

The Great Old Ones

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Contents

Chapter 1	1
Chapter 2	7

Chapter 1

The priest followed the river through the forest and the dark figure stalked him from the high branches. The holy man, humming a song from his childhood, slid on a wet stone and fell to one knee.

The shadow leapt from the branches and enveloped the priest in darkness before he could open his mouth to scream.

“Dark clouds bring dark days.” If his mother was right, every day he could remember had been dark and that probably wasn’t going to change anytime soon.

John wiped the sweat from his face with a grimy cloth and looked up at the sky. Dark clouds again. No surprise there. The 19 year old turned back to his mortal enemy – the Glow Tower.

Like all young men in the hamlet, John toiled in the fields. Tending to the crops was back breaking work but the worst part meant maintaining the Glow Towers. Corn, beans, potatoes – they all depended on the Glow Towers to survive because the dark clouds blocked most of the sunlight.

“...and the Great Old Ones blessed our village with the Gift of Light...”

“Light is Life. Without Light we shall surely perish...”

“Damn the Old Ones and their Gift,” John mumbled to no one in particular. He provided the towers life support and they in turn provided the village food. His village was losing the Towers as the Old Ones’ magic faded; only 34 of the original 77 Glow Towers were operational.

John and two of his friends kept the Towers alive but they fumbled through their maintenance without having any real understanding of how the machinery functioned. The Towers had always been there and if anyone had known the Old Ones’ secrets, they were long since buried in the Holy Place.

Tower number 22, his current patient, shuddered like an old woman in the cold and the Howling began. The Glow Tower “howled” in pain and a rainbow of lights flashed. As suddenly as it had begun, the Tower was silent and dark.

John frowned. Only 33 remained.

The priest stared into the hearth as wavering images danced on the flames. The herbs had taken affect.

A fiery robed figure appeared and spoke to Lars. “Send him out to the River.”

Lars frowned and threw a bucket of water on the fire. The hooded man melted into the steam and floated away.

The priest called out in a booming voice, “Son! Come in here!”

The boy reluctantly approached his father. “Yes Father?”

If the Great Old Ones had modelled the man after a Grizzly Bear, they had created the boy in the image of a rabbit. Lars towered over the men in the village while the son was the shortest in his age group; the father’s very presence demanded attention while the son faded into the background.

“I’ve consulted the Old Ones. They say you must go to the River. Only then will you earn your name.”

The Naming Ceremony would be held on the boy’s 18th birthday in five days. The boy would return from the River as a man or in disgrace. Either way he’d earn a name.

The first born son of a priest had no name of his own – he simply hadn’t earned the right to one yet. Upon his 18th birthday the boy would be cast out of the village and he’d have to make his way to the River, 3 days’ travel from his home. There he’d have to do...what? He had no idea.

After his time at the River, he’d return home and the village would embrace him or shun him for the rest of his life. If he succeeded, the boy would earn a name and start his training so that he could replace his father as priest. If he failed, he’d be banished from the only home he’d ever known.

Larson (Lars' son), as he was known until he received his name, returned his father's gaze. "I'll go Father and earn my name."

Larson hunched over his father's book – The Light – searching for something, anything, to prepare him for his journey.

"All who seek The River shall bathe in its waters; some shall drown while others shall be quenched."

Larson flipped forward in the book and another passage leaped out at him.

"To drink from The River is to live; to cross The River into the abyss is death."

Since early childhood, Father had spoken of The River as being a boundary: both physically as the edge of their territory and mystically as a forbidden place that must never be crossed. The Great Old Ones had lived across The River in their magical towers and now that They had left, some powerful evil had taken over.

When the boy asked his father what he'd have to do at the edge of The River, the man grunted and told him to read The Light again and prepare his soul for the journey ahead. Now the boy was hoping to find some clue that he'd missed the countless other times he'd skimmed The Book.

The Villagers knew about The Book of course but very few could actually read it because only those in the priesthood or sons of The Elders were literate. The priests and village leaders told the illiterate of how Mathias, after The Burning, found The River and met the last of The Great Old Ones.

The Burning had ravaged the countryside and the crops were withering in the darkness. Diseased obsidian clouds blocked the sunlight and the villagers were dying. Mathias, only 17 years old, volunteered to leave the safety of the village walls to find a food source.

The boy wandered for 2 days until he entered a dense forest. Why had Earth Mother spared all of these plants from The Burning

and how were they thriving with no sun? Why was the forest so quiet? He didn't see any signs of animals anywhere.

