

THE QUARRY

A Guiding Light

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What truly remains of a mortal once they are touched by the stars?

The Anucici of old passed tales that the world was shaped by heavenly bodies, that the stars came down from the heavens to sow the seeds of life on our world. The stars watched the seeds bloom, and rejoiced at the spectacle of a world awakening. And whilst most stars felt that their role was to foster new worlds, there were still many that believed the seeds they had sown must be reaped come harvest. They knew that from life, comes power.

The difference drove a wedge between all the stars as clusters formed factions.

When the first blood was shed, it stained the earth and turned the soil barren. For a century there was naught but chaos and violence until there remained only three. Only three stars in the heavens with light left in their bodies. Monin and Montara were sisters, and had been the youngest to defend what had been created, whilst Fultus was amongst the eldest demanding

recompense for what had been given. Fulstus was no fool to his predicament and retreated, remaining close enough that he might whisper in their ears, and burned fiercely that they might fear him. He became the sun. The sisters were forced to hold close to the world, circling constantly, vigilant to protect what they had suffered so much for. The sisters became the moons.

On nights when the moons sat full in the sky, when there was not a cloud even beyond the horizon, and there was a calm carried through the night, those who bathed in the heavenly glow would be afforded particular favour.

The fishermen asked for calmer waters, and the moons gave them peace. The travellers asked for guidance, and the moons lit the way. When the farmers begged for reprieve from the sun's harsh light, the moons chased Fulstus away. Then, as the moons began to weary of relentless favours, Fulstus moved closer to the world, whispering to the minds of those unsatisfied: 'If your protectors will not provide, then by your own need, it is left to you to take.'

Monin and Montara were quick to shield the world once they noticed his motion, holding Fulstus at bay, but the whisper had already spread. It started with a hungry child and a desperate mother stealing bread from those whom would not give it willingly. Conflict quickly spread throughout the world. The moons could only watch with disdain and weep at the horrors wrought as they guarded against Fulstus.

Fulstus smiled at the chaos he had stirred, and observed carefully for another opportunity. Monin and Montara were forced to watch their foe constantly, only able to peer at the world beneath them for brief moments at a time. The blood of rising empires and collapsing civilisations stained the ground, filling the moons with a disgust they had not felt since witnessing the horror their kind had wielded.

Fulstus, after millennia, spoke to the moons, ‘Do you see what they have become? How familiar they all are to me. Why should you protect those that have grown to reflect what you despise? Look upon them and tell me they are worthy of you.’

Monin was reluctant to behold the life that dwelt below them again, so Montara accepted her sister remain to hold against Fulstus. She moved closer to the world and listened for the prayers of mortals, as she had done thousands of years before, searching for a place to begin. Her eyes were quickly drawn hence to the cries of a man, fleeing a pack of hounds whilst begging for mercy.

She watched as he ran in terror and desperation, all the while clutching a bottle close to his chest. Montara was intrigued by what could be worth risking life to this man, and so aimed to disorient the pursuing beasts with lights from the sky, then cast a wind to confuse his scent. She smiled as they strayed from their prey. The man, she saw, paid no mind to what was behind him, continuing forward as fast as he could. Montara watched as the man entered a forest where the Anucici had worshipped her in ages gone. He stopped by a pond that sat as still as a mirror, using it to refresh and recover himself.

Montara gazed upon him resting and thought it an opportunity to discover what this man had risked so much for. Whilst her body remained in the heavens, she presented an image of herself: a figure of elegance, luminescent skin, and magnificent waves of hair. Her image shimmered with the energy of a star. She stood above the centre of the pond, ripples flowing out from her presence.

‘We stand in sacred ground, but I do not ask that you kneel,’ Montara spoke softly, that only he would hear.

The man, caught quite off-guard, let out a cry of bewilderment and almost fell to the ground.

She stood in anticipation of his acknowledgment, forced instead to behold a panicking man struggling to decide whether or not to flee. Montara could see that he was small in stature. One of the elfin folk to be sure, with a sharp chin and hair like the grass. She spoke again to fill the silence. ‘I am Montara, a guardian of this world, and I would know of you.’

