

The Olde Ways Are Made New

Sharizaad's books called to him, each with a different voice. Some sang, some whistled; some shouted, some explained. His favorite books hailed him, calling him by name, inviting him to return again and again—but only one whispered.

He found it hard to meditate that day. The pains of age were becoming sharper and sharper, and his patience with his decaying body waned. He didn't care for old age, even as his mind retained its potency. The long years had compressed his spine, and every movement meant a wince. But it was all right. Everything he needed was here in this chamber.

It was the highest room in the tower named for himself. The tower, built long ago upon his ascendancy to high priest of Rerebello, gave him the gift of isolation. The height, slightly taller than the kingdom's tallest trees, held him close to the heavens. But the gray stone brick, cold and hard and unforgiving, remained empty of decor or frill.

It was largely empty of furnishings as well. His chamber was graced only by a fountain of water that continually renewed itself and a few cushions to keep him sane in his frailer years—though his body complained more and more each year at how much padding the cushions seemed to be losing. The floor of his chamber was blanketed in a fine layer of dust, marred by footprints but also by symbols and equations and alchemical diagrams his fingers drew.

"The sun, the greater of the rest, the mother beacon," he chanted as his arthritic fingers danced across the dust, as the deeper layers of his mind generated images only possible in dreams.

There was a certain magic to it all, but more than anything there was study. Sharizaad knew very much, but never enough. Enough to manage the spiritual and metaphysical affairs of Rerebello as high priest of the land, but never sufficient to give his drive rest. Hence his books.

The messy mountain of books he kept in this chamber was organized only insofar as they warranted repeat readings. The less read the book, the more digging was required to find it in the mountain. The greater the need to review, the more likely it was to be found on the slopes.

The whisper came from the deepest part.

Sharizaad's eyes shot open. His weary spine straightened, and his fingers froze in their paths. He knew the book at once. Though he couldn't discern the words, its beckoning voice was unmistakable, no matter how smothered it was beneath Mazlow's Aelonic Chemistry and the Volumes of Named Stars and The History of the House of Metagon. This book's distinguishing characteristic: it was the only book of fiction in Sharizaad's collection.

The downy whisper tickled him. Soothed him. Enticed him. No other book ever spoke to him like that. And he remembered its existence as if remembering reality after waking from a dream. Long ago he had found it, and read some of its pages. He did not read deeply, but he also did not cast it away. Instead he hid it, as if knowing he'd come back to it someday.

The whisper came again. An invitation with the cadence of a woman's caress. At least, what he imagined such a thing would feel like.

The wordless voice wasn't wrong: he was indeed a mighty counselor to the king and queen, indeed to the entire kingdom. He had their ear, and had their father king's as well, and so on before even that. That made Sharizaad the most influential man in perhaps the whole world. Many may have hated him because they did not understand him, or his magicks; he was no threat to them, no matter the rumors that abounded, no matter the whispers that seeped into his extra-sensitive wizard's ears whenever he walked the streets of their cities. He had no need for their praise or even their support in any way. He had quite a large enough realm without it.

But of course he needn't dwell on such boastings. And so Sharizaad questioned that wordless voice and its flattery, then rejected it, and returned to his sorcery. Only to find his thoughts tentatively drawn back by an unnatural gravity.

Fiction held a strong sense of danger in Sharizaad's mind. Books meant for scholarly study were about true things, real things, things that already were, and nothing more. But untrue stories, those were dangerous. They were physical emblems of what he called the World of Ideas, the place where all things that are real once originated. Their power and potential were not yet known, and could yet be realized if or when the great Dreamweaver decided to bake her wet clay.

And this particular book, this tale that sat deep within the mountain, it sketched a sequence of scenes that led only to ruin. It was the story of the Summoning. The Unholy Vow. The Olde Ways, the oaths and covenants that could make the immaterial, material—at a great and terrible cost.

It was the Tale of the Meta-Demon Golgath.

Many similar tales had been told over the epochs. It was an ancient story, but the danger was, of course, in the potential for modern rhyme.

Why was it speaking to him now?

He was confident in his shell. There were no regrets. He had spent his life well. He wanted for nothing. The whisper could not—

Sharizaad was jolted out of his reverie by a crashing wave of desire. Memories and dreams he'd buried long ago filled him all at once like a flash flood. He could not even sort them out they were so many—a boyhood greed, an unquenched lust, the deep loneliness of his quest and the itch to go back and set each of these at right with a rewriting of his whole life. All of it swelled within him, and he knew not where to put it.