On the afternoon of the third day, Mathias heard the sound of running water. Following the sound, he soon found a great body of water with wonderful creatures swimming in it. He cut down a branch from an oak growing near the shoreline, speared a "swimming creature" with it, and cooked it over a fire. After eating, Mathias went to sleep.

A bright light pierced the darkness and awoke Mathias, who dropped to his knees in fear. He shielded his eyes from the light but it continued to intensify. The forest lit up as though it was midday.

A booming voice told Mathias to have no fear as They were here and his loved ones would be spared. The Voices explained that the lights were Glow Towers and that they would provide sunlight to the dying crops as long as the villagers brought them to the fields.

Mathias thanked the Voices profusely and promised to bring as many able bodied men from the village as he could find.

Over the next few weeks, the men of the village brought back 77 Glow Towers and the crops were saved.

Larson wondered if after all these generations a Voice could still remain at the shoreline.

She slid her glove on over her metallic hand and made a fist. Celeste, with her shame hidden from the world, turned to her mother.

"Mother, I'm going to the water seller. Do you need anything from the Center?"

Ruth smiled at her daughter. "Two loaves of bread if they have any."

Celeste brushed an auburn lock of hair away from her piercing green eyes. The girl was two years past marrying age but she avoided picking a mate because of her shameful hand.

She gently pulled the front door closed behind her and sauntered up the ruined pavement toward the Center which lay in the

middle of the village. Celeste breathed deeply and a symphony of smells drew her on: roasting hog, freshly baked bread and spices.

Men and women shopped at the myriad of vendors, children played as their mothers gossiped, and a dog wandered around looking for dropped bits of bread or meat.

John, his clothes spotted in the Glow Tower's grease, waved at Celeste from the other side of the street and approached her. The girl smiled and waved back at John.

“Hi Celeste.”

“Good morning, John.”

She absently brushed her hair behind her ear and gazed into his eyes. John's face reddened and he glanced away.

“Are you going to be at the Enlightenment Festival Dance tonight? I thought we could, um, maybe go together. If you wanted to.”

“Sure. I'd love to go with you. I've gotta go get some things for my mother. See you tonight, John.”

“Bye.”

Celeste handed the bakery vendor three credits for the loaves and then stopped by the water seller's booth.

Samuel, the grizzled old water seller, flashed a toothless grin at the girl. “How's ya Mother, Celeste?”

She politely returned the smile. “Mother's doing fine. I'd like one and a half liters please.”

The old man produced a large clay jar almost as ancient as he was and filled it from a nearby water pump. He handed it over to the girl and said, “Tell Ruth I said hi.”

She placed credits on the counter and headed for the middle of the Center. A filthy boy about seven years of age was taunting a mangy dog with a piece of bread; he'd hold the bread just out of the dog's reach and then kick it when it came near.

Celeste yelled at the boy to leave the poor dog alone but he only stuck out his tongue and kicked the beast in the ribs. Celeste yelled again and the villagers stopped their shopping and looked at them.

Her face reddened with anger and embarrassment that all of the Center was watching her. Tears threatened to roll down Celeste's cheeks. The boy laughed. The dog whined.

Celeste gritted her teeth and tightened her hands into fists. The clay jar exploded as her powerful metal fist squeezed it. The townspeople gasped at the inhuman strength this petite young woman displayed. Blinking away tears, the young woman ran blindly from the crowd.

Chapter 2

Everett snapped awake. Sleepily, he rose from the chair and jogged to the wall to scan the dark horizon.

“Nothing out there of course. Never anything out there. Such a waste of my time,” he thought.

The lazy watch guard briskly walked along the wall to wake up. He better not let the head guard catch him sleeping again or he’d get a black eye for sure.

Finishing his uneventful rounds, Everett pulled his chair up to the wall and leaned over for a final look. The night watchman sat back down but this time without his head attached.

The body slid off of the chair as the head crashed into the hard dirt below.

“Larson!” the ethereal voice hissed from the fog rolling off The River. “Come here little priest.”

The boy willed his legs to stop but they propelled him toward the water’s edge. The voice seemed to be controlling his body.

“No!” Larson screamed in horror as he waded into the murky water of The River. The fog rippled and enveloped the youth’s legs, pulling him deeper into the water.

The fog cut his cries short as it forced him below the water. The misty tendrils released him and he struggled to break the surface. His hand touched the boundary of air and water but couldn’t break through; the surface of The River had turned to glass.

The voice spoke from the bottom of the water, “Come here boy!”

