

## Tales of Nurigen

### The Sleeper at the Crossroads

**“Look up Mozim in a dictionary from the original planet Ixir and you’d find the following definition;**

**Mozim – Ugly, misshapen, unnatural, deformed, chimera, curse of the gods.**

**Not that you’d ever be able to find the dictionary, not now, Ixir has long gone.”**

¶

Mo was probably in the most danger when he was just a few moments old. No one in the slums of Ixir could afford a midwife and Miram, his mother, had no living relatives. Miram had never had shoes on her feet, or owned more than two loose fitting frocks. She had two rooms in her shack and one mattress, which she’d shoved well out of the way. She’d lay on the floor for the birth; the floor could be scrubbed clean.

“Nethesta, please hear my prayer.” She called.

Poverty in the Ixir slums was famous; they almost prided themselves on the brutality required, just to survive each day. Miram only had two rooms, because her home was in a part of the slums called Demon Corner. Strange creatures had been seen near her shack. No one had ever shown any desire to come and live with her.

‘Things that aren’t natural.’ They said in slums.

So Miram was alone and his child was eager to come into the world.

“Nethesta, please ! I’ve never asked for your help before.”

Her people had worshiped the old gods and Nethesta was one of the oldest. A female god, who was one of the few to show compassion towards mortal creatures. Miram lay on the floor, a knife by her side to cut the umbilical cord, when his child arrived. It would be a boy, she knew it, such a fierce lover had to create only boy children.

“Nethesta, I can’t do this alone. Without help I’ll die and his child will die.”

She’d told her few friends that she’d been raped, but refused to name or identify her attacker.

Sightings of the strange creature had coincided with the alleged rape and people had assumed the worst, Miram had taken an unnatural lover. No one came to help her, despite her pleadings. She felt her back digging into the bare boards of the floor and screamed as the birth began.

“Did you love him ?”

The voice seemed to come from all around her, even from below the floor and above the tin roof.

“Who is this ?” She asked.

“You know who I am, you’ve been calling me for hours. I ask again, did you love him ?”

“Yes I did and I still do.”

“Will you love his son ?”

“Yes, with all my heart.”

The pain was becoming unbearable, the child was obviously stuck and her body was trying to push the baby out. She tried not to push, but it was impossible to stop her muscles contracting. Nethesta sounded kind, but in no hurry to help her.

“Please Nethesta, my child is dying !”

“He will be unlike the people of Ixir, will you love him Miram ?”

“Yes, I don’t care what he looks like.”

“It’s important, one day your son will help to awaken the great gods. It is more important than you, your pain and the whole of Ixir. I ask again, will you promise to love him, no matter what?”

Miram was almost unconscious, the pain was too severe, how could the god she'd prayed to all her life, allow her to suffer so ?

"I give you my promise, to love him and to give my life to protect him."

There was no more conversation, just a head looking through the tarpaulin, which had been nailed up to make a bedroom door. Kelis the old midwife was peering at her.

"I have no coins for your fee." Said Miram.

Kelis held out her hand, palm open, showing her a pile of coins.

"My fee is paid Miram, though I don't know why I came to this place. A child came and paid me to help you, over an hour ago, maybe more. Still, I'm here now."

The old woman had trouble kneeling and obviously wasn't used to working on the floor. She lifted Miram's frock out of the way and grumbled as she inspected the trapped infant.

"Oh, nothing too bad, an arm in the wrong place, or is it a leg."

She looked up at Miram, a look of pity on her face and something else, perhaps fear.

"I'm sure the child will be fine, once I get the head turned round." Said Kelis.

Miram felt a lot of tugging and then Kelis took the knife from her and she felt it cutting.

Consciousness left her and she didn't know anything else for some time. Miram awoke, still in pain, but she knew instinctively that her child, her son, had been born. Her frock was now red with blood and she was still in so much pain. But Kelis held her child and he was crying.

"You have a son." Said Kelis. "It took my all my skills to save him and now I'm wondering if I should have."

"Let me hold him." Said Miram.

She ignored the pain and got up on one elbow, reaching out to touch her son, his son. Kelis had the child crushed into the folds of her dress, it was impossible to see him properly.

"Best I take him and drop him in the creek. Snap his neck first of course."

"No, not my child ! Give me my child !"

"For the best Miram, for the best." Said Kelis. "I won't tell anyone that he's..... not human."

Miram ignored the pain and leapt forward, slipping on her own blood, but managing to snatch the baby from the midwife. Kelis wasn't giving up though, she tried to grab the child's arm. Miram picked her knife up from the floor and ran it over the midwife's thigh, causing her to scream and jump back. Miram pointed the knife at Kelis, while she pushed the baby against her chest, feeling him suckle at her breast.

"Go midwife, leave here. Touch my son again and I'll gut you like a fish. Tell everyone that I'll kill anyone who tries to harm my son."

Kelis went, limping and shouting abuse as she left the shack. Miram took her first look at her son and his legs looked bent up. She tried to straighten them, but the joints seemed to go both ways and he had two knees. It was a puzzle, but he didn't seem upset by her pulling, so she assumed they were supposed to be like that. His arms and shoulders looked strong, there was even evidence of muscle, almost unknown in a new born. His chest was all lopsided, but again, he didn't seem upset by her pulling and prodding. There was no getting around the fact that her child was strange, but it seemed he was supposed to be..... as he was.

"At least your face is mine."

He had a good face, cover him in loose clothing and he'd be acceptable anywhere, as long as he didn't straighten those legs. She just hoped he wasn't going to turn out to be a bit stupid, that would be too much to bear.

"Please Nethesta, at least give him quick wits." She prayed.