He sat there, cross-legged and stunned, looking around the room as if he'd never been there before. Something was different. Something was *present*. Somehow he sensed the potential for satisfaction was with him, in that very room. He could have it! All that he had forgotten he ever wanted, if he would just reach out....

And so he did. His hands reached out into space, groping for something he did not know. He became utterly perplexed when he actually felt something. A kind of invisible thickness, like space had been made solid. He could press against it, and through it, even manipulate it so light refracted in strange unworldly curves and angles.

He felt warmth, and with heavy breath began to draw energy out of that thickness. Absorb it in his long, bent, stiff fingers. As he willed the energy in, his digits burned with a prickly

heat. He wiggled them back and forth, then shook his knuckles like he was flicking water at the castle's cat. Gradually he gained control, letting the heat seep into his flesh—owning it, owning the fire of space-time, mastering it, commanding it.

And then those stiff fingers felt young again, the wrinkles smoothed, the aches vanished. He flexed them, and felt he could dance his fingers across the keys of a piano, or piece together intricate marble puzzle parts like he'd done as a lad, and...perhaps even caress the bare back of a young, slender, fair-haired girl. Play with the half-moon pendant around her neck, part the hair from her misty eyes, slide those charged fingers down softly and express his newfound fire...

He opened his eyes, expecting to see her.

Instead he saw ancient spotted skin that had not transformed with his mind. The sight doused him, and like waking from a dream he remembered the hardness of life, the agitation and ugliness. Reality was always hiding behind the mirage, and he felt the burden of his mortal frame heavier than it was before, like someone had saddled him with extra flesh.

Yes, he should have known this. Been prepared for the false taste. Aged his hands were and aged he himself was. 'Twas a folly of youth to indulge dreams long presumed dead. He cursed himself. Where was his wisdom? Where was the knowledge he'd gathered and treasured all these many years? Where were the fruits of his devotion, the rewards of his life path? How could he still be swayed by the brief rush of blood in his body?

Am I a reed where once I was an oak? The Great and Terrible High Priest Sharizaad, a man of the flesh like any other.

Damn mystique, he murmured. It fools even me.

He managed to stand, limbs creaking, and stumble over to the fountain to wash those trembling fingers. He splashed a bit of water into his face, rubbing his eyes, then his brow, then his temples, until he was staring into his own eyes reflected in the still water.

His own eyes, violet and bold and new. His brow, smooth and uncratered, even shining. His temples, the hair dark and thick. It was...a young man's face. Age melted away wherever the fountain had touched him. Had it not been a lie after all?

Soon he was splashing the water everywhere. Cupping his hands and pouring it over his scalp and face. Tearing off his robes to bathe in it, to immerse, to wash the age away. Watching his folds stretch taut over new muscle and sinew, seeing that which sagged tighten and fill out, feeling the gut he'd let expand over his life draw in instead, like he was taking in a permanent new breath.

He felt at his ears—those pointed, bestial ears of his that had so been mocked his whole life. They were round now. And could hear perfectly.

Seeing his new likeness, feeling his masculinity returned, he let out a shout of joy and ran to the far side of his chamber. But even just halfway there he found himself out of breath, his joints uncoiled and limbs shaking. He panted and stared at his hands. They were already returning to their rust. He could not stretch his fingers straight nor even form a fist.

He tried to roar but could only manage a guttural growl that quickly turned into a storm of coughing. He collapsed to the cold floor, limbs bending to soften the fall as he slowly rolled onto his back. He stared at the stonework above him.

Damn it all, were these really the deepest desires of his heart? Was he as simple as every other man? How was he, Sharizaad, High Priest of Rerebello, vulnerable to such baseness?

For that matter, why didn't that voice play to his intellect? He raised his arm up toward the smooth stone ceiling, and mocked the tempter, grinning wryly.

I will show you the splendors of the Starpara! I will grant you a place among the gods, up in the sky, far away from the pulse of the planet! I will teach you the aelonic language, the songs of creation. I will show you proof of your theory of the origin of man in the World of Ideas. I will take you there, and you will see the eternity and destiny of man.

That's what the voice should have been saying.

Yes. All that, and much, much more.

Sharizaad's breath caught, like someone shoved a pin through his throat. No, he hadn't been countering the voice, in sharing those dreams. He'd been asking if they were possible.

You know they are. Because someone has seen them, or they wouldn't have been written about. Someone has known the taste of the dripping juices of higher knowledge. But you never have. Not in all the study you've done up here in your little tower. Your tower that doesn't even reach higher than the surrounding mountains. Your tower that's as close to the sky as you'll ever be. As close to the sun, moon, and stars with whom you'll never be able to converse....

