

The Conduit, Part IV  
By Tim Kennard

What is in a name? After all, it's just a label. You can call a horse an eagle, but that doesn't change the fact that it can't fly. So, changing your own name makes no difference in you, unless your actions change accordingly.

Meko knew this. He had considered it for a long time. No real change occurs just by saying you are something else. But in his case, it was different. Not only had he taken a new name, but he had done so publicly. He had taken a name of destiny. He must fulfill it.

The somber mood at home reflected that of the village after the ceremony. Tan El' was visibly shaken by Meko's announcement. He had always expected Meko to follow him into the family trade business. Honoria was making a vain attempt at appearing happy despite her sadness at her only son's impending departure.

Meko looked to be the only person in the village not affected by his announcement. He very matter-of-factly set about packing his belongings for the long and arduous journey. He wasn't sure exactly what he'd need, so he packed for any eventuality; warm weather, cold, rain, or even snow. He knew from conversations with various traders that there was varied terrain ahead of him.

As he packed, he could hear his mother and father talking in the kitchen, although he couldn't make out what they were saying. The discussion became heated and voices grew louder; then, the kitchen door slammed and it was done. A few minutes later, Honoria peeked into Meko's room almost apologetically.

"Your father is very upset," she said as she stepped into the room, hands wringing in front of her.

"I know I have disappointed him, but I didn't think he'd take it like this," Meko replied. "I guess I'd always hoped he'd be proud of me and support my decision, even though we'd never talked about it."

"Oh, it's not you, Meko; it's me he's angry with just now." She sat down on a chair near the door, staring out the window, trying hard to fight back tears.

Confused, Meko asked, "I don't understand. Why is he angry with you?"

Her answer wasn't directed at Meko; rather she seemed to be talking to herself. "You think you know someone. You put your trust in them; you

love them, care for them, and rely on their honesty. Then you find out they've kept things from you. I don't know why I hid it from him all these years. I guess I was trying to protect him."

"Mother, what are you saying?" Meko stopped packing and knelt by his mother's side.

"I have a secret past, one it would not do well to get out to the public. I've just revealed some of it to your father and now I must to you."

"There is no need mother. Grandfather's journal told me much about the two of you. I know you traveled and had many adventures in the years before you came to Treblehorn. He even told me you were something of a wizard at one time." Meko tried to reassure her.

"Yes, Meko, that is all true; but he did not tell you everything and it's time you knew it all. I have carried this burden for too long and I do not wish for you to suffer because of me."

"Please, mother," Meko interrupted, as he hugged her tightly. "You don't have to do this."

She kissed his forehead and pushed him away. "Yes, Meko, I must and you must hear it."

Meko knew better than to press the issue, so he eased off, sat down on the floor, and listened intently as his mother continued.

"You never knew your grandmother, Vulnavia. My mother was so beautiful. She used to sit and sing as she sewed. We were just small children then, my brother Juron and I. We spent many an evening with her by the fire. Your grandfather was always off on some quest or another, so we spent considerable stretches of our young lives without him."

"When he would finally come home, she'd be waiting in the doorway for him. 'Dameko Gedron, it's about time!' she would boom; then a smile would break across her face as she rushed to greet him. He would lift her in the air and they would embrace heartily. It was always good when father was home."

"We lived a very peaceful life in the village of Enlori, which lies at the border between Arecha and Murn. Father came and went as usual, never telling us exactly what he did while he was away. You know now as well as I that he was practicing the spirit crafts. He often spent considerable time at the Elethay Temple, consulting with the priestess there."

"Once, when I was twelve, he even took me along. It was then that I met Sunda Brill. She was an acolyte in the temple, the same age as me. We became fast friends and she spent many nights at our house. She taught me

about Elethay and I showed her some of the magical secrets my mother had taught me. Your great grandfather, my mother's father, was a wizard, and a good one, too, by her account. He had taught her ways to protect herself with certain spells when she was young."

"Sunda spent so much time with us that I guess it was inevitable Juron would take notice of her. Actually, she had a secret crush on him as well, but was too shy to say anything, except to me, of course."

"Anyway, the three of us spent time nearly every day together over the next two years. Mother kept up my training in the wizardly arts, Sunda continued to worship and train in the temple, and Juron worked very hard at studying Sunda when he wasn't training with the village militia."

"One cool fall evening when Sunda's duties at the temple kept her from her usual visit with us, Juron came to me and confided that he was in love with her and wanted them to be joined. I wasn't surprised but I pretended to be. He said that they'd discussed it but she had reservations because of her service to the temple. She did not feel it appropriate to consider a joining at this time. He was convinced that her trepidation was because he hadn't actually asked for her hand yet. 'Tomorrow would be a good day, I think,' he added as he turned to leave; then he just chuckled to himself, smiled, and walked out the door. I wondered what she would do when he asked her. I couldn't sleep that night, anticipating the next day's events. Little did I know, at that time, how life affecting those events would be."