Heart thudding in his chest, Larson opened his eyes. It was three hours before sunrise on his last day in village. Fully conscious now, the priest violently shoved the herb fueled vision from his mind.

Celeste tore a small piece from the loaf of bread and nibbled at it.

“Nice plan! Two loaves of bread is plenty to live on,” she scolded herself.

She had spent the night in a crumbling stone shack that stank of rot and age. The roof was partially missing and her new owl roommate constantly asked her who she might be.

After exposing her unnatural strength to most of the Center, she’d fled the village with nothing but her knapsack and her mother’s loaves of bread. The majority of the village, herself included, had never left the safety of the town walls but they all heard the stories of the Path and the River at the end of it.

According to the Book and the Elders, the River was three or four days away on the Path; she’d found the shack three hours outside of the village.

She imagined the Elders passing out torches and demanding her hanging because using the old magic simply wasn’t tolerated. The Elders had some weak justifications for their hypocrisy: the Glow Towers were allowed because the Old Ones had gifted them but mechanical hands were blasphemous.

“They’re dead. It’s not like He’s going to need his hand anymore,” Celeste mumbled.

Her roommate, ever curious, asked who wouldn’t be missing his hand.

She slung the knapsack on her back, stepped out into the hazy morning air, and inspected the shack for the first time. When she’d found the place, only the few stars that shone through the dark clouds lit her way. Now that she actually saw the shack in the daylight, she realized the danger that she’d been in.

The stone walls were crumbling and the whole structure listed wildly to the southeast. Brother Owl would have to find a new home soon because one more good storm would topple the shack. Grayish vines entangled the outside walls of the building and a water pump rusted in the yard but Celeste had no bucket.

“Mouth to rusty pump it is, Mr. Owl.”

Celeste gently pumped the lever up and down. The water pump vibrated and brown water trickled out. After a few seconds, clear cold water filled her mouth and she drank greedily.

Thorns pierced her upper thigh and grayish vines wrapped around her left leg. Celeste shrieked as the plant dragged her back toward the shack. She grabbed for the water pump and her fingers slid off of the slick surface.

Her leg went numb as the vines constricted. The plant squealed with an unworldly voice.

Celeste, fighting against the grayness descending on her vision, pulled and twisted the vines on her leg with the metal hand. The plant yelped in its hideous voice. The severed vines withered and fell from Celeste's thigh.

The plant mewed like a wounded kitten and withdrew against the shack's exterior wall. Celeste fell when she tried to stand on her leg.

She dragged herself inside the shack and passed out.

John buttoned the top of his newly pressed shirt, smoothed his hair, and rapped his knuckles on the oak door. He smiled as the door swung open.

Ruth peered around the slightly opened door.

“John? What are you doing here?”

“I, uh. I'm here to pick up Celeste. She wasn't at the Enlightenment Festival Dance. She was going to meet me there.”

Ruth frowned. “No one's seen her since the problem at the Center. I'm getting worried.”

“What happened at the Center? I asked her to meet me at the festival and then I went to the fields.”

She frowned again. “I heard that she embarrassed herself in front of the crowd and ran off. I can't find her anywhere. I'm worried that she may have left the village. She was very upset.”

Now it was John's turn to frown. "She left the village? I've got to find her before something happens."

"Be careful John. Not even the Elders have gone beyond the walls. Hold on a minute." Ruth went back inside the house.

Soon the woman returned carrying a knife, a metallic object, and a bulging knapsack.

"You're going to need this. That metal thing is like a portable Glow Tower – a flashlight. If anyone asks, you didn't get that from me. I packed some supplies in the bag. Now hurry!"

The young man nodded and headed for the village gates.

The village walls, constructed not long after the Old Ones gave the townspeople the Glow Towers, stood 11 feet tall and 8 feet thick. The Elders claimed that the Great Old Ones had built the walls in three days with their magic. One guard patrolled each side of the wall – one for each cardinal direction.

John headed to the main gate which faced east. Normally a gatekeeper would have stopped him and asked where he thought he was going but today the guards were a man short. Something about a guard losing his head.

"It's open," John mumbled to himself.

The Elders demanded that the gates be barred at all times except for Enlightenment Festival days. The priest in training had set off this morning on his path to the River where he'd become "enlightened" and earn his name or be banished beyond the walls. If Celeste had wanted to flee the village, today would have been her only chance.

John had been performing surgery on another dying Glow Tower and missed the Enlightenment Festival sendoff. According to the tradition, the main gate would stay open until full dark in honor of the new priest. Taking advantage of the open gate and the missing guard, John left the safety of the village.