While her child fed, she heard the midwife talking to her neighbours, out in the street. The old woman was telling them about the monstrous thing Miram had just brought into the world.

“Mozim !” She kept shouting.

Everyone she spoke to, spoke to others and soon they were all talking of Miram and her Mozim child.

“It seems the slums have christened you little one.” She said to her son.

The slums had christened him and some called him Mozim, even after the meaning of the word was lost in antiquity. Friends called him Mo, though true friends were rare in the slums. Mo’s long legs and powerful arms gave him something to sell, his skills as a slum runner. Drugs, contraband, cash, Mo could deliver it all safely, by taking it over the rooftops and along paths few others could negotiate. He delivered for all the slum gangs, joining none, being useful to them all. At some point in his teens, he discovered another use for his strength and he became an assassin as well as a slum runner. Mo brought quick death to many who deserved it and to many who probably didn’t. He did well, amassing enough money to make sure his mother had enough to eat and always had shoes to wear. Mo became known and respected by most who lived in the slums. He became the best slum runner in his district and eventually in all of Ixir. Able to deliver anything safely and with enough strength and skill to take care of anyone who got in his way.

~ ~

King Denzu was in many ways a true monarch of his people. He hadn’t inherited the title, or been given it by a grateful nation. King Denzu was the accepted ruler of the two million people who inhabited the slums of Norraine City and he’d won the title by right of conquest. Like many brutal men, he prided himself on being well read and cultured.

“The carving looks to have been added years later.” Said Aelia.

Denzu liked having Aelia as his advisor; she added a certain class that his guards lacked. He had his usual six armed guards, mainly just for show. His real protection came from the albino twins who went everywhere with him. Their street fighting skills were legendary, but their conversation was rather limited.

“So the whole treasure legend is likely to be a myth ?” Denzu asked.

“Maybe not, this language has been dead for over five thousand years.”

He knew the wording by heart, all of the seven slightly different translations. Denzu was a Menderan wannabe and proud of it, so he chose to believe the Menderan translation.

‘Crossroads of the ancient gods, tread warily and choose your path with care.

Treasure awaits the chosen and a future cursed by prophecy.’

Aelia was prodding at the moss covered carvings on the side of the statue of a sleeping demon.

“See my Lord !” She said. “The edges of the characters are softened, these carvings are incredibly ancient, even if they were made long after the sleeper was placed here.”

He liked her calling him Lord without being asked and he liked her sharing his bed three times a week and actually appearing to enjoy the sex. Aelia had been a trainee apothecary, until there had been a scandal involving experimentation with poisons and a death. She’d fled and eventually ended up in the slums of Ixir, as many others before her had. Denzu had taken her under his wing, he’d been desperate for someone educated, someone to actually talk to. Aelia had actually studied on Mendera itself for a while, which made her almost royalty on Ixir. He wasn’t worried about her past, he just kept her well away from his food and the kitchens.

"I think it's time," said Denzu, "to settle the treasure issue once and for all. We need a team to search likely places and find the treasure. The people of the slums will love it. They'll love me for doing it."

He looked at the statue and personally considered any talk of a treasure to be nonsense. For years the people of Norraine had thought the sleeper was a statue which had fallen over. It took a scholar from Ventella to work out that the eighty foot long statue was intended to be lying on its side.

"It really is a statue of a sleeping demon." The scholar had said.

No one on Ixir had ever seen a real demon, they were creatures of the rifts, or so they'd been told. The empire had sent a team to dig the ground round the statue and take holographic picture for the imperial archives and that had been that. The sleeper was theirs though; it was only two miles from the slums, out in the snake infested scrub. Dozens had set about digging holes in the ground; one group had cracked the statue with explosives. None had ever found anything and a few, the ones who'd gone to the caverns in the south.... had never returned.

"There's nothing here." Said Aelia. "The ground has been dug over by generations of your subjects." King Denzu had bribed and threatened various sources and had obtained a great deal of information for Aelia. She even had satellite images of the whole continent to look at. He trusted her wit and intelligence, she'd never failed him.

"So where do you suggest we look?" He asked.

She crouched down and picked up a handful of the gritty soil that most plants refused to grow in, running it through her fingers and pointing east.

"The road only goes half a mile east." She said. "Then there are the slums and Norraine City, which goes right to the ocean."

She turned and pointed to the north.

"To the north the road stops at a mile marker and then there's seven hundred miles of land before you hit the Red Ridge Mountains."

"And there are three major cities in the way." Added Denzu.

"Three major cities, ten large towns and miles of farmland. There are no records of anyone finding any prehistoric ruins, cave paintings or ancient objects."

She spun and pointed west, towards the desert.

"The road runs out after three miles." She said. "Then there's fifteen hundred miles of scrub and desert until you get to the western sea."

She dug through her files, pulling out a large satellite picture, which she put on the ground.

"Nothing," she said, "no ruins, no structures of any kind. But we can't rule out the treasure being in a cave in the desert. It would need a large well equipped expedition to investigate the route west and it would be expensive."

"So like everyone else, you're saying to look to the south?" He asked.

Aelia pulled another file from her bag, dropping her maps.

"The road only lasts for two miles," she said, "but there are mile markers right up to the caverns. It is only twenty miles to the caverns and they have never been fully explored. Plus there is cave art, which indicates prehistoric occupants of the deeper caverns."

She held up a picture, of what looked like a demon with a large club of some kind.

"Demons aren't indigenous to Ixir," she continued, "so I suggest the sleeper caverns are a good place to start."

"People have been there before Aelia. They either come back empty handed, or they don't come back at all."

She was collecting her papers together, shaking off the dirt and refolding them.

“The slums have no shortage of desperate people.” She said. “We could easily put together a sizeable party to send.”

