

The Forgotten Monastery

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The old man whispered the incantation, tracing each gem on the frozen crown with wrinkled fingers. It was once magnificent and gleaming, but decades of constant frost bit at the metal until it was tarnished and stained. The headpiece was cold to the touch, magically absorbing the heat from all around it. Years of daily rituals to nullify this effect on himself had made the enchantment habit. The magic was effective - but even a man of his great skill could only keep the cold at bay for a short time. The skin on his hands had shriveled from the constantly frigid air that surrounded him. All around him was ice; the one exception being a round red stone embedded into the side of the crown. It felt warm to the touch, and at its heart a flash of angry red fire glinted.

He shifted the crown on his head. It could be moved, but not removed - the ancient magic held it tightly to the man's scalp. Its power was both a blessing and a curse - the crown would only come loose at his death. He knew it would float away, settling on the head of the next highest ranking member of his order. He bore the crown for another day, and glanced down at the once great Monastery of the Alpine Order. Like the crown, it was once vibrant, a brilliant sight to behold, shining on the very tallest mountain in the Northern Peaks. Now an ice covered ruin, a shadow of its former glory. *Am I such as these?* he wondered. *Alone. Decrepit. Old. Scarred by the Ice.*

No. I have an unnaturally long life span. I have acquired spells unrivaled by any Master. I have learned the secrets from the goddess herself. I am indeed Blessed by the Ice.

He stood in his throne room, the only room in the complex where a real fire burned. Water dripped from the ceiling above, quickly freezing and forming icicles as jagged as a dagger. At his

feet formed a slick pool on a floor that was smooth as a mirror. The image of the fire danced on its surface, a perfect reflection of the real flames. *I'd better not get too used to the warmth.* With a snap of his fingers, the fire was snuffed out completely. The old man felt the drain the magic had on his energy. *I may be old, but I still possess power.* Tired from the exertion, he sat in his transparent throne. He rang the ceremonial bell - once it brightly sang, polished daily by acolytes. Now it sounded a deep dull thud, which he felt more than heard.

He recalled the bright sound of the bell. Memories floated back to him of being a boy and polishing the brass. He pushed and shoved through the flock of kids and sometimes won the honor of ringing the bell. Where were all the acolytes now? Certainly more were needed to keep the faith alive. Only one had come in last decade's pilgrimage. And he was less than impressive. Acolytes he remembered were a mix of Elves, half-Elves, half-Orcs, and Felines. As a child, he had always accepted

these Other beings as companions. But certainly never friends. After all, he and his human Master knew these Others were simply accepted because the ranks needed filling. Fewer and fewer families were taking the Rites. Parents gave their first born son into the Order, and from there one was chosen to be their spiritual leader. To be innocent in the ways of the world, but instead to turn inward, and spend their days in meditation at the feet of the Sacred Texts, the Ancient Scrolls.

But only a male, a human, and a True Believer could become Master, and then only after decades of study. And, of course, only a human could be Chosen. But the world of men seemed to be a thing of the past, as Elves, Halflings, and other creatures emerged from the Unknown Lands. Even the elusive Dwarf was seen wandering the Northlands.

One acolyte, his only student, was the single candidate. Gregor, his servant. He recoiled as he recalled the oaf's fumbling manners and stooped gate. The acolyte was a slow learner. The

old man had taught Gregor to snuff out a candle-flame using magic, but the young man had to practice for years until he could cast the spell. And even then, it was unpredictable. Sadly, Gregor was the only other member of the order. The massive monolith of a monastery, in all its icy glory, was inhabited by only two people.

The Master stood and walked to the edge of the room. He flicked his wrist, and the door leading to his balcony obeyed. It melted open, then reformed into the chiseled archway made of translucent ice. Wind instantly buffeted him, so strong that he could barely keep his feet. The blast of cold froze his nostrils. He pulled his cowl down from his forehead, covering his eyes from the razor sharp snowflakes. Stepping out into the frigid air, he stood upon his balcony. A magical blue circle at his feet glowed faintly. In its center, a black streak scarred the rock. He remembered that day like it was yesterday. The monster, snuffed out of existence by his holy chant, left only a dark blotch on the floor.

The first time he faced a daemon of that size, he was young - and simply ran. The brute killed most of his adventuring party before he could even react. He barely escaped with his life.

The second time, he battled, but lost. The ice spells he casted lasted mere moments in the presence of the fiend. His party scored several direct hits against the monster, but it refused to fall. In the end, spent, they withdrew.

