took another slow, deep breath through my nose, held it, and slowly released it

through my mouth. As I did so, I let my eyelids droop. I fixed the image of the pine cone in my mind.

I continued the breathing technique for several minutes, slowing my heart rate, relaxing, and getting into a different mental state. It had been years since I took the black-belt test that required me to stay in a small room without moving and meditate for 12 hours. I felt myself entering an altered mental state, yet it felt different than the previous times. Perhaps it was the setting or perhaps my concerns about my Tall Search were coming to the surface. I did not fight the thoughts. The dreams. The visions.

I walked through the forest. At times it reminded me of home, which was very unforest-like, and at times it reminded me of the sea and my travels there. Occasionally, I would see faces, partially obscured by the trees or bushes. Some would be family, some would be friends. A few were enemies, and many were familiar but not recognizable. Perhaps it was irony that the face I was seeking never appeared or maybe just part of the price. Trails led off of the path I followed, almost at every twist and turn. And standing in front of each path was a large, heavy-set eunuch, wearing only a loincloth and wielding a large sword. Each eunuch was well over 2 meters and was probably twice my weight. They stood in front of each branch in the path, gazing out into space with a vacant expression. I could not tell if they were some sort of palace guard or a memory of a childhood fairytale. They seemed inert, yet I knew if I approached, they would spring to life in a flurry of bloody violence.

I avoided them.

The ground became soft and muddy. I tried to walk along the drier parts of the main trail, except when they would take me too close to the eunuchs. Dull colored birds darted in and out of the tree canopy and the nearby bushes, always singing the same song. The song had not changed since I arrived, yet I really had not paid much attention to it. After some time, it began to dawn on me that it was not a song, but a form of communication. It was to me. It was a question.

The high-pitched whistles asked me who I was, where I was going, and did I belong.

“Names are not important, not here anyway,” I said out loud.

The song continued.

“I seek the eastern port city. Again, my name for it is of little importance, but it lies a ways beyond this forest. I only seek transit through the forest.”

More whistles and chirps. It felt like my words were being translated.

“Belong?” I continued, “To a person, to a place? How should I know. You know my immediate goal, to seek safe passage through the forest. Beyond that, I do not know how to answer that.”

“Why do you stay on the trail?” a deep voice asked me. I could not tell where it originated. Perhaps it was all around me.

After a moment, I replied, “These palace guards. I fear them, and the violence they could do to me. Also, I have spent too much time taking paths that branch away from my destination. I fear I may be too late to accomplish my ultimate goal, of which I shall not speak, though I suspect you may be able to see it from my thoughts.”

“The Guardians of the Forest protect it from those who know it not, those who are strangers to it,” rumbled the deep voice. “You, little one, are in a queer position. You have traveled very far, through many lands. That much is obvious. The desert sands and winter frost remain on you, in you, in your being, as well as the Winds of the Landfall, and many other locations. You cannot experience a place without it affecting you, and without you affecting it. Yet, by entering the heart of the forest, you court your own undoing. Do you bring destruction to the forest, to the world? We do not see your thoughts, only your intent, your emotions, your determination. You would fight till the end for your goal. You entered the forest knowingly, realizing that it may very well bring about your end. It troubles you, but you do not fear it.”

There was a pause and silence, except for the bird song, which had shifted back to voiceless music. I realized even though the voice made statements, there was a question implicit, hidden in the words. I turned around in slow circles to address the voice, which had come from all around me.

“Your assessment seems valid. I have spent much time on my quest. And in truth, I expect it will have little impact on this forest. I would not attempt deception in that way. My success would help others who would suffer grievously if I failed. But then those who are against me would suffer if I succeed. I believe they are in the wrong, but there is little more than hearsay I can provide. I assume that I am addressing a Guardian of the Forest.”

More silence before the reply. “The Taloori have few games, they do not gamble, it holds no appeal to them. They risk their lives each time they walk in the forest, and more so when they act as guides. They test themselves constantly, with pathfinding, with identifying the poisonous foods that would kill them, with the animals that would prey upon them. If they fail, they die; therefore they are certain before they undertake an excursion. You are not up to this task, why did Taloori Tomolo bring you here? A guide losing their charge is a form of failure to them.”

“I imagine he evaluated the risks,” I began. “No guides would take any of my group. They probably felt it would be certain death. They had been warned by others, the ones who are against me. Tomolo knew they were lying and probably figured that if I was as bad as they said, having me murdered in the forest would be worth the penalty he would suffer as a guide. And in the unlikely event that I survived, then it would be in his interest to be my guide.”

“And you accepted that?” asked the voice.