Denzu took the picture of the cave painting from her and looked at it for a while. The picture wasn't a formless wall scrawl, the painting of the demon was clear and well defined.

“Sending fools to die is pointless.” He said. “We need someone good, someone who might actually succeed in finding the treasure.”

“There is Mo the slum runner, my Lord. He has gained quite a reputation for being able to get into impossible places and surviving.” Suggested Aelia.

“Yes, I've heard about him, a very resourceful young man. Can we trust him though ? Is he the sort to try and run off with the treasure ?”

“He has a mother, dotes over her I've heard. He won't abandon her.”

“Good, good, arrange a meeting with this slum runner.”

~ ~

Mo had no idea why the albino was outside his house, he was just grateful his door hadn't been bashed in.

“King Denzu wishes to see you.”

It was over a mile to the royal palace, one of the few brick built structures in the slums. A mile gave plenty of time for Mo to think about what he might have done and for bystanders to stare as he walked past. The albino twins usually stayed close to the King. One being used to escort the slum runner, was either good news for him, or very bad news.

“Any idea what he wants to see me about ?” Asked Mo.

“Relax, he sent Darva out for lunch. He never feeds people if it's bad news.”

The palace was built on the banks of a relatively clean creek, or at least clean for the slums. Four huge ex-cops from the Norraine police force stood at the door, at least a dozen more waiting to back them up. Denzu took his security very seriously.

“He can go straight in.” Said one of the ex-cops.

Inside the air was conditioned and filtered to take out the usual stench of Ixir. For the first time in his life, Mo smelt fresh air. To him the air smelt of fresh flowers, others had different sensations brought on by a rare experience of clean air. Several more checkpoints and Mo was being searched from head to foot, someone even inserted a finger into his backside. No one commented on finding three daggers hidden in his clothing, only a fool went unarmed. His weapons were placed in a wooden tray and then a female servant tidied him up and ran a brush through his hair. She looked at him and tutted.

“He'll have to do.” She said.

She squirted his neck with a fluid that smelt like a brothel owner's parlour and then pushed him through a curtained doorway.

“Mo ! So glad you could join us.” Said King Denzu.

He recognised Denzu and Aelia, he'd often seen them in the slums, though usually only from a distance. There was just the two of them, looking at a table full of paperwork. Another table held food, which smelt wonderful.

“Let me get you something to eat.” Said Aelia.

It wasn't daft food, like tiny birds in batter, which he'd once heard about. It was proper food, well cooked meat and chunky vegetables. Mo was given a plateful and a jug of decent ale.

“We can look at the maps once you've eaten.” Said Denzu.

“The King needs your opinion on the Sleeper at the Crossroads.” Added Aelia.

“Yes, of course, glad to help.” Said Mo between mouthfuls.

They ate and then Aelia went through the various assumptions that led to the southern caverns being the ideal place to search for the legendary treasure.

“The dagger does point south.” Said Mo.

They were both looking at him blankly, so he found an aerial picture of the site and pointed at the hand of the sleeping demon.

“Here,” he said, “under the hand is a dagger. Years of winter ice and summer heat have cracked the stone, but you can still see it’s a dagger. The point of the dagger is indicating south.”

“Yes,” said Denzu, “I see it. We’ve obviously chosen the right man for the job.”

Mo was usually hungry and hunger meant being cautious, keeping one step ahead. He’d been well fed and then given ale and he wasn’t watching for the danger signals.

“I’m sure Mo will want to help his King ?” Asked Aelia.

Mo didn’t even see the trap and walked right into it.

“Yes of course, anything I can do, it’ll be an honour.” He said.

King Denzu called over a servant and obtained a purse from him, which he handed to Mo.

“A little money,” said Denzu, “you’ll need it for supplies and to hire a team, we don’t expect you to go on your own.”

“And you’ll need to leave soon, the people expect it.” Added Aelia.

Mo was young and inexperienced, but he wasn’t stupid. He knew he’d just been volunteered for a trip to the sleeper caverns.

“The treasure is likely to be just a myth.” He said.

Denzu was giving him a huge grin and hearing none of it.

“You said the dagger points the way Mo. Bring back the treasure and you’ll be well rewarded.” Said the King.

“There can’t be failure, the King would lose face.” Added Aelia.

“You do see, that if you fail, it will be your fault.” Said Denzu.

Mo understood perfectly, failure meant an afternoon being beaten to death by the albino twins and his body going into the creek. Coming back empty handed wasn’t an option.

“I understand perfectly my King.” He said.

“Good.” Said Aelia. “The King’s best people will guard your mother until you return.”

“I thank you for your kindness.”

~

~

Three days later, Mo found himself wearing a heavy backpack and in the company of three companions. He’d decided to start off from the crossroads, giving the statue a quick rub for luck. He’d considered hiring a couple of strong back to carry their packs to the caverns, but it was only twenty miles over fairly decent terrain. It was only an hour after dawn and they were all still trying to wake up.

“Watch out for snakes.” Said Mo. “They come out to warm up in the sun.”

Cal, his lifelong friend, tightened the straps on his pack and followed him south.

“Just make you sure you tell my mother, if I get eaten by anything.” He said.

They were about the same age; Cal was born in the large block near Miram’s shack. Mo didn’t fully trust anyone in the slums, but Cal was the closest thing he had to a genuine friend. The packs had been picked up by all of them, ensuring the distribution of caving gear, lamps and food was fair, but Mo still had a nagging suspicion that his was the heaviest.

"We'll take two days over getting to the caverns, no point in feeling knackered when we arrive there." He'd told them the night before.

There were mile markers on the old road, huge stumps of stone with no markings on them. As they got to the first one a member of Denzu's guard was waiting. He waved at them and wandered off without saying a word.

