

The Conduit, Part III
By Tim Kennard

Time no longer had meaning for Meko. The days passed as hours; the weeks as days. He was consumed by his training and its completion was nearing rapidly. The only task left to him was to create a link with one of the Great Spirits like Braun or Bubo.

"You have come far and learned much, Meko," said Grandfather, his pride gleaming like a brilliant medal on a soldier's chest. "You have bonded with minor spirits and learned to call them, you can track better than I ever could, and you have grown both physically and spiritually. Next week we will begin the final phase of your training. But first we must tend to a more mundane ritual, albeit a very important one. Preparations must be made for your Coming of Age Celebration."

Meko winced a bit at the idea of celebrating his birthday. He had never liked the fuss at being made over by all of his family and friends. But, this was different. The Coming of Age Ceremony was a clear signal that he couldn't be treated like a child anymore. He could stand proudly in front of the whole village and proclaim his name of manhood. No longer would he be known as just plain Meko; his name would be followed by the words that would define his place in life and society. He would be known as Meko well, he hadn't quite figured out what it would be. But he still had a week to decide.

Meko had changed, it's true. He stood as tall as his father now, strong, stocky, and bore a striking resemblance to his dear mother, Honoria. He walked differently and showed much more maturity than others of his age. The last three years studying with his grandfather had been the most difficult of his life, but they had been good years none the less. He felt a kinship with his grandfather that transcended their familial relationship.

"We must get back to Treblehorn soon. You know how your mother worries," Grandfather said as he began to break camp. Meko nodded and set about packing.

It had been nearly two months since he was last at home. It was increasingly difficult to pass his training off as 'taking a nature walk' with Grandfather. His mother was there in the doorway waiting to greet him. "Oh, Meko, it's so good to have you home," she said as she hugged him tightly. She took him by the arm and ushered him inside. "You must promise

me that you won't leave again too soon. And try not to be gone so long next time."

"All right, mother. I promise," Meko said as he kissed her on the cheek.

"Now, go and clean up before lunch. We have to discuss the arrangements for the celebration and I don't want to hear a single grunt or groan!" She winked at him as she said it, knowing that he had already groaned to himself at the mention of it. "Where is your grandfather? I have words for him as well."

"He left me at the edge of the village. He said he had a special errand to attend to. I'm sure he won't be long." Meko was holding something back. Grandfather had insisted they have a talk today about something that was long overdue. He wouldn't elaborate but he made Meko promise not to say anything about it to anyone.

"Well, he'd better hurry up or we'll start without him!"

Meko knew she was serious but he detected a note of playfulness in her voice as well. He turned and went to his room to freshen up.

An hour later the family was sitting around the kitchen table about to commence the meal; all except Grandfather, that is. He had not arrived and concern was beginning to show on Honoria's face. It was not like her father to be late, especially for a meal.

"He'll be here soon," said Tan El'. "He's probably trading stories with the elders of the village. You know how long-winded he can be at times." As the words left his mouth, he could feel two sets of eyes boring a searing hole into his head. He sheepishly regarded each set in turn, knowing full well that he had crossed the line. "Well, you know what I mean," he apologetically pleaded as he retreated to the safety of his meal and said nothing else.

Meko and Honoria were not appeased but they exchanged a commiserative look and let it go. They began to eat as well, turning the conversation toward lighter fare and Meko's impending party.

They had barely gotten a few bites in their mouths when it began. At first it was nothing more than few raised voices; someone running past the door; but, then the screaming began.

"What is that?" Tan El' insisted indignantly as he rose from the table, strode to the door, and flung it open to investigate. No sooner had the door opened than Tan El' was met by his neighbor, running onto the porch.

"Tan El', come quickly! The village is under attack by marauding vermites!"

Tan El' reached inside the door and grabbed his axe. "Meko, protect your mother and this house!" he shouted as he ran to defend the village.

"Father!" Meko called to him but he was already out the door. Meko desperately wanted to help. His spirit training would surely be of some use and he was no slouch with a sword either; Tan El' had seen to that, but he couldn't leave his mother alone.

"Meko, what about your grandfather; where is he?" Honoria cried with a panic-stricken look on her face. "You must go find him and bring him home. He cannot defend himself."

"But, mother, what about you? I can't leave you here. Father would never forgive me if anything happened to you; and I couldn't live with myself."

"Do as I say, Meko! I can take care of myself. You're not the only member of this family that can make things happen." She winked at him and stared deeply into his eyes. Her expression was so reassuring Meko couldn't help but believe her.

