

CHAPTER SEVEN

The Captain climbed the steep path from the seaside village to the cave. Being high in the mountains it was often shrouded in mist. From his sixth birthday, the day his mother died, he had made this daily trek to visit his reclusive father, who refused to see anyone other than his son, who brought the necessities, food, and fuel for the cold winters. When the Captain was away, others from the village took turns to provide Ramaedie with his spartan needs, leaving it outside the green curtain of light.

The Captain stopped at the entrance and opened his mind to hear his father calling him to enter, saying he had unlocked the green light barrier at the entrance.

‘Come my son, I have been waiting for your return.’

The Captain, with his staff walked, into the cave and hugged his father. He stood back and lovingly gazed at him.

Ramaedie set a table with food and drink. They ate in silence, His son was excited, impatient to learn of his history and how he was chosen for this dangerous leadership role; his whole life dedicated to rescuing and then defending these lands. Ramaedie suggested they move to chairs which catch more of the heat from the fire. Ramaedie started his tale.

‘I was born the first of two sons of the leader at the time. I was banished to these lands where you were born, lands far away from the mainland and the centre of Shardforth’s power. You are tall and strong and was raised to be the leader for the people of Dottlefink, following on after Atrollis.’

‘Why were you banished, father, and why does he use the title, Old Man?’

‘I’ll tell you the reason for my banishment as it fits in with the story. As to the name. It’s his wish. He believes it lessens the impression of elitism. Many leaders as they grow old have taken on this title. You will be known as the Captain, but in time you may prefer to use the title of ‘Old Man.’

‘Father, you are thin and frail. Come to the village where we can give you love, and attention that will mend your ailments. I’m sure my staff will help me, though in truth I’m still learning how it works. I was given it recently, and I must tell you all about it and what has happened to me.’

‘Son, or Captain as you are now called by my, and soon to be your, people.

‘My time has come to use my wizard powers to help in the overthrow of Shardforth and explain your part in freeing Dottlefink from his clutches and the Supreme Being.’

‘But father, I thought all power came from our staffs, and Atrollis told me there is only ever two made at any one time, one for the leader and one for his successor. And aren’t we ordinary fisher folk? That is what I thought until this last voyage, which I still haven’t completed.’

‘To some, yes. But it’s that humility which will give your people the confidence to love you without fear, and you, the wisdom to govern our lands wisely. Those without humility, such as Shardforth, and the Supreme Being, will always be vulnerable to your power, as they are to Atrollis.

‘You’ll be aware of your skills you were taught, such as finding solutions to disagreements, showing the people who use anger in argument, a better way to settle disputes. Like all in your village you learnt the skills of fishing and the ways of the ocean. When you were six your mother fell ill and died. You’ll remember the pain this caused me, how you begged me to stay in the village, when I withdrew and made this cave my home.

I started my meditation and could not be distracted by outside influences. It’s the reason for my considerable powers, greater than the staff’s, and my acceptance into the world of wizardry. I have been supporting Atrollis and his friends as you battle to reach their homeland.

‘Many years ago, I was being groomed to take over the leadership of our community, the Islands of Dottlefink, being the eldest of the leader’s two sons. On reaching manhood, I rebelled, believing I was not suited, though I was looked on by all as their future leader. I presumed they would then look to my brother. He had even less interest than me in taking this role, having never been groomed for it. There was another family whose son was jealous of our family and of me.

My father sent me away on a long voyage to reflect on all I had received from the people and my duty to them.

On my return, after a long period of reflection, I still doubted my abilities and my jealous friend challenged me to come forward as the new leader or abandon it. He was willing and capable and, in my absence, had worked hard to ease the misgivings of the Council of elders, and build their trust in his

leadership skills. My enemy, he had declared himself as such, challenged me to a dual. I was wounded, and he was about to kill me when my father's staff, prevented him. His name is Shardforth.

'My staying would further destabilize the community and I chose to leave, never again to step foot onto my home lands. I was granted immunity from attack whilst in the cave. The green barrier at the front of the cave can only be opened by me. Members of Council who had strong reservations against Shardforth were in the minority and my father had little option but to anoint Shardforth as his successor.

'When my father died, Shardforth killed my brother and my mother, fearing a rebellion of the people, demanding my brother become leader.

'Shardforth, became the leader and was the vessel through which the Supreme Being, a demon of gross proportions, never seen except in images, used his powers to destroy the lands, and enslave my people. It is the only time in our history that the power of evil was so great it could shut down the good of the leader's staff and turn the green light of purity into the blue light of the black Gods. The staff trees withered, the lands became barren and there is this great black cloud hanging over all, blocking out the sunlight. The people, living in misery, sought to defeat him. There was no man or group strong enough to do this until three creatures escaped the black cloud. The three were the rat, the magpie and the dog. You have met them and marvel at their skills.

