

The Conduit, Part II
By Tim Kennard

Purpose. It was Meko's new favorite word. All of his life he had only known ordinary and essential, routine and necessary. Do your chores, clean your room, and don't bother your sisters. Never a surprise, nothing new; every day was much the same as the next. Granted, only being fifteen, he did not have a vast background to draw on. Still, he knew the difference. Grandfather had been drilling it into him for the past two years and Meko relished it. To arise each morning knowing that what you do today has meaning and substance is to understand life itself.

Unfortunately, that was Bubo talking; Bubo and Grandfather. Of all the animal spirits he had encountered so far, the Great Owl Spirit was the most like his grandfather; patient and wise. That was the problem. Although Meko was progressing well along the path of the true Spirit Guide, his maturity was beginning to show signs of fatigue. He was still quite impatient.

"Grandfather, please don't think me ungrateful, but when will you teach me to bond with a spirit?" The frustration was evident in Meko's voice. All of his training the last two years had been on understanding the true relationship of Elethay to the earth, recognizing the differences in terrain, learning the signs, tracks, habits, and quirks of countless species of animals, and most importantly, delving deep within him to find his own spirit. Why did he have to learn all of this stuff first? Surely bonding with a spirit was more important.

Grandfather thought for a moment then turned to Meko. "Very well, then. If that's the way you'd like it, I will teach you how to make a spirit bond. But first, please build a fire so that we may warm ourselves and prepare a meal."

A broad smile adorned Meko's face as he leapt to his feet, grabbed his tinderbox, and began to gather wood for the fire.

"Oh, I'm sorry my son. You may not use any wood in creating your fire, nor may you use any tools such as the tinderbox. Also, you must take this strip of cloth and tie it around your head and use it as a blindfold."

Meko stood there with the cloth in his hand and a puzzled look on his face.

Grandfather continued. "Once you have affixed your blindfold, you must turn around and allow me to bind your hands behind you as well. Then you may continue to build the fire."

Meko laughed nervously. "What?!? You've got to be kidding, Grandfather." He was stunned by the strange requests from his mentor. What manner of lunacy was this? He could not comprehend it. "How do you expect me to build a fire if I cannot see, cannot use my hands, nor the proper fuel or tools? It would be impossible!"

A knowing smile peeked out from Grandfather's usually serious visage. "Exactly, my son. And so, too, it would be equally impossible for you to bond with a great spirit without first acquiring the sight, senses, knowledge, and skills that are necessary to a true spirit guide. I know how eager you are and how difficult it is for you to wait. You must trust that everything has a time and a season. So, too, it is with your training. It is only after you arrive at your destination that you can truly understand and appreciate the journey."

Meko felt foolish. He'd done it again. How was it that Grandfather could take any situation and turn it into another lesson? Although still a bit frustrated, Meko acquiesced to his teacher's wisdom. He would just have to wait a little bit longer and put aside his impatience as best he could.

Despite his disappointment with the speed of his training, Meko was happy with his new life. Sure he still had chores to do and responsibilities within his family and community, but his training offered side benefits that made the mundane easier to swallow. For instance, his ability to handle animals was uncanny. Even though he had not yet bonded with a spirit, he could sense the emotions of his animals and thereby know better what they wanted and needed. This knack was starting to draw attention around the village and was becoming a concern to some.

Grandfather had warned him that this was a possibility but he did not explain why, other than to say that there were those who looked down upon the ways of the Spirit Guide, especially the dragonkin.

"Dragonkin, Grandfather? What are they?" Meko was never question poor. "Do you mean . . . shape shifters?" He paused and looked around to make sure they were out of earshot before lowering his voice to ask.

Grandfather showed his amusement with a muffled laugh. "Yes, Meko, the shape shifters are those I speak of but you need not fear them. There is much you should know about them. I believe you are now old enough to

fully understand the truth about the world." And with that, the next phase of Meko's training began.