"Checking on us." Said Nate. "He could have at least wished us luck."

Mo put his finger up to his lips and glared at Nate, it wasn't wise to speak ill of the King, or his guards. Nate was another friend from the same part of the slums, another child born at about the same time. They were all young; Mo thought anyone older was likely to try to order him about. Nate was greedy and ambitious, but like all three of them, he was hungry and desperate to make something of himself.

It was barely late afternoon when they reached the stump of stone that marked the tenth mile and the halfway point.

"We could push on, we're still fresh." Said Jongie.

Mo knew Jongie would be the one to watch. He was only their age, but he'd once been a member of a caving club at college. That was before his father had become a rather bad embezzler and the entire family had ended up in a one room tin shack.

"We won't get much rest in the caverns." Said Mo. "As you're feeling fresh, you can hunt about for anything to make our rations go further."

Jongie just stood there, giving him an insolent look.

"Go on!" Shouted Mo. "A few berries or bulbs, anything will do. As long as it's edible of course."

Jongie went, but Mo knew that eventually he'd have to remind him who was paying him, perhaps even give him a few bruises to keep him in line.

"There's a small stream with clean water." Said Cal.

They had no tents, but it was still a time of year when a bedroll on the ground was adequate. Nate found plenty of dried twigs and a few larger fallen branches and lit a fire. Quite quickly, the gap in the scrub had become a warm and friendly camp. Mo was just about to dig out a pack of rations, when Jongie crashed through the scrub, dragging a creature as big as himself.

"I sort of fell over it." Said Jongie. "Managed to get it with my dagger before it could run off."

"Is that a DigDak, he's got?" Asked Nate.

Mo helped pull the creature nearer the fire and it was indeed a large herbivore, known in that part of Ixir as a DigDak.

"Is it ok?" Asked Jongie. "Is it good eating?"

It was beginners luck, but Mo slapped him on the back and thought that Jongie might just have been a good choice to bring along. They'd needed his caving experience and his expertise with ropes and spikes. But Mo knew that luck was an important factor and Jongie seemed to have it.

"They are splendid eating," said Mo, "well done, you get the best bit of meat."

Cal seemed to be the expert, though Mo had no idea where he'd picked up the skills. He put an entire leg on a spit over the fire and then cut the flesh into portions and wrapped them up to be taken with them. Nate found a few edible bulbs and they had the kind of feast that none of them were used to.

"I'll come on trips with you again Mo." Said Nate.

"You'll be sick of DigDak, when it's day five and I'm rubbing spices into the meat to make it edible." Said Cal.

They were all quiet for a while and it was Cal who voiced an idea they must all have been thinking.

"Is there any treasure?" He asked. "Surely we're going on a fool's errand?"

"We just enjoy a few days in the caverns and go home, no problem." Said Jongie.

"I can't go home empty handed." Said Mo.

He couldn't see the others that clearly in the dark, but he saw their heads turn towards him, lit by the light from the fire.

"Denzu has told me that failure isn't an option." He continued. "You'll all be fine, but I won't survive long if we find nothing."

"But..... supposing there is no treasure?" Asked Jongie.

"You could run," said Cal, "go north to Ashen Falls. Hide there for a while and then head for another city."

"Miram can't run." Said Mo.

"Of course, sorry." Said Cal.

"We'll do our best Mo, if the treasure is there, we'll find it." Said Nate.

"Yeah, right, give it a hundred percent." Said Jongie.

~

~

The next night they camped just outside the entrance to the caverns and Cal was right, they were already tiring of the rich flavour of the DigDak meat. He still cooked all the remaining meat and carefully wrapped it, rubbing in salt, knowing it would keep for at least two days. They had a last night sleeping out under the stars and woke at dawn to get their caving gear ready.

"I used mining lamps that your contact acquired." Said Jongie. "Then I added the standard battery packs used by drills and stuff."

Mo had already seen the contraptions that Jongie had built and riveted to metal police helmets. Mo had seen worse, especially as they were put together in just three days.

"They look good Jongie," said Mo, "let's see the light they give."

Even in the morning light, they could see the diffuse light, glinting off damp early morning leaves and sharpening shadows.

"Nice amount of light." Said Cal. "And I like the waterproof covering."

Not so much covering as wrapped in plastic, but the lights looked tidy and efficient.

"Aelia charged the packs at the palace," said Jongie, "and there should be enough to last months, but....."

"I know," said Mo, "tech stuff in the slums tends to be crap!"

"Even if the packs only last a third of the time they should," said Jongie, "we'll still have enough light to last a month underground and then we have the two oil lamps."

"A month! We'll be out of food in a week." Said Nate.

"There's always food in caves," said Mo, "if we get desperate enough to eat it."

Mo led, taking them along the side of a small stream that ran through the vast cavern. For over a mile the path was obvious and they carried on following the flow of water and entering one breath taking chamber after another. Eventually they came to a cavern with three separate exits, none of them obvious and all quite narrow.

"Time for the feather." Said Jongie.

He brought something wrapped in plastic out of his pocket and unwrapped a fragile feather, attached to a length of thread. Jongie held the thread up at the entrance to the first exit and the feather didn't move. At the second it swung about slightly in the breeze, but at the third it was blown about by a steady stream of air. He carefully coiled the thread up and wrapped up the feather again.

"This way." He said.

"You actually once did this for fun?" Asked Cal.

Jongie shrugged at him.

"Caving seemed to get the best looking girls." He said.

Jongie in front, they set off, repeating the trick with the feather several times. Mo noticed that the passages began to get so narrow, that they often had to crawl through and the floors were wet. He dreaded to think about flooding and he didn't mention it to any of the others. It wasn't the rainy season and he just hoped the weather remained fine.