"Other than not getting any sleep, the day started as any other with father off somewhere. We washed, changed, ate, and got to work. Only Juron's impending proposal held any suspense. But, things quickly changed. By mid-morning the skies were being to cloud over and darkly at that. Storms were not uncommon; without them there would be no rain for the fields. This was no ordinary storm though. The clouds grew darker by the moment, twisting into strange shapes, and moving very quickly toward the village. Strange flashes of orange and green light coursed through the air and the putrid smell of death hung all around."

"The village alarm sounded and the warden yelled from his wall tower, 'Dragonstorm! Dragonstorm!!' There had been dragonstorms before but none had ever threatened the village. This one was more than a threat; it was right on top of us. I heard mother yelling for Juron and me. As I started for the house, I looked around for Juron. What I saw stopped me dead in my tracks."

"The black swirling clouds dove at the village as if a cat pouncing on a field mouse. But as the clouds bit at the village rooftops, they spat out horrible flying creatures; terrible warped madspawn. Almost as one, the villagers panicked and ran for any cover they could find. I could see the militia spring to action though it looked hopeless at best."

"It was black as night as the storm enveloped us. The village gates burst open and a band of wakana berserkers charged the scattered mess. I was so scared I couldn't move."

"I don't know why I panicked but no matter what I tried, I couldn't move at all, even when a berserker spotted me and charged. He lunged at me, claws and fangs bared. I remember thinking I would surely die, but something inside me said 'Lightning!' My hands sprung forth and flung a lightning bolt in the chest of my attacker. He let out a death yell as he crashed into me, knocking me to the ground stunned."

"I struggled to get up but my legs were like boiled noodles. Just then helping hands intervened; two sets of them actually. Mother and Juron had found me at the same time and were dragging me to my feet. I was never so glad to see anyone. But just as they got me up, a sharp pain shot through my body, pricking every nerve to attention and doubling me over. My vision blurred and I felt so dizzy I thought I'd vomit up my insides."

"But strangely, in the same instant, I also felt somehow powerful. My mind raced through the images I'd seen of the attacking spawn. I saw through eyes not my own the destruction of the village and its attackers, along with many of my friends. Rage. Burning rage consumed me and the village, burning on and on into the blackness. The pain was unbearable. I was lost in a swirling miasma of rage, pain, and sorrow in my mind. And then, as suddenly as it began, I had neither sight nor sound of anything."

Honoria collapsed from her chair, sobbing heavily and uncontrollably. Meko caught her in his arms and cradled her to the floor, doing his best to comfort her. "Shhh, mother. Shhh. It's all right. I'm here." He held her tightly and prayed to Elethay that her mind would be calmed. He could sense the extreme anguish in her heart as he prayed for her. His empathy allowed images to form from her tortured mind. For a moment, her sorrow was his. He couldn't believe how deeply she hurt. Then he saw it; an image of a huge red dragon breathing fire down upon her, searing her to the soul.

Startled, Meko pushed back from her. As he did, she turned her head, looking through tear-filled eyes, and stared him in the face. "Now you

know, don't you? You could see it in my mind, couldn't you?" She pleaded for agreement from him.

Meko stood slowly and turned from her, not wanting to believe it. He tried to make sense of it, but this was beyond his comprehension. "No, mother, it can't be," he said as he turned back to her, his hand rubbing his forehead.

Honorica picked herself up from the floor and stood weakly, drained by the effort. "Your grandfather found me unconscious nearly a mile from the village. I was bloody, beaten, and bruised but he nursed me back to health. He kept us moving around, said we couldn't return to the village. I had not the will to argue with him. I could remember it all and it sickened me."

"Father tried to explain what happened. He begged me not to blame myself but I could not bear the thought of what I'd done. The dragon in me had not only killed the spawn that attacked us; it killed my mother and brother and burned down half the village. No matter what he said, I wouldn't listen. I couldn't. There was no excuse that I could live with."

"He said we needed somewhere safe to hide. Because of what I was, there would be many who would hunt me. He explained about the necromancers and suggested we seek out Valarians to help us. In time I was able to bury the past deep within me along with the dragon. I have never allowed that vile creature to surface since."

"The Valarians took me in and tried to help me see that I wasn't evil. Your grandfather and I even worked with them for a few years. I used my wizard skills and learned much from them, but I never really felt a true part of what they were doing."

"One night I overheard a conversation between Father and one of Valarian mentors. They were talking about one of the necromancers, Haddock Nor. They said he'd been hunting dragon shifters and that he was coming this way. When I saw Father later, I confronted him about what I'd heard. I told him I had to leave. If I could get far enough away, I might be able to be at peace with myself and not endanger anyone else."