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Over the course of the next several weeks Meko's eyes were opened to a part of his world he never knew existed. He had heard of the shape shifters although he had never seen one. The trade routes between the Golden Savannah and the Northern Plains converged in Treblehorn. Most of the merchants and travelers told fantastic tales of the shifters and the evil they wrought throughout Grandilar, warping the land and drawing deadly storms in their wake. Some claimed that the government and its petty representatives controlled the shifters and used them to frighten and intimidate the populace. A scant few, however, told an even more unbelievable tale. They claimed that necromancers, evil wizards, were responsible for the bulk of the bad things they'd heard about and that they were hunting shifters to extinction.

So many stories. Even in a village as small as Treblehorn opinions varied, but most tended to believe that shifters were evil. Meko's father, Tan El', was one of the most vocal in support of this belief whenever the subject would surface. Naturally, Meko listened to his father and trusted that he knew best. Grandfather had always been silent on the subject and just shook his head at its mention.

But Grandfather was silent no more. He spoke of the great dragon cultures, Pylos wizards, necromancers, dragon storms, magic, Elethay, and Valarians. He spoke of grand adventures and terrible battles, wondrous beings and nightmarish spawn. It was enthralling and frightening at the same time. All that Meko thought he knew and understood about shifters and the world outside his village came crashing down about him like snow in an avalanche. The weight of it was difficult to bear, but he knew in his heart that it was true.

"I know you've lived many years Grandfather, but how is it you know these things you say to be true? You've never been outside our village other than on nature walks and most of them were with me?"

A distressed look began to wash across Grandfather's face. He turned and walked away a few paces. He clearly was uncomfortable with the question. Still with his back to Meko, he said "There is still much you do not know, much you are not ready to hear or see."

For the first time since the beginning of his training, Meko sensed Grandfather closing himself off. He had been so honest and forthcoming about everything. What was he holding back? What else could there be that would make him change so quickly?

Meko longed for an answer but had no desire to cause his mentor any more pain. "Grandfather, I'm sorry," he pleaded. "I did not mean to pry. If you don't want to talk about it, I'll understand."

"It's all right, Meko. You did not injure me. I have hidden away certain memories from myself for so long that I had forgotten how painful they were." He paused while he regained his composure and again returned to his seat beside Meko. "I always knew this day would come but I had hoped to wait until your training was complete. It appears that will no longer be possible. But, we must first attend to more pressing matters."

"More pressing matters? What could be more pressing than this?" Meko's confusion, frustration, and impatience were all ganging up on him.

"Oh, come now, Meko. Concentrate. Deep within you lies the answer." Grandfather's face now sported a broad smile.

Is he laughing at me? Meko was quickly losing the battle with his emotions. He was even beginning to feel physical discomfort. A gnawing pain was growing steadily in the pit of his gut. The more he looked at his grandfather, the worse it got. And the more pain Meko looked to be in, the broader the smile became on Grandfather's face.

What was so funny? Meko thought. Ough! The pain was intensifying. Meko could not understand it. "The pain, Grandfather, what is it?"

Grandfather struggled to hold in his laughter. "Meko, do you not even realize when you are hungry? Truly my training has been inadequate if you don't even respect your own body enough to feed it."

Meko laughed and his grandfather joined him, nearly falling over at one point. They embraced each other and enjoyed the release of emotion. Meko hadn't realized until now how long it had been since he had eaten. "Okay, Grandfather. I'll make dinner and then we'll talk. More pressing matters, indeed!" Meko reached for the shoulder sack that held the provisions his mother had packed for their extended nature walk.

"Don't bother, Meko. I will prepare our meal this evening," Grandfather insisted.

Now it was Meko's turn to laugh. He had never seen his grandfather prepare any food, much less a meal.

"Take care, my son. I was cooking for myself long before you were ever born. I have not forgotten how. Besides, we may be having company to sup with us."

That peeked Meko's interest. "Who, Grandfather?"

"You'll just have to wait and see. You go ahead and gather firewood and build the fire. I'll take care of everything else. Perhaps you should lie down and rest until the meal is ready."

Meko had heard that tone before, gentle but assertive. That was not a request from a family member; it was an instruction from teacher to pupil. Dutifully, Meko made the fire and laid down for a short nap.

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Something smelled wonderful as Meko awoke from his rest. He felt much better but the aroma of the food and the gnawing in his stomach were beginning to go to war. He looked over at the fire and saw Grandfather putting food on plates from a stew pot over the fire. He hustled to his feet and made his way to the fire.