"Over there, something glinted in the light." Said Nate.

The cavern was large and without Nate's good eyes, they might well have missed the remains. Two skulls and few bare bones, huddled in a corner, the glass of their oil lamps catching the light.

"Something has gnawed the bones clean." Said Cal.

"Looks like they've been here for years." Said Mo. "We're bound to see more, dozens have entered the caverns and never been seen again."

They weren't above looting the dead, but they had nothing worth taking. They moved on, through several more caverns that glittered with crystal ceilings. If they weren't on a mission for the King, they might have stopped and simply admired the beauty of some of the caves. They came to one cavern with at least six exits, all barely wider than their shoulders. Jongie used the feather, trying several exits a few times.

"It's a choice of two." He said. "We could try one, but they're both too narrow to turn round in."

Cal had looked uncomfortable in a few of the narrow passages and now he withdrew into a corner shaking his head.

"No, I'm not going." He said. "I'll take my chances going back to the camp on my own."

Mo had heard of people who couldn't tolerate confined spaces, but he'd never met any himself. The slums were nothing but confined spaces and he wondered why Cal hadn't been bothered by living four or more to a room.

"We'll rest here for a while." Said Mo. "It must be well into the afternoon."

Water wasn't going to be a problem, most of the caves had clean water running down the walls and it often fed large pools. Mo put his face deep into a pool and took a long drink of the cold, fresh water. Jongie and Nate dug out rations, but Cal just kept his back to a wall and looked terrified.

"I need help Cal." Said Mo. "Just give me your advice on the two exits."

At first Cal just looked at him, but then he moved, joining Mo at the first of the two potential exits that Jongie favoured. Mo took off his helmet, aiming the lamp down the passage.

"Well..... It looks..... wet." He said.

"No, look, there!" Said Cal.

He grabbed the lamp and shone it at some moss growing on the side and bottom of the narrow hole in the rock.

"That's flat moss." Said Cal. "It takes hundreds of years to grow and it hasn't been rubbed up against, ever! We know there are scavengers in the caves, but none have been this way."

"You're sure Cal?"

"I'm sure Mo."

They looked at the other passage and the flat moss had been rubbed away in places. Cal put his head into the passage and took a deep breath.

"It even smells fresher, you try."

Mo put his head into the passage and he too could smell a freshness that was impossible to define. He had to admit to himself, he might have been influenced by his friend's certainty.

"You need to go this way." Said Cal.

"We need to go this way. I need you Cal, only you can see the signs."

"I'm not sure Mo, supposing I freeze?"

"Then I'll jab you in the backside with my knife."

Call was chuckling now.

"Let me rest a while."

"Fine, I need something to eat and so do you."

Nearly two hours Mo gave them, using his own judgement of the time. Jongie led, with Cal following him and Mo behind Cal. The passage narrowed to a point where they had to slide their packs off and drag them, but Cal never did freeze up. He muttered and cursed, blaming Mo for dragging him into a hole in the ground, but they emerged unscathed into another large cavern. They carried on for another three hours or so and Mo began to gain a real faith in Cal and his nose.

"I tell you it's this way." Said Jongie.

Nate just sat on a stalagmite and let them get on with it.

"Nonsense, the fresher air is from this passage." Said Cal.

Mo looked at and stuck his nose into both and couldn't pick up any difference.

"We'll go with Cal's nose." Said Mo.

They emerged into a room with a narrow fissure that led to the surface and strange creatures with wings. The air smelt of animal dung and ammonia, enough to make Mo cough. He looked up and the ceiling was over a hundred feet above them and in the centre of it was a narrow fissure, a fracture, perhaps from an earthquake thousands of years before. It looked wide enough for someone to climb, but the distance it travelled was staggering. A good mile, maybe two, the fissure went straight up, allowing a narrow shaft of daylight to enter the cave. The tiny winged creatures moved about and were obviously agitated by their presence, but they didn't attack.

"Flying mice." Said Jongie. "I've head of them, but I've never seen them before. There used to be millions of them on Ixir, when the air was fresher."

"I thought it was late evening." Said Mo.

They were all huddled together in the pool of sunlight, the others looking at Mo for more explanation of what he meant.

"We must have walked right through the night." He said. "This is the next day. My judgement of time seems all over the place, down here."

"No wonder I feel so tired." Said Nate.

"We can't sleep here, it stinks." Said Mo. "We'll try the next cave we get to."

Mercifully the connecting passage was wide and high enough to walk through without stooping. Now he knew they'd gone a whole night without sleep, every step seemed agonising. The next large cave looked drier than most and there was a flattish area of rock at one side. Mo didn't announce they were sleeping there; he just threw down his pack and gave a long yawn.

"Dig out the oil lamps." He called. "No point in using the electric lamps while we sleep."

They rested against the cave walls, digging out rations and packs of the now highly salted DigDak meat. Mo cut of strips, smelling it and deciding it probably had another day, before even the salt couldn't make it edible.

"I think we should throw the rest of this meat out." Said Nate.

“There are slugs on the wall, blind mud fish in the pools and some of the algae are edible.” Said Mo. “We’ll more than likely be eating them eventually. So if you want to throw the DigDak meat away, feel free to do so.”

He smiled, as one by one, they looked at the slugs on the walls and repacked the meat.

“Rub in more salt.” Said Cal. “It’ll stop you getting bad guts.”

Nate put the lamps together, pumped up the pressure inside them and lit them. Once they’d turned off their helmet light, the cavern was lit by a flickering yellow glow. The light made every shadow look threatening and didn’t seem to penetrate the gloom at the far end of the cave.

