

The Conduit, Part I
By Tim Kennard

The small trade village of Treblehorn lay nestled at the base of Trembling Mountain, the easternmost peak in the Riverroot Chain. Meko had lived all of his nearly thirteen years inside this haven, rarely venturing outside its safety. His mother, father, two older sisters, and his maternal grandfather raised animals of all kinds at the village outskirts. Each day was much the same as the last with little excitement or change. Life was easy and good, and though they were not wealthy, they did not want for the necessities.

The most excitement came when he could spend time with his grandfather, a man of much wisdom and many, many, stories. Meko worked feverishly to complete his chores early on days he knew that grandfather could make time for him. As soon as he finished stacking the firewood, his last chore every day, he would race inside the house to find him.

But, today was different. He flew through the back door into the kitchen, nearly tripping over the chairs as he raced around the table to the common room where he knew he'd find grandfather sitting and waiting for him. Disappointment weighed heavy upon him as he entered the doorway only to find Grandfather slumped in his rocker, seemingly fast asleep by the warm fireplace. Although he desperately wanted his time with grandfather to begin, he knew he needed his rest, so he tried to leave quietly so as not to awaken him.

As Meko turned and tip-toed toward the door, he felt another presence in the room. He pivoted around trying to locate the source of his uneasiness and saw nothing, at least, not at first. As his initial fear subsided, he noticed a low, almost inaudible, humming noise that permeated the air, wafting to his ears as if on purpose. As he began to concentrate on the sounds, he slowly became aware that they were coming from Grandfather.

As he stood there motionless, his mind started to make sense of the sounds. It seemed there was a pattern to them so he quietly sat down near the door and closed his eyes to intensify the experience. As he did so, images began to form as well. At first the images were dark and non-distinct, nothing more than blurs and flashes of dim blue light. But, the longer he sat and relaxed, the clearer things became.

Suddenly, the images came into sharp focus; almost painfully Meko squinted beneath his eyelids. It was an outdoor scene, outside the camp in a clearing near the lake where his grandfather had often taken him on nature walks. "You cannot begin to know who you are until you understand the nature of all things around you," he often said. Meko never really understood what he meant by that but he accepted it as wisdom from his elder. As he watched his grandfather appeared from with a copse of trees, striding forward with a youth and purpose he had not seen in quite some time. Although Meko was not yet 13, he had observed for several years that his grandfather was not able to get around as spryly as he once did. That is to be expected from a man of such advanced years but in Meko's vision grandfather seemed to be much younger. In fact, his hair was not even gray yet. Meko's earliest memories of grandfather were as a gray-haired man with a slight limp and easy manner. The man he saw showed none of those traits yet he knew in his heart that this was his grandfather.

Meko tried to call out to him but no sound escaped his mouth. He could hear only the voice of nature in the plants and animals that surrounded him. Grandfather reached the middle of the clearing and knelt down upon his ceremonial blanket, one that was normally used in seeking the guidance of the great spirit of Elethay for a gentle season. But there was no prayer or words, only grandfather kneeling with arms outstretched as if awaiting something. It was then that Meko realized that the humming he'd heard before was growing louder. But as it intensified, it changed. It was no longer a humming but more guttural and coarse, almost a growling. Momentarily distracted by it, Meko had lost focus on the scene. As he tuned it back in, he was frozen in his tracks. A giant black grizzly bear was bearing down on his grandfather from behind, its huge dripping fangs bared, charging to its prey.

A blood-curdling scream ripped through Meko's ears and shattered his vision. Almost immediately he felt the hard floor beneath him and though he had not yet opened his eyes, he knew he was back in the common room, sweat pouring down his face. As the din subsided, Meko realized that his mouth was wide open and his throat hurt. He had been the screamer in his dream. He closed his mouth and took a gulping breath as his eyes slowly opened. The sight before him nearly stopped his heart. Grandfather was kneeling on his prayer blanket in front of the fireplace, enveloped in what appeared to be the spirit-form of a huge bear, one much the same as the one from his dream.

But this bear spirit was not threatening nor did it seem angered. Meko would swear later that he saw a grin on the bear's face but not just now. He rubbed his eyes and pinched himself, trying to waken himself from what surely was still his dreamvision. But, grandfather's eyes opens just then and he smiled at Meko. "I see you two have met," he said with a broad smile across his cracked face. "Do not fear him, Meko. He is my friend and it is time for you to know him as well."

"This is Brawn, the great bear spirit. We have known each other for many years and he protects me as one of his own," Grandfather continued. As Meko sat there transfixed by the sight of the shimmering bear encompassing grandfather as he talked, a flood of questions entered his already well-confused mind. How was this possible? Where did it come from? Why can I see it? Is this real?