He was so hungry that he dispensed with all pleasantries, grabbed the plate that Grandfather had prepared for him, and dove in. The first bite was in his mouth before he even wondered what it was he was eating. But, as he began to chew and swallow it, he gagged and spat it out. The taste was vile; not because of its taste but because of what was in it.

"Ugh! Rabbit stew, Grandfather? How could you do this to me?" Meko was as furious as he was repulsed. His grandfather knew full well that he had sworn off the eating of meat when he began his training. He could not bring himself to eat animal flesh. He considered them more as friends now. He would not be a cannibal!

"Calm down, my son. I'm sorry I did this to you, but I had to. You have neglected yourself for too long and without reason. It is time you put away your childish superstitions."

Meko could not decide which was making him angrier at this point; the fact that he had been forced to taste meat or his Grandfather belittling his personal beliefs. It really didn't matter because Grandfather was the source of both.

"Haven't you ever wondered why I still eat meat, Meko? You've never asked in the two years since you swore it off. Why have you never questioned my choice to do so?"

Meko considered it for a moment. "Who am I to question your personal beliefs? Besides, if you've taught me anything, Grandfather, it is that our beliefs are what define us and give us purpose. I had never thought to question yours and that is what troubles me most right now. Why do you do it to me?"

"I am glad to hear that you have retained so much of your training. But, that is only half of the lesson. You seem to have forgotten the most important part. A belief is only healthy if it is grounded in the truth."

Now what did he mean by that, Meko pondered. How could his belief be untruthful? It made no sense to him.

"Meko, you once ate meat didn't you? How do justify studying to be a Spirit Guide having been a cannibal for so many years?" Grandfather was twisting Meko's own protestation against him.

"You are just trying to confuse the issue, Grandfather," Meko defended. "You know how difficult it was for me at first."

"Yes, I do and I also remember telling you at the time that there was no need for this drastic course. You refused to listen to me then. Perhaps you will listen to me, now that you are older. Do you think Elethay is displeased with you for eating her animals?"

"Well . . . no . . . I guess not, but that's not what we're talking about."

"Isn't it, Meko? What if I could prove to you that there is no shame in eating meat? Would you then reconsider your decision?"

"Grandfather, I know you are wise but how could you possibly prove such a thing?"

"I'll let you hear it from the horse's mouth, so to speak. I believe it is time for our dinner guest to make an appearance." Grandfather reached inside his backpack and produced his ceremonial prayer blanket. Unfolding it with great care and reverence, he placed it on the ground facing the fire and knelt upon it. Bowing his head and reaching his arms outstretched to the sky, he intoned "Oh, Elethay, mother of all that we see, grant me favor with your children that I may protect, nurture, and bring healing to the earth."

For a moment there was only silence and a breathless calm descended upon the camp. An all too familiar humming arose next. Meko recognized it immediately. Could this be an actual bonding in progress? Grandfather had as yet not revealed the actual ritual. Meko's level of concentration immediately jumped.

Not only could Meko hear the humming, he could feel it as well. The rhythmic pulsing of it was musical and soothing. Amidst the music there was

also another sound emerging. He couldn't quite distinguish it. Was it a wheezing? Laughter? No. It was a whinnying. Meko followed the sound and separated it in his mind so that it was the focus of his attention. As he aurally tracked it, his eyes landed on the fire. It was coming from the fire!

Just as his vision clarified, the smoke from the fire began to take a form. The wisps collected and merged growing large and more coherent as they did. As the flames fueled the massing form, it became more and more substantial. It was beginning to look equine. Did Grandfather say 'Straight from the horse's mouth?'

Suddenly and without warning the form leapt from the fire and landed to Grandfather's right. It was a horse! "Meko." Grandfather's voice entered Meko's mind. "Do you not recognize the spirit beside me?"

Meko strained to make concrete sense of the spirit form before him. There were familiar aspects but he could not envision its solid state. "No, Grandfather," Meko thought, "I cannot. Why would I be familiar with this spirit?"

"I am disappointed, Meko. Nightshade was really looking forward to seeing you again."