“Imagine only having oil lamps.” Said Jongie.

“We’re lucky.” Said Cal. “Most will have come down here with old oil lamps and little food.”

“No wonder so few ever came back alive.” Added Nate.

Mo wrapped his thin bedroll around himself, still feeling every bump and ridge in the floor under him.

“Do you think we will Mo ?” Asked Nate. “Come out alive I mean ?”

“My mother keeps telling me I was born with some kind of prophecy from the gods. I never really believed her before, but I’m not sure now. I’m certain that they don’t want me to end my days in this place.”

“Did she mention me in this prophecy ?” Asked Cal.

They all laughed and then the cave was silent. Cal pumped up the lamps and turned them as low as they’d go and then they all settled down to sleep. Despite the lumps in the floor, Mo was asleep in seconds.

~ ~

He woke up once, noticed the light was sputtering and pumped more pressure into it. He then peed and went back to sleep. When he finally got out of his bedroll, it felt as though he’d been asleep for hours. Cal was at a pool, shoving his head under the water and washing as best he could. Mo only had one change of clothing and that was only for emergencies. He’d stink, but they’d all be stinking soon, so that was fine.

“Breakfast !” Shouted Cal.

He was holding a wriggling cave fish, it looked about as appetising as congealed mucus. As no one seemed interested, he dropped it back into the pond. Even Mo couldn’t face salted meat for breakfast, he dug into a pack of dried fruit and nuts. He watched in silence as they all washed and ate something. Cal turned on his helmet light and turned off the oil lamps, giving them a few minutes to cool down, before being packed away. The problem came when Nate turned on his light and nothing happened.

“I was worried about this.” Said Jongie.

He pulled back the plastic covering and fitted a new power pack and the light once again worked perfectly.

“Still not a real problem.” Said Jongie. “Even at this rate, we’ll still have enough power packs to last until we’re well past the point of starving.”

“Thanks Jongie, that cheered me up no end.” Said Mo.

Everything was packed away and they carried on for another two days, finally throwing away the DigDak meat on the second morning. Mo was beginning to believe in the prophecy his mother had told him, as every cavern had just the right exit and they found fresh water just when they needed it. The lights were even behaving and looked likely to last for weeks. Halfway through the day, or what Mo judged was a day, they found the room with over a dozen skeletons.

“One of them had a proper caving lamp.” Said Jongie.

They’d been expecting to find remains, the surprise had been that they’d found so few in the first two days. Every year saw groups setting off into the caverns, hundreds had disappeared over the years, maybe thousands.

“Anything to identify them ?” Asked Mo.

“No.” Said Cal. “The damp has destroyed their clothes and scavengers have scraped the bones clean.”

There was just a pile of bones and twelve skulls, they couldn’t even tell the sexes of the dead. A few decent steel knives had resisted decay, but there was nothing worth taking. It was unnerving to find a group of dead cavers, with equipment as modern as theirs. Someone had tried to carve something on the wall, maybe their initials, but it was just a meaningless scribble.

“Let’s keep moving.” Said Mo.

They moved on for another hour before stopping for lunch, but it might well have been the middle of the night outside. They worked to an unstated agreement, that time was according to Mo and it was a system that worked as well as any other. It was close to the end of their fifth day in the caverns, when they came to the hundred foot drop.

“Looks like a job for Jongie.” Said Nate.

Without the helmet lights, they might well have fallen over the edge of the sudden sheer drop. It was as if some mighty shift in the rocks had sheered part of the cave system, dropping it over a hundred feet deeper into the ground.

“See if there’s a way down, before we start using our rope.” Said Mo.

Jongie had the rope bag and they were all too aware of the dangers of it running out. They searched and found no way down, but Cal found several steel pegs hammered into cracks in the rock, with modern ropes attached to them.

“Manmade fibre rope,” said Jongie, “might be a year old or a hundred years. The stuff lasts forever.” He pulled at the ropes, twisting and tugging to see if the pegs could be budged.

“Solid,” he said, “no need to use our ropes.”

Mo looked over the edge, his lamp showing the ends of the ropes, curled up on the ground, a good hundred feet below them.

“You’re sure ?” He asked. “It looks a long way to fall !”

“I’m sure.”

“Fine then, you’re our experienced caver.”

There were three ropes, but they went down one at a time and the ropes held firm. The cave below was a mess, the titanic earthquake had split stalagmites and caused part of the ceiling to cave in. Instead of tidy, beautiful caverns, they faced a nightmare of jagged rubble and loose scree.

“Someone obviously found a path out of here.” Said Mo. “Search about for it.”

Cal found the hole with three bodies in it and the path that went past it and on into the rest of the cave system. Mo shone his light so that he could see the remains in the hole.

“They only had oil lamps.” Said Nate. “They must have simply not seen the hole.”

Mo began to sleep badly that night, their sixth night in the caverns. He was woken up by Cal pushing at his shoulder and he felt as though he’d only been asleep for an hour.

“Sorry Mo, we left you to sleep for as long as we could.”

He rubbed his eyes and looked about, wondering where he was for a second or so.

“What time is it ?” He asked.

Cal just shrugged. “Morning I guess.”

They carried on, finding bones and ruined equipment in every cave. The sheer number of dead had an effect on all of them, but something else was draining Mo, something he didn't understand. Even lunch had to be eaten in the company of a skull, leaning against the cavern wall.

"They must have started to starve." Said Cal.

"Or wandered about in the dark." Added Nate.

"We won't run out of light." Said Jongie. "As long as we aren't down here for months."

They were all looking at Mo, but he didn't have the energy to give them a rousing speech.

"I keep telling you," he said, "there is no need to starve in these caverns."