Montara could see his body trembling like a leaf in the wind, his eyes squinting in an effort to look upon her, desperate to hold himself in place. Montara had forgotten the effect she had on these mortal creatures. She grew impatient, all the same.

‘Speak,’ was all she could tolerate to utter through the void.

‘I am Tuo’laken.’ The words forced their way out of him. ‘I am of the Mardwri.’

Montara smiled faintly now that the conversation was progressing. She gestured towards the bottle still firmly grasped in his hands, ‘and what is that you have carried so close to your chest?’

‘I-it contains a remedy for my child’s ails.’

Montara waited a moment to give pause before continuing, ‘Why were you pursued by those hounds.’

‘I stole it.’ Montara made out a mutter from Tuo’laken, censuring himself for being unable to lie.

‘Did you harm another to take this?’

‘No. Never.’

‘Why did you resort to stealing it?’

‘The people who held it do not receive my kind well and would not abide my presence. I felt left with without choice.’

Montara smiled at this creature, and promised him safety by the pond for the evening. She told Monin what had transpired, that there was at least a single soul below who was willing to risk themselves for another.

Fulstus came closer, daring to interrupt, ‘You speak as though you have known this creature for more than an eve. Grant him your favours, allow him power, and then you will see the truth in his heart.’

Montara, incensed by the interjection, rebuked Fulstus. But Monin, weary from watching against the enemy, softened her sister's anger. 'This is no longer a cause I am certain of. If you can find kindness in his life then we shall remain to guard them, but if Fulstus is correct then we must abandon them to themselves.' The sisters agreed, united as they were, and Montara hastened back to the pond to consult Tuo'laken.

She granted him a medallion, a token of her favour, so that she would be able to hear his call when needed. Tuo'laken hurried off, singing praises in her name. Montara watched that night as the daughter recovered from her ailments, who even smiled to the sight of her father's delight.

Patiently, Montara watched, she waited.

It was several months until Montara was called upon. The well of the Mardwri had run dry by the harsh light of Fulstus, and they desperately required aid. She shifted an underground stream, replenishing the water. Montara was thanked and praised by the people.

It was many weeks until she was sought for again: the soil had become dry and hard. So she shifted the winds to bring three days of rain whilst the farmers tended the soil. Montara ensured that the harvest was the most plentiful the Mardwri had seen in years. Both she and Tuo'laken were thanked.

As the winter approached, the villagers feared to enter the forest to collect wood for their fires, and so she chased the beasts away. Though when she had done so, Montara did not witness any prayers or thanks to her, but saw the villagers proclaiming Tuo'laken as a herald of good fortune.

When winter's frost melted, it became apparent that the Mardwri's prosperity had caught the attention of others. Threats and demands were made against the Mardwri. And when the Mardwri spoke of the protection Tuo'laken ensured them, their homes were ransacked, their lands burnt, and their children taken.

Tuo'laken's daughter was amongst the taken. He demanded Montara deliver him retribution, that their attacker's homes be torn with madness and bloodshed. Despite his protests Montara would not strike down another creature, but she agreed to assist in Tuo'laken's efforts. She fascinated the offenders with her presence in the sky and held their

gaze fixed to the heavens for the entire night, allowing Tuo'laken to walk freely amongst his enemies. But with every step his fury boiled higher. Montara knew she should have stopped him, warned him for what would follow, but that was not her role, and so she continued to watch from afar.

He found one of the taken, bloodied by a knife. Butchered in discretion. And so he did the same, brutalising the enemy individually. He exterminated them to the last child, and walked out of the debris with his own child wrapped in his arms, his feet wet with blood.

Tuo'laken was made the leader of Mardwri by the rising of the sun.

He sent word to all the tribes, towns, and villages that the Mardwri knew, stating what he had done in the tribe's name, and what would happen should anyone wrong them again.

Tuo'laken's demands only escalated with the passage of time as the influence of his people grew. They demanded minerals that they might make fortifications for themselves. When the work was too treacherous, they demanded others of their kind do it. And when the town grew to be a city, they demanded that all elfin folk join them.