Nightshade? Meko's mind raced. Suddenly, he found himself back home inside the barn cleaning out the stalls. He could hear his father's voice. "Meko, come quickly. Bright is about to foal!" Meko rushed to his father's side just as the foal was birthed. It was as black as the moonless night sky and more handsome than any horse he'd seen before.

"Meko, I have decided that this horse will be the first of your charges. He is in your complete care. If you keep him well, I will consider giving you other animals to raise and train. But, first, you must name him. Well? What shall it be?"

Meko stood there motionless for what seemed an eternity, staring at the foal as it struggled to get to its feet. He could not take his eyes off of the new born. It was the most pure black he'd ever seen; but something about it was truly unusual. Within the blackness he could also see a hint of another color, dark and mysterious. The more he stared, the more it became clear that the other color was a deep violet. He'd seen this combination of black and violet before, but he couldn't place it. He knew he'd seen it in the forest. Then it came to him. "I have decided father." Proudly, he announced "Nightshade!"

With the name ringing in his mind, his thoughts returned to the present. There beside his Grandfather stood the spirit of his horse,

Nightshade. Tears welled up in his eyes at the joyous sight, but the moment was bittersweet. It also brought back to him how much he missed his boyhood friend. It had been five years since Nightshade died. Meko was unprepared for the rekindling of these emotions.

"Nightshade, is it really you?" Meko's voice quivered as he spoke aloud. The knowing whinny and nodding head were the only answer he needed.

"Now, Meko, you must concentrate. To communicate with the spirit you will have to use your mind. Horses do not understand our speech just as we do not understand theirs. You must think what you want to say and listen with your mind's ear for an answer. The link I have created can only be extended to you as long as we work together to maintain it. Do not waiver or falter. I will not be able to recreate this link. It is only temporary."

Meko would not let this chance pass. Reluctantly he closed his eyes and relaxed, breathing deeply and slowly. He let go of his emotions and allowed himself to sink deeper into the link to strengthen it.

"Very good, Meko," Grandfather reassured him. "Your patience serves you well. We must make this brief. Do not allow yourself to stray from the importance of this meeting."

Meko knew what he meant. If anyone was guilty of getting off of the topic in a discussion, it was Meko. "I will not disappoint you, Grandfather," he thought.

"Welcome, Nightshade. We are honored at your presence here."

"It is good to see you and Grandfather, and you especially Meko," said Nightshade in a very gravely sort of tone.

"So that's what a horse sounds like," thought Meko.

"What did you expect?" Grandfather chimed in. "Remember, Meko, focus! I have asked Nightshade here tonight to help you understand the nature of things. It is possibly the most important of the lessons you will learn." Grandfather paused. "Do you remember how Nightshade died, Meko?"

It was a painful memory but Meko did not let it distract him. He could see it in his mind as clearly as if it were yesterday. He was riding Nightshade in the forest and was having such a good time that he forgot how far he was getting from the safety of his village. His father had warned him on many occasions about the dangers of the deep forest but it was too far from his present state of bliss to register.

Out of nowhere a cougar lunged through the brush and made his attack. Fortunately his timing was off just enough that he only landed his blow to Nightshade's left hindquarter. Nightshade lurched forward awkwardly. Meko was so distracted by the shock that he was thrown from the horse's bare back and tumbled off into the bushes.

He was hurt but forced himself to his feet to make his escape. His eyes darted wildly back and forth searching for Nightshade or the cougar. He found them at the same time. They were locked in a death struggle and Nightshade was losing. Meko wanted to grab something and join the fight to rescue his friend but something inside him said, "Run!" He dismissed it and grabbed for the nearest weapon he could find but again from within it came. "I said Run!!!" Before he knew it, he was running; not toward the fight, but away from it. Once he started, he couldn't stop.

He ran as far and as fast as he could. Complete exhaustion finally felled him. Only then did he have time to consider what had happened. How could he have left Nightshade? Where was his bravery? A sickening feeling enveloped him as he sobbed heavily over his cowardice and his lost friend.

He made it safely back to the village even though he was hurt more seriously than he thought. He was ashamed when he told his family what had happened even though they assured him he did the right thing. He never forgave himself.

As the memory eased from him, he could not look at Nightshade's spirit. His head hung low and he began to weep.