"I'm not eating mud fish, or slugs." Said Nate.

Mo put his pack on his back, noticing how it was much lighter than the day they'd started.

"You will." He Said. "Two days with nothing to eat and you'll think mud fish taste better than best steak."

He began to walk towards the passage to the next cavern, but the others weren't moving.

"What is the plan?" Asked Jongie. "To keep going until we're left in the dark, eating slugs and going crazy?"

"Shut up Jongie!" Shouted Nate.

"Ask him!" Shouted Mo, pointing at the skull. "He knew, they all knew. Whatever is hidden here is hidden deep, probably in the last cave in the deepest level."

Mo moved off and they followed him, but he knew Jongie was going to be the one, the one to try to and kill him. That night things were tense, they all opened their last pack of rations and said little.

"Are you ok Mo?" Asked Cal. "You seemed a bit pre-occupied today."

"You must feel it?!" Barked Mo. "Didn't you see the claw marks on the wall? A dying man had tried to crawl in the darkness, still obsessed with finding it."

They were all wanting to look at Mo, but not be obvious about it and then look at each other.

"You may not feel it, but it's changing us all!"

They left him alone after that, though he saw Jongie looking at him and whispering to Cal. Mo made sure his dagger was loose in its scabbard and tried to stay awake. How could he explain to them how he felt? Cal came and sat next to him, almost whispering.

"Perhaps we should stay here for a day?" He asked. "Give you a chance to rest."

"I'll be ok Cal, I'm just having my moment in the narrow passage. I never believed we'd find a real treasure, something genuinely legendary. But it's there, I know it is, It's been pulling at me ever since we climbed down those ropes."

"What do you think it is?"

"I have no idea. All my life I've joked about my mother and her crazy talk. Now it looks like she was right and I really am cursed by some sort of holy prophesy. It ruins everything I had planned."

"I can see that would take some getting used to."

Mo slept and the next day they went through their morning routine, Mo leading them into yet another passage in the rock. An hour later they reached a point where the passage descended into deep, dark, and cold water.

~ ~

It was a shock, coming to what was effectively a dead end. There was a single dead adventurer leaning against the wall, reduced to a few bones and an ancient oil lamp. Mo walked several feet into the cold water, ducking his head below the surface. Shaking the water from his hair, before he re-joined the others.

"We can swim it." He said. "It can't be far to the next cave."

"That'll be flooded." Said Jongie. "We've given it our best Mo, we have to go back."

"I'm not even a good swimmer." Added Nate.

Mo ignored them, taking off his trousers and untying the straps that held his legs rigid and gave him a fairly normal walk. Cal had seen the strange legs with their double knees before, but the others gasped.

"So you're going on then ?" Asked Cal.

"I have no option."

He'd been loosening the straps at night, but it had been some time since his legs and joints had moved properly. He paced up and down the passage, sometimes letting his legs extend, greatly increasing his height. He was pleased that his companions looked more curious than horrified.

"I can swim fast." Said Mo. "I'll leave you all the remaining rations and just take my own helmet light."

Cal began to go through his pack, throwing away just about everything heavy. Oil lamp, small rock hammer, spare shoes, it all went into a heap in the passage.

"I'll go with you." He said.

"You're both crazy !" Shouted Jongie.

"Then I'm crazy too." Said Nate.

He too began to empty his pack and get ready to swim into the flooded passage. Jongie said nothing, but he began to go through his own things and the heap of discarded equipment became quite a large pile.

"We'll need one oil lamp." Said Mo. "In case our electric lamps are ruined by the water."

Cal nodded and put an oil lamp back in his pack. They wrapped the remaining dry rations in as much plastic as they had and ended up with almost empty back packs.

"I'll swim to the other side, dump my things and then help the rest of you." Said Mo.

"You're certain there is another side ?" Asked Cal.

Mo stared at the water, knowing it was just a flooded section, but not knowing where the knowledge came from.

"Yes." He said. "It's just a fifty foot section of the passage, then it's dry again. Swim hard and you'll easily get to the other side."

Mo was looking at the water, something about the way it moved troubled him. It seemed to have a current, which meant a link to an underground river.

"Don't get confused by side passages." He said. "Just follow me."

He made sure they were moving towards the water and then Mo dived deep into water, using his powerful legs to propel himself forwards. He saw a fissure in the wall to his right, the current gaining strength as he passed it. Then a hole just below him, the current tugging at him, trying to pull him down. He kicked hard and up, finding the dry section of the passage fairly easily. He'd just dropped his sodden pack, when Cal appeared, breathing heavily.

"There's something down there Mo, something huge !"

Mo noticed Cal's light was flashing and playing up.

"Light the oil lamp, I'll go back for them." Said Mo.

He was back in the water and kicking hard, seeing a light not far off. It was Jongie with something long and shiny attached to his arm. It was a fish of some kind, but long, with eyes that glinted in his light. Mo struck out at the creature, cutting it in two and getting a view of its razor sharp teeth. Mo pulled at Jongie, but he had several of the creature attached to his back and he was struggling too much to swim. Mo sliced through them all, watching out for more of the brutes, as he pulled Jongie

towards the dry passage. He had Jongie out of the water and propped him against the wall, preparing to go back in and find Nate.

“What is it down there ?” Asked Cal.

“Fish of some kind, lots of them, all with lots of nasty teeth.”

Mo swam fast, his own light was flashing. The plastic wrapping, that had proved itself to be reliable, obviously couldn't cope with being underwater. Mo swung his dagger at an approaching fish, cutting it in two and swimming on. He saw an arm, it had to be Nate. Lots of the creatures were on him, pulling him down and towards the hole in the passage floor. Mo almost had a hand on Nate, but his light went out, leaving him in complete darkness.