"We left the next day for the north. We traveled a long time and finally ended up here. We settled in and I met your father. He never knew any of this until today. I don't expect you to forgive me. I still haven't forgiven myself. Last week's attack, father's death, and yours nearly; it was all too much to keep in any longer. I'll understand if you choose not to acknowledge me further." She slumped back down into the chair, hanging her head low.

Meko stood for a moment, considering carefully what he would say next. He could not judge her. Besides, she'd done enough of that herself. "Mother, I do have something to say to you. You need to listen to me now."

She recognized his insistence; his stubbornness reminded her of her own words earlier. She wiped the tears from her face and regarded him plainly, bracing for his words as if they would hurt.

"Yes, I saw the dragon in you. It was fierce and startled me at first. But it was not evil." She opened her mouth to protest; but before the words could form, Meko put his finger to her lips. "Please, let me finish."

"The dragon in you is not evil because you are not evil. You are my mother. You have raised me these sixteen years and I've never known you to be anything other than good and kind and as loving a parent as any child could want."

She softened somewhat at his insistent words.

"Do you think I'm evil, mother?"

She was taken aback at this. "Why, of course not, Meko. How could you ask such a thing?"

"Can evil beget goodness? No, it would not know how. If I am not evil and you begat me, then you cannot be evil in any way!" As these words left his mouth it was as if his grandfather was speaking them. It sounded very much like one of his lessons.

"Grandfather taught me much of the shifters and how the change comes on them in the beginning. He told me of many times where the shifter had no control of itself until it realized what had happened. You are not to blame. Stop torturing yourself!"

She knew he was right. She had always known what he was saying to be true but she could never bring herself to accept it. "I know, Meko. But I swore many years before you were born that the dragon would never surface again. I do not accept its existence."

"You may not, but I do. As long as I live, I will love you. Your past is just that . . . past. I only grieve for your sorrow and I pray you find peace one day." Meko reached out and hugged her to his chest tightly.

"I love you, too, Meko. Perhaps through you I will find a way to accept what I cannot change." She paused for a moment. "I did not tell you all of this to gain your forgiveness. I just wanted you to know that since my blood is in you, there is a possibility that you may be a shifter as well. I pray to Elethay that it is not so."

They hugged for several minutes not wanting to let go of each other. Meko gently pushed her away and turned to his things on the bed. He shouldered them and turned for the door.

"Meko!" she shouted to him as he neared the kitchen door. "If you wish to contact the Valarians, seek out assistance at the Elethay temple in Enlori. At last report, Sunda was still high priestess there. Show her this. She will remember me and shelter you." Honoria reached inside the neck of her tunic and revealed a chain with a ring on it. She took it off and placed it in Meko's hand. "It belonged to my brother Juron."

She closed his fingers around the ring, kissed his hand, and turned away. Meko leaned to her and kissed the back of her head, reaching his arms around her for one last embrace. "I will be back," he whispered; then he turned and left, closing the door behind him.

Many pairs of skeptical eyes were watching him as he made his way out of the village. A few of his friends waved goodbye even though their parents didn't approve. After he cleared the south gate, he turned for one look back at the only home he'd known. With a deep breath and exhale, he pivoted and strode toward the tree line.

As he rounded the first bend out of sight of the village, he was greeted by the sight of his father sitting atop Harbinger, his trusty steed. He dismounted at Meko's approach.

"So, where will you go, Dameko?" He used the proper instead of the familiar.

"Please, father. I must do this. I know you don't approve, but I owe it to mother and grandfather."

"Yes, Meko, I know. Destiny calls you and has caught up with me." He looked toward the village, fighting back the emotion.

"Mother needs you, now more than ever. I am only strong because you are; she needs your shoulder to lean on. Please go to her and forgive her. I fear she may be consumed by her past without you."

Tan El' marveled at the wisdom of his son's words for one yet so young. "Your grandfather taught you well," he said as he stroked the horse's neck. "You have a long journey ahead. Harbinger says it will be easier if you take him along." He put the reigns in Meko's hand and turned toward the village.

Meko could only watch him walk away, not knowing what to say. As his father reached the bend, Meko reached out his hand, fingers outstretched, and called to him. "Father!"

Tan El' turned and seeing Meko's hand, outstretched his own as well. They exchanged a knowing look for a few seconds and lowered them. "That's my horse and I want him back," Father called to him as he smiled and disappeared around the trees.

Meko smiled, too, and turned to the open road ahead of him. Giving a pat to Harbinger's head, he began packing the horse with his belongings. He was leaving all he'd ever know behind. What awaited him, he didn't know; but it would certainly be an adventure.