"Do not blame yourself, Meko," Nightshade thought. "You did not abandon me. You did exactly as I told you and I am grateful."

"What? What are you saying? It was my fault. I ran and you died because I did not help you."

"You ran because I told you to and something within you listened." Meko looked up as Nightshade nodded his head and seemed to smile. "You did not lose your balance and fall from my back; I threw you to safety on purpose!"

Again, Meko was confused.

"I knew the cougar had us. I could not outrun him with my injury so I made the choice to stay and defend you so that you could get away. You did not kill me. I gave my life for you."

Meko didn't want to believe what he heard but he could feel Nightshade's compassion even through his thoughts. He could see and feel the truth of it. Meko slumped to the ground weeping openly.

"I must go now, Meko, but you must promise me that you will blame yourself no longer. If you honor my memory, you will do this for me." Just as these thoughts were received, the link was broken and the spirit once again became just so much smoke and drifted aimlessly toward the moonless night sky.

"No! Don't go!" Meko cried, but it was too late. Almost immediately Grandfather was at Meko's side, his arms wrapped securely around his grandson.

"It is all right, Meko. Let it go. Let it all go." Grandfather rocked him reassuringly as Meko's heart emptied through his tears.

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"Good, you are awake," said Grandfather as Meko stirred from his bedroll, not knowing how he had gotten there. "Perhaps now I can answer the many questions that still exist for you."

Meko rubbed his eyes and stretched. How much time had passed? He didn't know. It was still night and the fire was blazing.

"Please forgive me for putting you through all that, Meko. You have too long carried that burden and it has poisoned you. If you reach past it, you will be able to finish your long journey to become a Spirit Guide."

Meko sat up and smiled. It was a good sign. Grandfather was right. A terrible weight had been lifted from Meko's heart and he could see more clearly now than he ever had.

"I thank you for bringing Nightshade to me, Grandfather. I will carry the memory of my friend with me for as long as I live and I swear that it will haunt me no more. It is the least I can do to honor him."

Grandfather was astonished at Meko's words and he smiled at the young man his grandson was becoming. He was ready. "Perhaps now you will give some thought to your aversion to meat."

Meko laughed. "No need, Grandfather. Your teaching has forced me to become familiar with your ways and symbols. I know that you did not bring Nightshade to me only to end my suffering. You always use everything as a lesson. Let me see if I understood what you were trying to teach me."

Meko thought carefully for a moment then stood authoritatively. "Elethay's plan is for all living things to exist in harmony, each giving of itself as is needed, regardless of personal risk. The proof is in Nightshade's sacrifice for me."

"Yes, yes, my son. Go on."

"All living things know this and therefore understand that each of us has a purpose, even though some may be unpleasant. To honor Elethay is to seek balance and continue the harmony."

"But what has this to do with your not eating meat?" Grandfather listened intently for Meko's answer.

"Even as Nightshade gave up his life for me, so too, do the animals in the fields to nourish and sustain all of us. They maintain the balance that Elethay requires to ensure harmony. It is the natural course of things and we should not fight it. Is that it, Grandfather?" Meko looked to his teacher for some sign of approval.

Grandfather stroked his long gray beard while he pondered over Meko's statements. After what seemed an eternity to Meko, Grandfather finally spoke. "Yes, Meko, you have found the truth in it. Perhaps I'm a better teacher than I thought."

Meko's broad grin belied the knots in his stomach. He had been nervous about Grandfather's answer but there was something more. Then, he remembered. He was still quite hungry. "Is there anything to eat?"

"Well, there are the fruits and vegetables that you have in your sack. You could fix some of those or eat them raw."

"No thanks, Grandfather. If you will allow me, I'd really like to have some of your stew."

"Are you sure, Meko?" Grandfather asked with some reservation.

Meko walked over and put his arm around his grandfather's shoulders. "It is all right, Grandfather. Let it go. I have."

The two of them looked knowingly into one another's eyes. They sat down together and shared the stew and had a conversation that was different than all of the others. This time they spoke not as grandfather and grandson, nor as teacher and student, but as kindred souls sharing a special purpose. Grandfather had not forgotten the secrets about himself he promised to share with Meko; but they would wait for another day.