“I had little choice. For all I know, I am already too late to achieve my goal. But I cannot give up hope. And I cannot allow further delays. Going around the forest would take too long and the others would be watching the routes. And with a guide, I could transit the forest in the most respectful way. I do not seek further adversaries.”

“Then you must provide something of use. Not a tribute, not a demonstration, but something that justifies your passage. Your body is of use and could serve as fertilizer, for example. That is the standard price.”

“That would not be my preference,” I said simply.

“Then your compatriots,” it said.

And after a moment of thought I said, “The group that travels with me: I need them, their skills. And even if I did not, they are not up for negotiation.”

“That is only true because they are not at this moment in the forest,” rumbled the reply. “Had they been here with you, or anywhere in the forest, your statement would be meaningless, since you have no way to protect yourself, let alone them. You should understand you have very little time left.”

Suddenly I was grateful that Tomolo had insisted it was only me. While I believe my answer would be the same, even if I had them as bargaining chips, more likely they simply would have been claimed. Now, the cost is only *my* life.

And my mission.

The thought of failure lit a cold fire burning within me. I must *not* fail. I must not fail myself, my companions, those who have helped me, and those whom I seek to help. I will not fail. I had an idea, it was my last chance.

“I will make you an offer. In exchange for safe passage, for me and my group, I will do something of direct benefit to the forest. Something that can only be done *outside* of the forest, where even your reach has its limits. And since you cannot, or at least should not, trust me, I have a suggestion as to how we can provide assurance.”

For a few moments, the forest was silent. The lack of bird song, wind, or any perceptible noise was disturbing. Then the voice said, “Continue...”

We conversed further and came to an understanding. As we spoke, the world shifted, the trail melted. A palace guard came walking down the path towards me, and as he came within three paces of me he drew his sword, and with a great, rumbling battle cry, he charged at me.

I was in pain, my body was burning, and my head was throbbing. Everything looked dim and the world was spinning violently. I would have thrown up, if I had the strength.

After some time, I realized that I was lying on my back, on the ground. Staring down in front of me was Tomolo, his face a pale yellow, illuminated by fire light behind me. He was talking but sounds were still somewhat muffled, as if I had cotton in my ears.

Suddenly there was a shift, as if the cotton had been removed and the fever had abated. I felt cool sweat on my face, but no chills, no shivering. I felt the warmth of the fire nearby and it felt pleasant.

Tomolo was saying, “...now? You seem to hearing me, Otar Seecher, and there is some color returning to your face. What about now? Are you feeling any better?” He repeated himself a few times, with variations on that.

I closed my eyes and nodded and quiet said, “Yeah, a little better. Don’t know what happened.”

“You are safe. And getting better. I saw you blink and move your head, can you move your fingers?” he asked.

I did, weakly. I also moved my toes. I was surprised how weak I seemed to be.

Tomolo said, “Soon you will feel stronger and be better. You need to rest some and then you will feel better. Sleep now.”

I woke up from a dreamless sleep and it was late morning. I was tired, but I could move somewhat more normally. The fever, headache, and general malaise were gone. I was thirsty, and also a bit hungry.

Tomola made a thick porridge from some powder he had brought with him that had ground up beans

from a sunbush and a few varieties of roots, most of which were unfamiliar to me. The base was mostly flavorless with a bit of an earthy, dirt-like aftertaste, but he added some small, dark red berries that gave it a sweet flavor. It wasn't until I was halfway through the second bowl that I felt I had enough energy to ask him any questions. I started with the basics. I wanted to see how much he would offer before I pressed him.

"How about telling me what happened?" I asked, and continued my work on the second bowl of porridge.

He looked at me cautiously. He knew he would have to tell me more than his taciturn nature normally preferred. After staring at me in silence for almost a minute, he drew a slow breath and said, "You lived." I did not react to him and continued to eat. After a moment he allowed, "I did not expect that."

Another delay and then he spoke more.

"I spoke in truth. I was to bring you to The Guardian and you would be judged. Though the Guardians can reach into this plane, they exist and live elsewhere. If you could reach them or at least find a gateway from this world, then you could parlay. Apparently, you *can* meditate and found The Path. I have never known an Otari who could."

He continued. "In this world, you were dying."

"From the quickweed," I offered.

"Yes, but not directly. That branch had a mold growing on it. Rare in these parts, generally not too risky, unless it enters your blood, in which case it becomes a deadly threat. The thorns were contaminated with the spores. I had never seen that before, although I would believe it was the Guardian's Will. The treatment involves some roots and herbs, prepared over a fire. The faster the victim's heart goes, the less time they live untreated. I followed the stream until I came upon the roots I needed. However, at that point, I was certain you were dead. A Taloori could last a day, possibly two, if he properly maintained a self-induced coma. I had spent a day and a half just to locate the *buki'pta* root. By the time I gathered the other ingredients and returned, even if I traveled at a run, it would be a full day. And then preparing the mixture takes another half day."