But I can show you those things. I can take you there. I can make you young again, and give you power to overcome every problem that afflicts this kingdom that you love so much. I can even make you fly.

The sun has been silent for you, all this time. But I speak to you.

Sharizaad could not deny what the voice had revealed. The core of uncertainty that he tried to hide every single night of his life: the sun's silence. The constant, unending silence of the universe.

It was true. Spells he had seen. Marvels he had witnessed. Healings and soothsaying he had performed. But she, the sun herself, had never spoken to him. Not after all his supplication, all his calculation, all his increase in knowledge.

That little kernel of doubt had taken root in his heart from the first of many unanswered prayers, far back in his earliest meditations. Over the years he did his best not to water the soil packed around it, but no insight or experience could ever extract it fully, as hard as he tried. Now in his nightmare he clung to it, let it rise up from his heart into his mind, let it fill his skull like a gas, let it attack his soul like a cancer.

His hands started doodling in the dust he lay on. Not doodles—unconscious tracings of the symbols of the sun. He was giving her the chance to save him. To swoop in and douse his brain. To bring him into the light at this most important of moments, after all this time.

The important moment passed. She did not appear. Only still that cold stonework and dead dust on the floor.

He raised his head, and looked toward the mountain of books. The voice was there, at the bottom, in the center, as far away from the surface as could be. He stopped thinking and let desire drive him, such visceral desire as he had not felt in many years. He lifted himself to his hands and knees and began to crawl. His knees bruised and his bones might as well have been

developing little cracks each time they came in contact with the stone. Each movement was increasingly painful, like he was aging faster the closer he got to those books. And the more it hurt, the more he sought after the secrets beneath that mountain, for it seemed they were all that could truly save him from total decay, body and soul.

I have read every single book in this pile, he thought to himself. And each one has only produced a desire for even more. Never have they satisfied. Never have they given the final answers.

He felt the weight of his lifetime pressing down on him, and paused in his motion. Just for a moment, to appreciate it. To feel the strain on his vertebrae, how the duties and solitude had bent crooked his spine.

In that moment, he paused to think.

And he was horrified.

No. I won't do it. I won't let it entice me. I am too good, too old, too clever to be taken in. I am the summation of decades' worth of fulfilled responsibility. I have ministered to many, advised kings and princes and generals, delved deeper into the dark dungeons of this world than any living creature in all the land. That is who I truly am, and it is the fruit of my life's work. I will not trade it in, not for the unearned harvest of handsomeness that is the victory of paternal lottery; not for secrets I can still search for without a demon's helping hand; and not to relieve the pain and humiliation of body's end that only means I've lived longer than most.

Let my ears remain pointy. That book should be burned.

So Sharizaad ignored his pain and rose to his feet. It was easy, he found. Or at least, possible.

But he didn't move after that. A thought, a terrible thought, held him back. If he wanted to burn that book, he'd first have to get near it. He'd have to rifle through the rest and check the pages to make sure it was the right one. He would have to hold it in his hand, carry it up to the tower's top where his altar stood, let it touch his skin and feel his pulse all that time.

Even now, as he stood there, eyes still fixated on that pile, he felt its pull. And he could not tear himself away. His eyes glazed over. He did not feel himself swaying, the disconnect was so great.

Why now, he thought. Why did it suddenly whisper to me now.

There was a knock at his door.

The rapping startled him, and he blinked several times. His body resumed its normal function and his mind cleared and the alienating gap between himself and reality was suddenly closed. He strode swiftly across the room, stepping over the robes he'd discarded earlier without bothering to pick them up. He opened the door nude. This was the body he'd earned, and he would not give in to either vanity or shame.

"Yes?" he said.

Just the briefest of falterings from the knocker.

"Something's happened," said the lesser tower priest. "The king and queen need to see you at once."

"Do you know what it is?"

"They have not told me," he said. But Sharizaad caught the hesitancy in his voice.

"Tell me what the rumors are."

“The prince. Prince Josiel....”

“Of course. What knick-knack did he steal from the vault this time? What overpowering peasant stench did he come home with this morning? What minor infraction of the law did he commit that we need to cover up?”

“No, it’s that...that...” said the tower priest.

Then the tower priest told him what it was.

And what it was convinced Sharizaad to leave the tower at once—after dressing to maintain a modicum of modesty in presenting himself before the king and queen. What they shared with him, what crime filled his wizard’s pointy ears, sent him reeling, sent him craving the great power he would need to right this wrong, sent him clambering back to his tower forgetting he had ever decided to burn that book.

Instead he found it, and he opened it, and in a rush he read it, into a night that would not end for a long time to come.