The third time, he had achieved Master of the Order, and faced the wretched creature alone, armed only with his crown and the knowledge of the Ancients. He tricked the fiend, and teleported the fire monster to his magic circle at the top of the Monastery. He stepped into the circle now, and stared down at it. In the wintery environment, the Beast was at a disadvantage. Angry and promising retribution, the beast lost the fight. However, if it were destroyed in this plane, it would simply reappear in the Abyss. The old man sang a summoning chant in reverse, trapping the monster within a gem. The old man's hand reached up to the

crown, touching the red gem embedded into the side, feeling its angry heat. The slight smile contentment added more lines to his face.

Their Order's arch enemy, the Fire Lord, certainly sought retribution. An agent captured the Order's only zealots, Gregor's parents. The Fire Lord had communicated with the old man to gloat, offering a trade of hostages. But the old man knew he could never let the beast out, no matter how significant Gregor's parents are. He feigned interest, only to learn the location of the Fire Lord's lair. But alas, his years of adventure were behind him. There was little hope of rescuing the pair. And he hadn't the heart to tell Gregor.

He looked up into the clouds. The storm blew from West to East, instead of the normal North to South; the sign he was looking for. Satisfied, he walked back inside the monastery, wind pushing his old body along the way. No need for mechanical locks... with a snap of his fingers, the spell expired, and the door

melded into the solid ice wall.

Gregor, the simpleton, came shuffling in response to the bell.

"You've beckoned me, sire?"

"It is time. The spring will come tomorrow, and bring thaw to the lowlands. Now is the season of travel, tonight the night to prepare. Strike out for the city at first light. Walk among civilization, heading for the heart of it. There you will find our sister Monastery, the Brothers of Celestial Light. Although I have not visited there for many years, I'm certain Vox Mondragon will remember me, our order, and our symbol."

He paused and pointed to the simple necklace that the servant wore, which bore their crest: the goddess, seated at the peak of a snow-covered mountain top.

"Present our symbol, and the appropriate offering." He tossed a leather pouch filled with coins to the apprentice - his reflexes too slow to catch it.

Gregor stood agape, trying to take it all in. "All the coins of

our treasury, sire?" He bent down and picked up the heavy sack. He had never held so much wealth in his life.

"Soon, you will be Master. You will need acolytes to attend you, like you have attended me. Teach them our traditions. You will be responsible for rebuilding our community. And when a family brings you their child, you can show him everything you know."

The simpleton looked at him with fear... understanding the mission, but having no knowledge of the outside world, he himself being raised here in the monastery. His parents had given him to the priesthood at age five, like every proper family should. The pair travelled abroad, and were about to break ground on a new temple on a new continent. They never returned, so they must be succeeding. At least that's what the old man told him.

Last season, the old man had consulted the Skull. The vision was clouded, not giving a picture of the couple's location, either their bodies or spirits. It was as though they no longer existed. He

had seen their souls trapped in gems, victims of the Fire Lord treachery. The Prophets did not send him on a mission to free them, however - despite his prowess in battle. Spells needed to be immune to fire were costly, and worked marginally at best. Although he had defeated a daemon of the third layer right here in this very monastery, these hostages were being held by the Fire Lord himself. On the seventh layer of the Abyss.

The old man looked over Gregor. Stooping. Shifting. Unfocused. I simply can't tell him what's happened to his parents. It would only embolden him to try and rescue them. He couldn't rescue a mouse from a mousetrap. Normally, a man as slovenly as Gregor would never have been considered for the Highest Office. But seeing as though he was the only other member of the Order, the old man had no choice but to make him the next Master. The old man had achieved the thirtieth scroll. Gregor had achieved the third.

The old man raised a finger, and whispered an incantation.

Gregor's eyes clouded over, and he became very still. Then the old man spoke.

"Gather supplies, food, and maps. Meditate on the mission. Bed early, and travel to man's largest village with the first light of the sun. Bring back those young enough to train in our ways."

"...my successor" Gregor mumbled, almost in unison with the old man.

"You will be the next Master. Teach the young acolytes the first scroll. When those humans who remain faithful to our traditions come, bringing their first born, accept them. Train one of them to become your successor." It is your responsibility to elevate the next Master in his fifteenth season."

"...fifteenth season." the young man drooled on, his eyes still gray and opaque.

Gregor knew, even in this altered state, that the crown had an intellect of its own. A force that stored all the knowledge of the past Masters. He had nightmares of the crown being stuck to his

head, no matter how hard he pulled on it. And when one Master died, the crown would find its way to the head of the next highest ranking Brother. The magic that bound it to these rules was ancient, forgotten. An agent of the Fire Lord had even infiltrated the brotherhood ages ago, in an attempt to steal the crown. But even though he assassinated the Master, the traitor could not don the crown.

With a wave of his hand, the old man dismissed his underling. The young man shook his head like he had just awakened from a dream, then went shambling out. The old man cast another spell, making the outer wall transparent. He turned toward the newly formed window, then drew his hand over his open eyes with a sigh. His magic would keep him awake this night. Plenty of time to think. He started out the window, patiently waiting for the sun to rise.