"Three days before the cure could be administered," I remarked. "If a Taloori could not be counted on to survive for two, then at that point I would..."

"You would surely be dead," Tamolo said, finishing my thought.

"Then why did you continue?" I asked.

“It was the Guardian’s Will,” he said simply.

I played his game and waited, staring coldly at him. After a time he continued. “I gathered the *buki’pta* root by a curve in the stream. I rinsed it in the cold water to remove any dirt, so it would dry evenly and not rot, and walked down the stream some. That was when I glanced beyond the bend and saw it.”

He paused for effect, and this time I finished his thought. “You saw rocks, stacked in the same way as here.” It was my turn to pause for effect. I had given him the Otar answer. Before he could tell me I was wrong, I gave him the Taloori answer, “You saw a Guardian. You saw *this* Guardian.”

Quietly, he nodded.

“And what transpired?” I asked.

“Nothing. The Guardian watched me for a moment, then left.”

“And that changed your mind?”

“The Guardian indicated *I* was being watched, by the Guardians and the entire forest. I had committed myself to getting the cure. To vacate my task would be to presume authority that is not mine and to act as your...’judge, jury, and, executioner,’ is your term, I believe. To be reminded of my duty by a Guardian means my task was more important than I could imagine and I must hasten to complete it.”

“I see. And thus chastised, you hurried back. Did you...interact...with the Guardian at all?”

“Once I was reminded of my duty by the Guardian’s presence, I finished gathering the needed herbs and returned to you.”

“And how did you know it was the same one?” I asked.

“Besides being able to tell by the heart-feel, even an Otar could tell by its appearance,” he said, as if lecturing a child.

For the first time since I regained consciousness, I turned and looked at the giant stone pine cone, beyond where the fire had been last night. And with a mix of surprise and horror, all I saw was a pile of stones, as if the core of the intricate mesh of connecting stones had been removed, allowing the remainder to fall inward. And then perhaps half or more of the stones had been flung in all directions haphazardly, anywhere from one or two meters away, to ten meters or so. And judging from the amount of missing stones, many were probably farther away than that.

A sickly feeling crawled into the pit of my stomach. A memory of my poison-fueled dream flashed before my eyes: the large palace guard drawing his sword and slashing me to bits. I remembered

nothing beyond that until I woke up, weak and fevered. It was not a stretch to assume that the guard could have been the stone cairn and it seemed likely that I would have fought back my attacker. Tomolo had even said he could do nothing to stop me from desecrating the cairn once he left.

My throat was dry as I said to Tomolo, “In my ... fever ... I had a dream. There were many parts, but a large palace guard, a eunuch, came up the path and attacked me. I don’t remember what happened next, but...” I stopped. It was painful to say, and even though I had earned his disdain time and time again, none of those were for a legitimate reason, like desecrating a holy site. Nonetheless, I had to continue. “I *swear* I never meant to touch the stones. And I don’t *know* that I did, but it’s possible that I might have been responsible for ... that,” I said, pointing to the pile of rubble where the stone pine cone had been. “In my fever, it’s possible I dreamed it was attacking me and then, then struck back. I will not let this interfere with my goal, but once that is completed, if I live, I will face whatever consequences the Taloori impose.”

Tomolo’s eyes darted back and forth, between the pile of rocks and me, while his eyebrows were furrowed in concentration. After ten or twenty seconds, he snorted once through his nose and then made a “*ka ka ka ka*” sound.

“While in the dry fever of the *tuset’i*, few are responsible for their actions, even if they have managed to connect to the next plane. But now, you in straight mind, make big insult. You think while not in plane, while in dry fever, you would have strength to move rocks in pile, let alone defeat a Guardian?!? *Ka ka ka ka!* Otar, punishment is simple. You must tell this story in front of entire tribe! Better story than bull-ant and elephant-cow as lovers.”

The sound of him laughing was not only foreign to my ears, it seemed to be something he had not done in a long time. His spirits seemed to be greatly lifted.

“Otar,” he began, “since you make me happy, I tell you this: one thing *you* cannot do is *harm* a Guardian. You were weak and could not move. Even now, you would not succeed. I warn you to not touch for your own good. I forget you know so little. When Guardians leave, stone body crumbles. They go elsewhere, but the rocks remain.”

I was relieved, embarrassed, and a bit angry.