"I'll be back just as soon as I can," Meko promised as he turned and ran out the door to search for Grandfather. A strange sensation washed over Meko. Out of the corner of his eye he thought sure he could see his mother's hands beginning to glow as he left.

Within the village there was much confusion, small skirmishes being fought all over the place but mostly concentrated at the access points in the village palisades. He couldn't see his grandfather anywhere. How would he find him? He could sure use some help.

He began searching in and around the nearest buildings hoping to find him in one of them. Having no success in the first few, his eyes fell on the barn. He rushed over to it and burst inside. A quick search revealed nothing but poking around the barn inspired a memory.

Meko quickly took out his prayer blanket, knelt on it, raised his arms to the sky, and began the ritual. "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." Meko concentrated very hard and began the hum-chant that could summon a minor spirit. This must work he thought as he prayed and chanted. "Nightshade, come forth I beg you. You must help me find Grandfather!" Meko pleaded as tears began to well in his eyes.

Meko waited but nothing was happening. He began to panic. He knew he couldn't wait much longer. His mind started to race, darting rapidly between images of his father fighting, his mother being attacked, and his grandfather injured. "No!" screamed Meko. "I cannot allow myself to be distracted. I must focus!"

As he wrestled with himself for control for his emotions, something began to happen. Other images began to bombard his mind's eye, but these were not of his family in trouble. They were images of Nightshade! Meko's heart leapt in his chest as he tried to fine tune what he was seeing. Something was different though. This was not the same kind of link Grandfather had made with Nightshade. There was no sound and he was only seeing images from his past; at least he thought they were from his past.

Meko could see Nightshade galloping through the forest, jogging back and forth to avoid low tree branches. He thought he recognized the area. It was near his favorite lake; he was sure of it. Just then Nightshade began to slow down and soon he was cantering into the clearing near Meko's lake. Nightshade stopped and scraped at the ground with his hoof. Then he raised his head and looked straight at Meko. He could swear Nightshade was trying to tell him something. Meko wasn't sure of message but it was certain to him that he must get to the lake. Perhaps Grandfather was there.

Breaking his concentration and ending the ritual, Meko quickly grabbed up his blanket and headed out the back of the barn in a dead run for the forest. He glanced back over his shoulder toward the village and was at least a bit relieved to see his father and mother embracing outside their house. Perhaps the attack was over. Meko prayed it was so.

It was between fifteen and twenty minutes before Meko neared the clearing at the lake. It had seemed much longer and he was becoming very fatigued from the pace. Meko's only wish was to see his grandfather there and safe. As he broke through the last thicket into the clearing, his heart sank. Only half of his wish was true. Grandfather was there, wielding his cudgel wildly, but he was being overpowered by two vermites.

"Get away from him you vile vermin!" Meko bellowed as he drew his sword and charged wildly into the fray. He gave no thought to his own safety. Saving his grandfather was paramount, no matter what the cost.

Having alerted them to his presence, Meko lost the element of surprise. One of the vermites broke off his attack on Grandfather to deal with the charging boy. He squared and set his spear defensively in the ground, pulling a shield to his chest to brace for the impact.

Meko saw his adversary's preparations and instinctively knew he should dive and roll to the shield side to avoid the spear, coming to his feet just in time to slash the enemy in the back of the leg, thereby disabling him from further movement. Father's training had been very thorough. Unfortunately, instinct and training were being overridden by pure unadulterated hatred, so Meko slammed sword first into the defenses of the vermite.

A sharp pain wracked his right side as the spear found its mark just below his rib cage. Simultaneously Meko's sword lunge found the chest of the vermite as the shield was dislodged by the force of the impact. They tumbled together each impaled on the others weapon and crashed to the ground. Meko's head struck the wayward shield and everything went black.

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Pain. It was the great clarifier, stripping away the facade and baring the senses. So strong is it at times that even the subconscious cannot escape its sting. He should have dived and rolled. He should have dived and rolled. Over and over he heard it repeat; and then more pain.

"Meko? Wake up."

He knew he heard it.

"Meko! Wake up!"

Now he was sure of it. More surprising was the fact that something else was missing; the pain was ebbing. He was sore to be sure, but the majority of the pain was gone, as quickly as it came. Relief did not begin to describe what he felt.

"Meko, open your eyes!!" His mother's voice was unmistakable and it sounded like she meant business.

Meko thought it best to comply, if only he could find his eye lids. He knew they were there, somewhere; he was just having trouble making the connection. Ah, there they were. Open, he told them. They wouldn't listen. With every ounce of strength he could muster, Meko willed his stubborn eyelids to move; and they did.