'Indeed, I have, Father. They are truly extraordinary. But what of Shardforth's staff? That would now make three with mine.'

'No, as you have learnt, the staff can only be operated by a pure soul. It withered as the Supreme Being took over Shardforth's soul and he destroyed it, fearing it may one day be resurrected and turn against him.

'The rat, the dog and the magpie were created from the mud flows of geysers in the land of Tupplenut, where lives a powerful community of wizards. They rarely interfere directly with the affairs of other communities, but when they do they send others to combat wrong, such as the dog, the magpie and the rat who were sent to live in the Black cloud. They remained invisible until they attacked Shardforth. When he was asleep, they drugged his minders, and the dog bit off the finger with the golden ring on it, swallowed it and escaped with the others. They selected a healthy young sapling from the forest of staffs. This sapling absorbed the collective power and wisdom from all the other saplings as the rat converted it into a staff, disguising it as its tale as they escaped from the powers of Shardforth. In time, they found a safe Island away from his clutches and set about planning his overthrow. The dog kept the ring

inside it, until it knew only the way of good. The finger withered, and the ring was released into the care of Recorder.

‘After your mother died, I vowed to devote my life, through the power of meditation, to help people such as Old Man and his disciples, defeat evil.

‘The staff couldn’t operate effectively without a master. As my skills developed, I taught the power of thought to a handful of exceptionally talented students. There was a pupil whom I recommended as the leader to claim the staff, and this is Atrollis. But it was agreed, my first born would become his successor. I chose this cave as my home, rarely leaving it, except to court your mother. She was a beautiful, clever woman, selected by the dog, rat and magpie along with Recorder. They sent her to my village and encouraged us to marry.

‘Shardforth learnt of your birth and on your sixth birthday, he succeeded in penetrating the family protective barriers and killed your mother. The rat learnt of her death and was able to rescue you before you were found. I was taken to the cave by the dog who was being chased by Shardforth.

Your identity was disguised, and you were given into the care of a humble fishing family. They taught you to fish, the ways of the sea, to sail small and large boats. They were preparing you to be a master mariner. Your curiosity of all matters stretched the village folks’ resources, but they managed to give you the tools to lead others. You attained wisdom, respect for all and did not tolerate inequality.

When you were old enough they told you who I was and what happened to your mother. Each day, after you delivered my food, I would put you to sleep and enrich your education. Shardforth never ceased to search for you. The dog, the rat, the magpie and the ring, blocked him from finding you. When the old man was nearing his end, you were given some tests which proved you are now ready to take over the role of leader. This will happen after the final battle. Atrollis may not survive. Even if he does, he is tired and has told Recorder, the dog, rat and magpie, it is his time.’

His father hugged his son, and they turned in for the night.

As he drifted into the sweetest sleep, the Captain recalled the end of a recent voyage. He had lost a good ship which belonged to the family with whom he lived. It had foundered on an outcrop of rock in rough seas. All but he was lost.

There was a small dinghy floating towards him. The seas were surging around the rocks, but there was a channel of calm water, that led from the Captain to the dinghy. The dinghy bumped into him, more like caressing, he thought afterwards. There was a very large black rat standing next a magpie on the gunwale, cawing, urging him to climb aboard as the rat wrapped his extended tail around the Captain, and pulled him in. The channel of calm water stretched into the night and the Captain woke to find the dinghy had arrived alongside the jetty of his village, the rat and the magpie nowhere to be seen. As the Captain stepped ashore, he saw the white bones of a skeleton slopping about in the brine.

Over breakfast, his father, with a small tear in each eye, hugged the Captain, and said it was time for him to leave.

‘You must go back with Recorder. Shardforth is making ready for battle. Your ship is fully operational, and your crew are anxious to have you on board. Atrollis too, grows restless. Go my son. The final battle begins. It will have many phases, but my powers, developed after years of meditation, will be always nearby, and will be the reason why the evil one will be defeated. I predict his death by your hand, but it will be a difficult journey for you and you may fail. Go now, you have powerful friends, and sadly, powerful enemies.’

‘When will I see you again?’

‘Never. I have been invited to live with the community of wizards in Tupplenut, but I will speak to you, and if the old man is unable to guide you, it will be my voice guiding you. You will always be able to reach me.’

You are the key to defeating Shardforth and the Supreme Being. Learn all the powers of your staff and your telepathy. It is most important you learn to shut out evil voices and channel your mind to selected people. Shardforth and his gang will also try to force you to listen to them or guide your mind against your wishes. You must leave, the cloud grows impatient.’