The Mardwri prospered, keeping the other tribes beneath them, as master does a pet. They viewed the rest of the world in contempt as they worshipped at the feet of their leader. And as Tuo'laken rejoiced at the well-being he had brought to his people, he remembered those that had trodden on them.

The dwarves were no longer welcome within the walls of the Mardwri, the gnomes were permitted nowhere near their borders, and the humans were regarded as an infestation. The other races chased all elfin-kind from their cities in response, but Tuo'laken used these actions as a means for war, in a twisted desire to make a world safe for his kind.

Montara watched in agony as the passing decades saw the Mardwri build an empire, raised by the hand of Tuo'laken. Worship of his image was a daily practice, and members among the Mardwri were appointed to enforce it. Montara could no longer recognise the man she had met by the pond.

She had grown weary of watching, of hoping for something to prove to Monin that this world was worth protecting. So tired that she was almost deaf to the screams of Tuo'laken

when they came. It had been a quiet, insidious occurrence. When she gazed upon the scene, she saw Tuo'laken sitting dead in his throne, as others stood looking with dismay, and Tuo'laken's daughter repeatedly plunging a blade into his chest.

Guards flew out of the hallways, but the daughter vanished before they could arrive, disappearing into the masses outside. Montara watched carefully as the daughter stepped through shadows with practiced feet, leaving the city and making for the forests.

It was a curious thing that Montara witnessed, as the daughter found her way to the same pond her father had, many years before. Montara manifested a visage of herself again, and stood above the water. Before Montara could speak, the daughter acknowledged her arrival.

'I remember a story my father once told me. Being chased by hounds he found himself by a pond and granted the favour of a goddess. Have you come to punish the one who killed your herald?' The daughter's eyes locked with Montara's, firmly gripping a bloody dagger.

Montara was intrigued by the creature she gazed upon. 'Why have you murdered your father in such brutal fashion?'

The daughter let the question hang in silence before answering, 'That was not my father. Tuo'laken murdered and conquered and made himself a god, and he forgot he was just a mortal.' She threw the dagger into the water. 'My father read me stories, and planted our fields, and then he died here.'

The ripples in the water moved askew as Montara stepped towards the daughter. She saw an opportunity to repair what she had unleashed. She grasped the hands of the daughter with a gentle grace.

'Violence in the name of justice does not absolve the crime. Consequence is what you committed, and consequence you must suffer.' Montara could see such remorse in the daughter's eyes that she softened her tone. 'I shall not force you, as I did not force your father. You may rest safe here tonight.'

Montara left the daughter to dwell by the pond whilst she spoke to Monin of what had happened, and begged her to watch what would transpire. The sisters watched from afar as the daughter returned to the city and presented herself to officials of the Mardwri and confessed to

her crimes. Judgement was passed swiftly on the daughter. Punishment was decided to be public hanging.

‘How did you know that she would do as you requested?’ Monin asked of her sister.

‘There was a sorrow in her eyes which echoed my own.’

Monin was at once overcome by disgust at the sight of those whom had gathered to relish the expected moment. ‘So, you sent her to be executed?’

‘No.’ Montara was relieved to witness her sister demonstrating the same emotions and conflict to the situation. ‘I brought you to pass judgement. She is the kindness from Tuo’laken’s life. Will you save her?’

As the boards beneath the daughter fell, and as the knot tightened around her neck, a beam of light crashed from the heavens to sever the noose. The crowd was stunned, and then filled with awe as the voice of Monin boomed down from above. ‘This one has freed you from tyranny and holds our favour. Look upon her and know that she is Mon’laken, an instrument of our will.’

Mon’laken rose from the ground, she stood bewildered as every witness knelt. Montara took the silence as a moment to speak with her sister. ‘This is why we must remain. To guide and to teach these children of ours. We can show them the path that we should have taken so long ago, and this one will be a figure to carry them forwards.’

Fulstus writhed in dismay when Mon’laken did not take her father’s place as the people called her to do. On the direction of the moons, she destroyed all the weapons, crushed all the walls, and finally obliterated the throne. Monin could finally bear to observe the world again, much to Montara’s delight.