As slits formed, Meko could see that it was dark, but there was a fuzzy white blur he just couldn't make out. Now half open, it was not so dark anymore and the fuzzy blur became a fuzzy blob.

"That's it, Meko." The fuzzy blob spoke. In another moment his dear mother's face was clear.

Dryly, almost inaudibly, Meko tried to speak. "What . . . happened?"
"Not now, Meko. You are alive and getting stronger. Go back to sleep and when you wake again, we will talk."

Meko managed one more word. "Grandfather?"

Silence was the only answer to his query. Drip. Something wet hit his upper lip. Instinctively his tongue searched for it. It was salty and Meko slipped back into the darkness.

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Bright sunlight shone through the window and warmed Meko's face. It felt good and Meko batted his eyes open under its embrace. At his first stirring, his mother was by his side stoking the hair from his forehead.

"Better now?" she asked.

"Yes, mother," he assured her.

Tan El' opened the door and peeked in. "Is he awake?" His gaze fell upon his son and the worried expression ran from his face. He stepped to the bedside and sat next to Meko, clasping his hands around his son's.

"Meko, how do you feel?"

Meko's nerves did a quick check around his body and reported no pain. "I'm fine, father, really." Meko struggled to sit up as his parents helped to support his move. "I still feel some soreness in my ribs and my head seems a little fuzzy, but I'm all right."

Meko's mother kissed his forehead and thanked Elethay that she had brought him back to her.

"Where is Grandfather?" Meko asked.

They knew it was coming. They had tried to prepare for it these last six days, but when the time came, there were no words. Honoria clutched her hands to her face as she fought back the tears. Even the normally strong features of Tan El' were melting under the pressure, his eyes clouding, belying his heartbreak.

They didn't have to say it. Meko knew the answer. "I understand, Father." Meko's tone was solemn, reverent, but not overwrought. Meko was surprised not to be more emotional. He loved Grandfather, didn't he?

"Please father, tell me what happened," Meko requested with sincerity.

"Very well, son, if you're sure."

"I'm sure Father. I must know."

"The fight with the vermites was nearly over when I arrived at the gates. The militia had dealt most effectively with the vermin so I was only needed to reinforce them and deal with the stragglers. I returned home not fifteen minutes later to find your mother standing over the singed body of a vermite attacker. As I embraced her, I asked why you weren't there to protect her. She told me she'd sent you after your grandfather. I turned just in time to see you sprinting into the woods at the other end of the village."

"I did not know where you were going but your gait told me there was purpose in your actions, so I followed you to the lake. I arrived just at the moment you crashed into the shield and spear of the vermite warrior. Your grandfather fought bravely and struck what looked like a killing blow to his vermite opponent. As I ran toward the both of you, he dropped to his knees but signaled he was all right, just winded."

"I was at your side in a moment. Your sword was buried hilt deep in the other vermite's chest and he was certainly dead. As I reached for you, you passed out. I removed the spear from your side and bound the wound. I could hear your grandfather getting to his feet just as I finished. He asked how you were. As I turned to answer him, the other vermite stirred, made a dying lunge toward him, and buried a dagger deep in his stomach."

"I made sure the vermite was truly dead this time and did what I could to help your grandfather, but his wounds were too severe for me to treat." His voice weakened. "I'm sorry I could not save him Meko. I was not his son but he always treated me like I was." Tan El' broke down into open weeping. "Please forgive me, Meko."

Meko placed his hand on his father's head. "There is nothing to forgive. I love you father."

Father, mother, and son held each other tightly and grieved together. After a time, they let go and set about to compose themselves. They washed, changed, and sat at the kitchen table. They supped on cheese and wine and talked of Grandfather. They even managed a painful laugh or two as they honored his memory with the traditional tale telling. Even though hearts were surely breaking, their smiles beamed brightly as they related story after wonderful story about him.

"I'd like to say goodbye to him," said Meko after the tales were finished. "I know he would want me to."

"I'm sure he would," said his mother. "Go to him. He rests under a shade tree near the north bank of the lake." She rose from the table and

went to the pantry. She emerged with a backpack. "Take this with you. It was his last request that you open this pack at his grave side."

"What's in it, mother?"

"I do not know, Meko. It is between you and him. Please respect his wishes."

"I will." He took the backpack as he kissed her cheek. "I love you, mother," he whispered in her ear and then he was gone.