“So you mean, all those crumbed cairns we saw in the last day or two, were places where a Guardian had been and left?” I asked.

Tomolo had a confused look on his face for a moment, then nodded slowly. “Yes to all. Except *we* saw nothing in the last day or two. It took me three days to get back to you, after day and a half of

seeking *buki'pta* root, plus day to make cure. Plus four days of you still in dry fever after cure. We walked together in the forest almost a ten-day ago.”

I had been incapacitated that long? The rest of my group were probably still in the outpost. Those seeking me, seeking the Seeker, might be getting bored and complacent. But another ten-days had passed, and another strain on my hope that somewhere, in the port town by the water, the struggle continued.

With the thought of failure, my anger grew, and then changed into a familiar cold, steady burning. And with that I remembered the rest of my fevered dream and my conversations and negotiations with the voice.

“How could I have survived long enough for you to arrive?” I asked Tomolo.

“The Guardian,” he replied. “The guardian kept you alive, sustained your body and spirit, but for reasons beyond me,” he said.

“You said that I’d be safe from any further quickweed, and you were right. The Guardians can control, or at least influence, those plants, and most of what’s in the forest. It could help me live while keeping my life signs at a bare minimum. And also help retard the spread of the poison, the spores, until you brought the cure. You brought me here to face the Guardian of the Forest and to be Judged. But that was not exactly what happened.”

My tone took on a hint of an edge, as I continued. “Instead, I explained my position. And we negotiated. Things were actually quite cordial. We even exchanged our well-wishes and names. But in the end, I wanted safe passage through the forest. And for that, I was willing to trade a favor, a task to do once in the port city, once my work is done.”

“You don’t negotiate with a Guardian,” my guide spat at me.

“I do. And I did,” I replied. “The task concerns three people who will be in the port. Of course, once out of the forest, the reach of the Guardians is less absolute, where an Otar’s might be more...direct. But an Otar cannot be trusted at face value.” To this Tomolo nodded.

I added, “Only a Taloori can be trusted to enforce the will of a Guardian. Therefore, one will accompany me. And the sooner *my* task is done, the sooner the will of the Guardian can be done.” I paused for dramatic effect and then said, “And in case it is not clear, the person who will accompany me is you.”

Perhaps it was cruel, but I enjoyed Tomolo’s reaction.

I waited a moment for the horror to turn to anger, and the rage started to boil. Before he could react,

I calmly said, “When I said we were cordial and exchanged names, I was not speaking figuratively—that’s *exactly* what we did. I gave one of mine, and I took one of its names. I don’t really care what you call me. Otar can be a term of friendship as well as a challenge or insult, but if you want to be formal, you can call me Otar N’t’calutu Seecher. I am both the stranger and familiar, the other, the one. The name of mine that N’t’calutu took, in case you want to contact him sometime in the future,” I said, deliberately using the masculine third -person pronoun, since it now had my name as well, “well, if you finish the task you’re assigned, you’ll find that out and can take that back to your tribe.”

He was speechless. The Taloori rarely speak the names of Guardians—the Otar would never be permitted to know, let alone speak one, yet now I claimed it as my own. And I had not been struck down where I stood.

I said, “I am running out of time to spare. You return to the outpost. Get my men and bring them to me at the far edge of the forest. I’ll go ahead. I no longer need you to guide me.”

“The forest dangers,” he began. “an Otar could not survive...”

Having spoken the Guardian’s name out loud seemed to have awakened an awareness of the forest in the back of my mind. Perhaps it was from the spores or the fever. I took two steps back from him and stuck my arm back into the vegetation and waited a few moments as I wound a vine around my arm.

I pulled my arm forward, dragging a vine with it. The quickweed had wrapped around my arm a half-dozen times, but the thorns all pointed away from me. I grabbed a section of the vine connecting my arm to the vegetation behind me and held it for a few ten-seconds and then gave a sharp tug. The vine snapped. Looking at it, I flexed the muscle in my arm, and watched as the vine withered and slid off my arm. No thorn come close to touching me. I threw the rapidly browning vine back into the patch where it had been, and briefly bowed my head in respect.

Looking straight at Tomolo, I said, “I passed the test. I am safe in the forest now. See to it that my men have safe passage. You can ask the Guardians about it if you wish, but time is of the essence. Also, I will try as best as I can to see that you have safe passage and return to the forest safety after completing your task, Taloori Tomolo.”

Quietly, he said, “Yes, Otar N’t’calutu Seecher. I will meet you at the far edge of the forest with your group in three days” took his pack and headed out on the trail.

Tomolo had come to the forest to seek his destiny, and he had found it.

I was just beginning to learn of mine.