The next morning, he watched Gregor trudge through the snow, beating a path with a staff. What the servant lacked in

magical ability, he made up for in brutishness. The young man disappeared into the southern valley. The Master knew it would take weeks to reach the city. Even longer to climb back up the steep mountain. So he waited.

His fire had run out of fuel. Wood and kindling were a precious commodity here, being above the tree-line. The only way to get more was to journey outward, away from the safety of the monastery. Too much manual labor for an old man. So, most nights he huddled in the lowest part of the complex. The winds could not reach him there. Every bundle of elk fur he had was unrolled and layered over him. It was still not enough to ward away the cold completely. In his younger days, he had raised wards to deflect a barrage of arrows, turn away sword and axe, and reflect magic flames back toward their caster... with simply a flick of the wrist. But now he hadn't the energy to waste on spells to keep the cold at bay. Now he was tired. Old and tired. And freezing.

On the eve of the third month, the wise one consulted the Spirits of Smoke. The ceremonial pipe had been passed down for centuries. He inhaled the smoke greedily, the warmest lungful of air he felt in a long time. He had almost forgotten the sensation. Wrinkled hands picked up the daemon skull, a prize captured by the first Oracle. He exhaled into the back of the skull, where the brain had been bashed out. Coils of purple haze wafted from the holes where there were teeth missing. He sat a patiently waited for a vision. The smoke coiled out from his leathery lips. He closed his eyes, and a mirage appeared in his mind's eye. Through grinning teeth, the skull spoke.

A boy who has no future will become the next master. He will defeat the Fire Lord, and become the greatest Master ever to exist...

The old man's eyes burst open. An omen! Could it be? The Spirits have sent a boon this day. The next Grand Master would be even more powerful than he!

He rose, and began bouncing up and down as much as his old knees would let him. He felt young again. Thrilled to the point of giddiness, the old man looked at Gregor in a new light. He'd had no future when his parents dropped him off, he was sure of it. The young man was going to learn, to train. The old man would teach him all he knew, and he would become the greatest Master in the history of the order. The old man no longer resented all the years of putting up with the young man's slowness. They just needed a few more decades together, so that Gregor could master the difficult spells that they haven't covered yet.

But wait, how could he be great? The boy took years to memorize even the beginning chants.

The old man's heart skipped a beat. Fear gripped his lungs. Could the spirits be wrong? They have never spoken untruly before. Could he have interpreted them incorrectly? No, the sign was clear. But his logical mind told him that its not possible for such a brute to become the Greatest Master. But he must trust in

the spirits, and not doubt. With a sigh, he extinguished the pipe; and with it, all his doubt, fear, and second thoughts. The young man will succeed in his quest to save his parents. I will crown him at my death, and he will become great. He will face the Fire Lord himself, and win the battle - somehow - and bring his parents back. They will continue our order. I don't know how he's going to do it. He can't even douse a candle from across the room.

On the twelfth day of the fourth month, the acolyte's form appeared over a ridge. Following him, no, hopping after him, was a small form. A youngling! But only one? How was that child moving so quickly over deep snow, over slick rock? They came closer and closer, the young one bounding ahead, and the acolyte, falling, obviously exhausted. The wise one, too impatient to walk down the stairs at an old man's pace, simply clapped his hands together and teleported into the foyer.

In the entrance hall, the pair came to stand before the old man. They shed their snow-encrusted garments, as the old man

was eagerly pawing at the young prodigy. His excitement made his heart race too fast. He bent down and tugged urgently on the boy's furs. Out popped a pointed smiling face, with almond-shaped eyes. The face and neck were furry and green. Hooves stuck out from the boy's trousers, horns protruded from the child's head. A Tiefling child.

Anger struck the old man's heart. He balled up his fist, and cracked Gregor squarely in the mouth. The young man fell, sobbing. "How could you disgrace our order!" the old man screamed. He had never broken a tenant before, had never struck one of his own Order. "The boy isn't even human! Now go, get out of my sight. And take this useless boy with you."

The old man went back to his throne, crying. The tears froze solid on his cheeks. He welcomed the pain. Water dripped down a huge icicle just above and beside his throne, like a knight's lance. He stared at his reflection in the pool. He thought of the penance he would assign himself for losing control and hitting a fellow

monk. The gravity of the situation was sinking in. He was the father of the Alpine Order. He had only a single acolyte, and one useless candidate. His heart began fluttering, his breath wheezing. His vision blurred. It was then knew he had little time left.