He took his time, walking slowly and pensively to the lake. He had much to consider. It still was not real to him. Grandfather was dead. Tomorrow was his day of ascension. Nothing made sense anymore.

He arrived at the lake just as the sun dipped behind the great mountain to the west. He scanned the north shore; he could see the marker under the tree just as mother had described it. The spot was familiar. Meko had rested there several times. You could not choose a more perfect resting place.

Meko knelt beside his grandfather's marker. He brushed away the leaves and twigs so that everything looked better. "Grandfather would want it that way," he thought. Kneeling there, he tried to think of the right words; the words that needed to be said at this time, but nothing would come. He still had not gotten over the shock even though his demeanor didn't show it.

After several silent minutes, Meko moved over and rested against the tree. Leaning back, he looked up through the branches at the sky. The rich hues of red, orange, gold and purple painted a masterpiece on the horizon. He had shared many a similar sunset with his grandfather and he was moved to tears. He tried to fight them back but the harder he tried, the worse it got. In a couple of minutes he was sobbing aloud uncontrollably.

"Why? Why?" It impacted in his mind over and over again. He clenched his fists and pounded the ground. The pain and sorrow welling up inside was driving the pace faster and faster. Flailing about wildly, he began screaming, kicking, and crying in a deafening crescendo to a final, body-quaking yell. "G-r-a-n-d-f-a-t-h-e-r!!!"

And then there was silence. Totally spent, he slumped forward and buried his face in his hands, resting his elbows on his knees. Only the heaving of his chest and the occasional nearly inaudible whimper gave away the fact that he was still upset.

His brief outburst over, Meko finally set about to honor his grandfather's request. The backpack lay beside him waiting to be opened.

As he reached for it, he hesitated, fearing the unknown of what was inside. He placed his hands on it and caressed it for a moment. He knew the feel of it all too well. He had carried it many times. But, this time it was his and he knew it wouldn't be the same.

Carefully, he opened the flap and reached inside, reverently removing each item and placing it on the ground next to him. First there was Grandfather's prayer blanket. Meko held it in his arms for several minutes, hugging and rubbing his face on it. He could still smell Grandfather's favorite pipe tobacco on it. Second, there was a gnarly, oaken cudgel, measuring twice the size of a regular cudgel, nearly the length of a staff. He remembered vividly how grandfather used it to get around. Third, there was a belt pouch containing ring, a small red gem, and a few gold coins. Last, there was a large leather-bound book, one he had seen his grandfather writing in and consulting from time to time. Meko opened it and a folded piece of paper slipped out and fell to the ground. He picked it up immediately and unfolded it to reveal handwriting, which Meko recognized as his Grandfather's.

"Meko," it read, "If you are reading this then I am dead and you are sitting under my favorite tree with my backpack, assuming your mother did as I asked of her. The contents of this pack are all I own. They are yours to use as you see fit."

Meko stopped and looked again through his new belongings. He didn't want them; he wanted his Grandfather back. Still, he knew that wasn't possible, so he continued to read the note.

"I know your training is incomplete, but do not despair. I have planned ahead for this possibility. Within my journal is all the knowledge you need to finish what you have started. It also contains other things; things I wanted to tell you long ago, but there never seemed to be the right moment. I'm sorry I was not able to tell you myself."

Meko had always known there were things that Grandfather had held back from him. He had assumed that he would be told as time permitted but there was always another lesson that held more importance. At least that's what Grandfather had used as an excuse.

"For most of my life, Meko, I used the powers Elethay bestowed upon me to guard and protect her children. It was not an easy life for there were many who would take from the earth with no regard for life or the future. There are also some who think there is no value in the ways of the spirit as we practice them. Should you choose to complete your training on your own,

you must be careful who you trust. I would urge you to contact the Valarians. Their cause is just and there are many among them who worship Elethay as we do. Seek them out in Arecha but beware the necromancers. They care not for Elethay and would kill any who would protect her."

"I am sorry I could not finish what I started with you, Meko. It was not meant to be. Know that all things happen for a reason. If you can find purpose from my death, then Elethay's promise will be fulfilled. I love you, Meko, and will always be with you. And so, I say farewell, my son. May Elethay guide and protect you no matter what you choose to do." The note was signed with Grandfather's true name - Dameko, Spirit Guardian.

Although Meko knew he was named after his grandfather, he had never known Grandfather's true name, the one he took at his ascension ceremony. Meko yearned to know more. He put aside the note, opened the journal, and began to read in earnest. He devoured its contents as a starving man would a feast. He read all day; and when darkness began to fall, he built a fire and read on well into the night until he fell asleep beside it.