Just then the back door slammed and Meko heard the familiar voice of his mother. Meko scrambled to his feet and ran into the kitchen. "Mother, come quickly! You must see this." He dragged his mother by the hand into the common room only to find grandfather again asleep in his chair and no sign of Brawn. "Okay, Meko. Now what is so urgent about papa sleeping by the fire? "But it was here just a second ago; I saw it. A giant grizzly bear!" blurted Meko, almost not believing it even as he spoke it. His mother patted him on the head, gave him that telltale look of disbelief, and returned to the kitchen. Meko stood there for several moments trying to convince himself that it was real, that what he'd seen and heard was not just a dream, but soon he gave up. Dejectedly, he walked toward his bedroom, still seeing the images and hearing the sounds. He was so confused and upset. He closed his bedroom door and lay down on his bed, trying to clear his mind. Soon he was fast asleep.

Meko awoke to the wonderful smells of breakfast cooking. Rubbing the sleep from his eyes, he stirred uncomfortably from his bed having slept in his clothes all night. He felt very rested even though thoughts from the night before still lingered. He had no memory of any dreams during his long slumber. That was unusual in itself. Meko always dreamed and remembered much of them the next day. Perhaps it was that he was so shaken by the previous night's events that there was no room in his subconscious for the playfulness of dreams.

He knew his mother would be furious if she knew he'd slept in his clothes so he changed quickly and went outside to wash at the well. It was a beautiful spring morning filled with the sounds of birds singing and the

bustle of the village coming to life. When he'd finished washing, he went back inside the house for his morning meal. His mother had just finished setting the table as he entered the kitchen. She kissed him on the forehead and mussed his hair as she greeted him at the door. "Good Morning, Birthday Boy," she whispered into his ear as he kissed her on the cheek. She knew how he hated to be fussed over especially on his special day. "It is my birthday, isn't it?" Meko queried to himself, dumbfounded that he had forgotten it himself. All that excitement last night must have distracted him more than he realized. Perhaps it all was just a dream.

His sisters Hanni and Jamai came in from their morning chores in the barn just as his father and grandfather called to the house as they approached. They must have risen very early to have been in to the village and back already this morning. Everyone took their places around the table and fueled themselves for the day ahead. The conversation was the norm for breakfast; the girls talking about boys and mother and father discussing the day's schedule. Only grandfather was silent making quick work of his meal, sporting quite an appetite for a change. Each time grandfather's eyes would come his way, Meko would avert his trying not to make contact. He still wasn't sure about what had happened last night and he didn't want to be caught staring or something equally silly like that.

Meko thought it best to finish quickly and get on to his work; that's the best way to put things back in perspective. Besides, he was thirteen today and a young man now in his own right. Now he would be given more responsibility and begin the long road to his right of passage as an adult. He said a brief goodbye to the family, again not meeting his grandfather's gaze, as he hurried out the door to his chores.

He was glad to get away from everyone and with his animals. They always were a comfort to him. They were his friends when no one else would be, never questioning him or his ideas, just giving back the attention he so freely gave them. Grandfather had taught him many things about caring for animals and showing them the respect they deserved. "All things have a purpose even if we don't know it yet." That was one of grandfather's nuggets of wisdom. Anyway, he settled into his work and before he knew it the midday sun was approaching its zenith. Where had the morning gone?

As Meko laid back under his favorite tree for a shady rest break, his thoughts again turned to this dreamvision. The clearing near the lake was not far so he decided he would take a walk there and grab a quick refreshing dip in the cool lake water before he went back to the house for his noon

meal. As he crested the ridge and cleared the brush, he could see the sunlight glistening playfully on the wave tops. The gentle breeze urged the waves in a never-ending trek to the shore. He disrobed as he ran down to the water's edge, leaving his clothes in a lumpy pile on the shore. Splash! He was in like a shot.

The water felt so good this time of day, just warm enough to take the chill off but not so warm that it felt like a bath. He loved to float on his back and gaze into the sky and the clouds, counting how many different shapes he could make out among them. After about 10 minutes he knew it was time to get back. He didn't want to be discovered away from his chores even though he knew he was allowed time to eat and rest. He turned toward shore and swam back but was startled to find he was not alone.

There on the shore sitting on a well-worn seat rock was grandfather. "Avoiding me today, are we?" Grandfather's tone was playful yet still a bit firm. "We need to talk." Meko's stomach was doing somersaults as he pulled himself out of the water and began to dress. He wasn't sure what to say to his grandfather. Was he here to reprimand him for being away from his work? Was he upset that Meko had avoided him at breakfast? Just as Meko's mouth opened to sputter something out, Grandfather beat him to it. "Oh, by the way, Brawn says Hello!" Meko fainted dead the spot!