He held only one hope for his Order. The time for this decade's pilgrimage was coming. Travelers from all across the realms would be coming. Although the number dwindled with each decade, he was certain that a human family would come this time. They'd bring a five year old, and Gregor would train the child. And in a decade more, the child would be powerful. Perhaps Gregor would be the father of a time of rebirth for the monks. Would that make him the greatest ever? Would he gather an army, and in his elderly years, confront the Fire Lord? Or would my spell take effect? He certainly would, the prophets had spoken.

The day came. The old man sat on the frigid balcony. After a

few minutes, he couldn't feel his backside, so he spread out a fur. It didn't help. Numb to the cold, he sat waiting, staring down the mountain. How could the Spirits be wrong? They've never been wrong. Someone WILL come.

The sun sank lower and lower. The old man was resolute to stay on his balcony in the cold, even after his ward against the crown's chill had worn off. When it dipped below the tip of the mountain, a shadow bathed him in sorrow. No one would climb in the dark. He took a deep breath, and slowly sighed a white cloud of steam. What little heat left in his body seemed to evaporate as well, and the breath brought on a sharp coughing spasm that he could not stop for several minutes. Again, his vision blurred. This disappointment only brought the end nearer, faster. He stumbled back to his throne and collapsed.

Gregor and the boy were training in swordplay at the far end of the room. Better the brute show him the primal arts, **as the old man had begun lessons for the boy in casting attack and**

defense spells. They must have heard the old man's spasms, because the boy came running, his cloven feet clomping with surety on the ice. Gregor trailed after more slowly on the mirror-smooth floor, slipping on the wet area formed by the sharp, dripping icicle.

The boy's small voice was near. "Your tea, I must fetch your tea, Master." He looked down at the boy, with his horns that were so different, so other-worldly. He could hardly believe that he drank from a cup that had been soiled by such bristled hands. Tainted. That's what the child was. Cursed.

At least the young Tiefling had a sense of duty. Ever since the ceremony that had officially elevated the boy from *Apprentice* to *Brother of the Order, First Scroll*, he had attacked his chores with a new spark of enthusiasm. After two decades, Gregor had reached the *Third Rank*. The old man himself had reached *Thirtieth Rank* before becoming Grand Master.

Broken hearted, the Master slouched into his throne. He

knew the end was now. When Gregor came to him, he said "My time is short. Tell me the truth now, where did you find that child?"

"The Brotherhood of Light cast me out. Vox Mondragon has been passed for six decades. They said they'd never heard of you, or our Order. They did not recognize our icon. They confiscated it as a sacrilege. I spent the night in the street. Evil men came and took what I had, our entire sacrifice. I told them that **other faithful** would avenge such evil, but they simply laughed."

He paused a moment, then continued. "Master, we have no faithful in the world of men. My parents were the last followers. Our ways, our existence, is forgotten. But there is hope - my parents are out there somewhere, gathering more followers."

The old man, grief-stricken, was nearly delirious with sorrow. He didn't have the courage to tell Gregor the true fate of his parents. He would learn their location soon enough, when the crown landed on his head, and the knowledge of the Ancients

flowed into his mind. "Then what monastery entrusted you with this child?"

The young monk smiled and turned to the child, playing tin soldiers near the fire. "This young one brought me food and water, and befriended me. He alone showed me kindness. He had nothing, but yet gave to me. Surely, learning the ways of the acolyte here will be better for him than growing up in the street. He had no future there."

Gregor's words echoed in the old man's head. No future. The old man turned his head, not so much as to turn away from Gregor, but to see the boy one last time. The child had dropped his toy into the fire, and was reaching in to get it. The old man raised his finger to stop the boy, with a telekinesis spell. Gregor reached out, gently putting his hand on top the old man's wrinkled one, stopping him. They watched the boy stepped into the flames, take his toy, and continued playing on the mirrored floor.

Gregor whispered into the old man's ear. "He does not fear

it. His green skin is proof against fire and flames."

With great effort, the old man grunted, managing to mutter a few syllables in the Order's ancient dialect. He declared the boy a graduate of the *first scroll*. He thought he raised a frozen finger, although he could not feel it. He redirected his telekinesis spell. The icicle above the bed creaked, and then snapped.

Gregor never had very fast reflexes. He didn't even know it was coming. And then the sharp stalagmite impaled him, pinning his carcass to the floor. The old man had closed his eyes, but heard the thud and felt hot splatter. A pool of blood began to creep across the ice.

The old man felt the crown loosen, then float away. It sought out the next highest ranking member of the order. Finding the boy's head, it landed snugly on top. All the knowledge from the Ancient times of the first Master to now flooded into the boy's mind in an instant.

The old man's hand went limp. The last breath left his body.

A new Grand Master had been crowned. The greatest ever to exist.

The blood had already frozen, adding a bright red splotch to the mirrored floor.