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Meko awoke to the warmth of the morning sun. The sky was a bright blue and blooming clouds were a striking white against it. What a wonderful sight to greet him on his sixteenth birthday. He packed up his things and made sure the fire was completely out. He knew he must get back to the village and prepare for the celebration. Although he didn't care for the hoopla, he knew it was important to his mother and father. He gave one last look at the grave, bowed reverently, and set his feet moving toward the village.

As he walked home, he considered all he had learned from Grandfather's journal. There were big decisions ahead and they needed to be made soon. One thing that puzzled him was a reference near the end of the journal to Meko's mother, Honoria. Grandfather had said that if he had more questions about the Valarians, he should speak to his mother privately.

Why did it need to be private? Meko understood the need for secrecy but it seemed there was something more there. Well, it would have to wait for later. The ascension must be completed first. There would be time after to deal with other questions.

The village was already humming with activity when Meko arrived. To most of the villagers, hustle and bustle were the order of the day; a day like

any other. Tan El' was outside chopping firewood when Meko reached his house. "We were becoming a bit concerned for you, Meko. You'd better apologize to your mother. She's been pacing around all morning wondering when you'd return." A small chuckle escaped as he said it.

Meko opened the door to the kitchen and sheepishly poked his head in to look around. "It's about time, young man!" The sharpness of her tone made Meko wince until he turned to see her stern look falter into a smile. She ran to him and hugged him hard. As she released him and stepped back she looked him in the eye. "Is everything okay?" Her eyes searched his for some sense of his feelings.

Meko took her hands into his. "Everything is fine, mother." He smiled warmly and nodded his head. "I'm sorry I'm late. I know how important today is to you."

She looked reprovingly at him. "It is just as important to you, Meko, if I understand my own father." She looked to see that Tan El' was not near the door. "I know the decisions facing you are not easy ones, but I support them no matter what. Your grandfather gave of himself all of his life to protect nature and I'm sure all the time he spent with you had something to do with your future as well," she said as she winked at him.

Meko was a bit stunned. Did she really know as much as it seemed?

"But, enough about that for now. You must go prepare. I am so proud of you!" She gave him another little hug and pushed him toward his room.

There certainly would be questions for later, but Meko knew he must be about the business of the day. He put down his things in his room and went outside to wash. He took his time, more lost in thought than concerned for his cleanliness. When he finished he returned to his room to dress. Another surprise awaited him there.

On his bed were laid out two sets of clothing and his grandfather's hooded cloak with a note resting atop it. "Choose wisely and well, for this choice will set you on a course not taken lightly. Ascension is an arrival at your adulthood as well as a commitment to the future." The note was in his mother's handwriting.

He looked back to the clothing. On the left were the garments of an adult trader; those that would be respected by others in his line. On the right were the traveling garments of an adventurer, similar to those he had seen his grandfather wear on many occasions. "Exactly how much did his mother know?" he wondered.

Meko sat down and considered the two paths of his future. One would keep him here with his family; the other would take him into the unknown and uncertainty. One was safe; the other likely fraught with danger. Meko wondered how many others his age had such a difficult decision.

"Are you ready, Meko?" His mother's voice called out from the kitchen. "We are going ahead to the square. Hurry up!"

Meko sat for another moment or two; then he rose and dressed, putting on Grandfather's cloak over his clothes. He pulled the hood up over his head and made his way to the village square.

Everyone in the village turned out for a ceremony of this kind. The square was filled with tables full of food and confections. A platform graced the center with a place of honor for the ascendant and his family. Everyone took their places and began the feast that preceded the naming. There was singing, dancing, and laughter. All seemed to be enjoying themselves except Meko. Throughout it all the expression on his face was serious and solemn. The weight of the occasion bore heavily on him.

Finally, it was time. The village elder called to everyone. "Please, may I have your attention? We are all gathered here to witness the ascension to manhood of one of our own. In accordance with our traditions and laws, I call forth Meko of the family Drell. Show yourself and present us with your true name!"

There were cheers and applause as Meko rose from his seat. He stepped to the end of the table and addressed the assemblage. "Today I am a man. I am humbled at your reception and honored by your presence. It is with great pride I take my place in society. In doing so, I honor the memory of my grandfather and take his name."

A hush fell across the crowd as he flung off his cloak to reveal his garments. He pulled on his backpack, raised his cudgel aloft and proclaimed, "I am Dameko, Spirit Warrior!"