He felt something cool and soothing on his forehead and as he opened his eyes he could see grandfather tending to him. "I didn't mean to scare you. Are you alright, Meko?" Am I alright? Now that was a question Meko wanted an answer to as well.

"I feel very strange, grandfather." Meko's voice was weak and he looked pale.

"You'll be stronger soon. You've had a rough night and morning. Let me see if I can explain. I know you saw the bear spirit last night as I was communing with him. You were not dreaming. Now that you are beginning your journey to manhood, it is time you knew more about me and about yourself."

Grandfather's words were comforting and made sense. A spirit of calm washed over Meko and he listened intently to the strangest tale he'd ever heard from his elder.

"I am a Spirit Guide, a special kind of shaman. The spirits of men are not what I seek. I have told you many times that understanding nature and all its wonders is the most important of all things. For me that is the truth above all truths. I communicate with the spirits of all that Elethay has

provided us, especially her animals. It is no coincidence that our family cares for and raises Elethay's children. The bear, the fox, the eagle, the owl - all of these and many more are part of Elethay's plan to balance nature and bring us to understand her way for us."

"Last night you saw Brawn, the great bear spirit as he came to me in my sleep. I often speak to him and he lends me his power when I need it. He told me he frightened you and for this he is very sorry."

Meko could not believe his own ears. Was he dreaming again? How could this be? "Grandfather, I just don't know about this. It is all so very strange to me. I know what I thought I saw but it couldn't have been . . ." Meko's sentence trailed off to a whisper as he looked at grandfather. The old man's eyes had closed and he stretched out his hands as he began to hum and chant. Meko couldn't make out what he was saying but it was very familiar to him. He'd heard it before in his dreamvision. The breeze freshened from the north and Meko felt a chill run down his spine. Right before his widened eyes, Brawn returned, engulfing grandfather in his misty form.

Meko's jaw had dropped to his chest. He was so stunned he couldn't make a sound. Grandfather's eyes opened. "You see. You were not dreaming." The words rang in his ears but grandfather's lips didn't move. He knew he'd heard grandfather's voice. "Be calm, Meko. It is Grandfather! Do not be afraid." Grandfather broke concentration and let Brawn go.

"Look, Meko. I know you are having trouble believing. It is very much to take in all at once but I assure you that this is real." Grandfather's tone was reassuring and helped to ease Meko's fear and frustration. "Please sit and let me explain."

For nearly an hour Meko listened intently as grandfather told the tale of how he came to know and understand the spirits of the earth. One by one, as he described them, they appeared to Meko. There were so many Meko lost count. He had never stopped to think that the animals that he cared for could have so much to offer him. The bear made you stronger; the eagle gave you increased perception; swiftness came with the fox and wisdom from the owl and toughness from the taur.

Grandfather paused to take a breath and let things soak in. As he had hoped, Meko had a question. "But, grandfather, there is still one thing that troubles me. I've never seen any of these spirits before in my life. If they are always with you, why is it that I'm just seeing them now?"

"An excellent question, Meko. It is true that the spirits cannot be seen by ordinary people. They are sensitive and need to find a point of trust before they will reveal themselves." Again grandfather smiled as he saw the quizzical look cross Meko's face.

"Then how is it that I can see them, grandfather?"

"Well, because they trust me I convinced them to show themselves to you. You see, Meko, for the animal spirits to have such trust in me, I had to form a spirit bond with them. It is a sacred pact between the two of us. I agree to care for and protect Elethay's lands and creatures and the spirits promise to lend me their abilities in return."

Meko understood. He could see the truth of it and was finally able to accept what he'd seen and heard. One thing still bothered him though. "But last night when you bonded with Brawn, I could see him, grandfather. Did you know I was there? How did he know to trust me?"

"I have known for some time now that I am no longer able to fulfill my part of my bond with the spirits. I can no longer get about as I once could and it weighs heavy on my heart. Someone else must take my place and continue to protect the land Elethay blesses for us. That someone is you, Meko!"

"Is that why I could see the spirits? Am I a Spirit Guide, too??"

Grandfather chuckled and smiled as he took Meko by the hand. "Yes, my child, but you are just at the beginning of the journey. To truly be one with the animal spirits and become a worthy Spirit Guide, you must know the land and the animals as you know yourself. Gaining their trust is not easy but you have within you all that you need begin. I will help you. My last duty is to train my replacement. Well, Meko? What do you say? Will you pledge your life to protect the bounty Elethay provides us?"

Meko looked deeply into his grandfather's eyes and searched his own heart for an answer. It all made sense now. He'd always felt a connection to his animal friends. Maybe they knew all along that he was special. "I am ready, grandfather. Teach me!"