He couldn't see the fish, but they knew where he was. They were all over him, dragging him down. Mo struck out, cutting through their bodies, using his other hand to rip their jaws out of his flesh. He rammed himself against the wall, killing a few of the creatures on his back and dislodging others. He kicked out and swam towards the welcoming glow of Cal's oil lamp. More of them were on his legs, once again pulling him down. Mo swiped out blindly with his dagger, feeling the pain as he cut into his own leg. Their grip lessened though and he was once again in the dry passage, one of the monstrous fish in his hand.

“Kill it Mo !” Shouted Jongie. “Kill the damn thing !”

Mo dug his dagger into its head and then threw the fish into the water behind him, watching the water boil as the dead creature became a meal for its friends. Mo sat on the ground, looking at the wound in his leg, but thinking of Nate.

“Did you find him ?” Asked Cal.

“There were dozens on him, dragging him down. My light failed, but he must have been dead.”

They all just sat there, watching the fish writhing about in the water, searching for something to kill.

“We'll have to go back that way.” Said Cal.

“It'll be better going back.” Said Mo. “We'll be expecting them.”

Jongie was the first to make himself busy, stripping their lights down, leaving the parts to dry. Mo unwrapped their rations, finding everything sodden and hoping it all dried before it rotted. They undressed as much as the cold would allow and sat shivering in the dull lamp light. It was too early for bed, but they all fell asleep where they sat. Mo woke with his joints aching from the cold, the wound in his leg healed up to just a nasty looking scab. Not far away, Jongie was whispering to Cal and nodding in Mo's direction.

~ ~

Their electric lights worked, once they'd had a night to dry out. Breakfast was whatever they could salvage from their sodden rations and they were then out of food. Mo dressed, noticing that his clothes were dry enough to wear, but still felt like putting on a damp towel. Mo led, getting to the end of the passage and stopping, unable to fully believe what he was seeing.

“Stairs !” Exclaimed Cal. “Are we there Mo ?”

“I'm not sure, but I feel we're getting close.”

Stairs led down to a wide passage that looked constructed, but not by men. The stairs were too spaced out for human legs, the stone handrails slightly too high. They climbed awkwardly down the stairs and into a chamber of worn statues and cracked paving.

“It looks old,” said Jongie, “very old.”

Mo looked at the nearest statue, its face ruined by millennia of water erosion. He recognised the shape, the four elongated arms, the squat legs.

"It's a shrine of some kind." Said Mo. "These are the old gods, the ones my mother described to me. They still worship them in parts of the south."

The others were exploring, but not wandering too far away. The statue in front of Mo wasn't of Nethesta, but the body was similar. He drifted from statue to statue, wondering if the people who'd created the shrine had looked like the statues. People did tend to create their gods in their own image. Deep in concentration he wandered towards the end of the chamber and found the massive doorway.

"Over here !" He shouted. "I think we've found it !"

Cal ran to him, looking straight at Mo.

"Found what ?" Asked Cal.

Then he too noticed the fifty foot high set of double doors. One was hanging at an odd angle, leaning against the wall, but the other was still there, slightly ajar.

"I knew I should have brought a camera." Said Jongie.

On the door still standing was an intricate carving of Nethesta herself, surrounded by the other old gods. She almost seemed to be looking down on the three people of Ixir, who'd come seeking her treasure.

"It's in there, has to be." Said Mo.

They walked through the open doorway and into a large chamber, lined in what had once been white marble. Now the walls were stained from water seepage, whole sections of tiles had fallen away. In front of them was a sitting statue of Nethesta, which almost reached the ceiling above. Mo walked forward, noticing the open stone containers, where the faithful had once placed offerings. They were empty and the dust around them looked undisturbed.

"I was worried this place might have been wrecked." He said. "It seems the vicious fish and the flooded chamber stopped anyone else from getting here."

"There doesn't seem anything to loot." Said Cal.

Mo walked to the foot of the statue and put his hand on the huge marble hand of Nethesta. He wouldn't kneel, it wasn't in his nature, but he lowered his gaze.

"Thank you Nethesta." He said. "For helping my mother at the hour of my birth."

He turned and noticed something glinting in the container for offerings. It had been empty, he was certain, yet now something sparkled in the light from his caving lamp. He put his hand into the trough like container and pulled out just the sort of thing he'd been hoping to find. He spun around, finally believing.

"Thank you Nethesta."

He held an amulet on a golden chain and in the centre of the amulet was a diamond, big as baby's fist.

"Now !" Shouted Jongie.

Jongie's dagger went into his back and it went in deep. Mo staggered, feeling the steel twist as it dug into his back. He fell forward, looking up and seeing nothing but hatred in Jongie's face. Jongie pulled the blade out and up, readying himself to stab Mo again. Then Cal was there, grabbing Jongie's arm and pulling it back. With his other hand, Cal used his own blade, stabbing time after time into Jongie's stomach and then another dozen times into his chest. By the time he let go of Jongie and let him fall to the ground, there was no life left in him.

"Sorry Mo, I didn't expect him to act so soon."

Mo leant on the offering trough, coughing up blood.

"I'm just glad you didn't decide to join him." Said Mo.

“After all we’ve been through !”

Cal was giving him a worried look, but Mo didn’t think the dagger had touched his heart.

“I’ll either be dead in the morning, or able to leave here.” Said Mo. “If I die, promise me you’ll get the amulet to Denzu.”

Cal picked the amulet up from where Mo had dropped it, admiring it, before handing it back to Mo.

“Of course I will, but you need to survive. I’m not sure if I can handle those fish on my own.”

Cal stood and grabbed Jongie by the heels, pulling his body to the far end of the chamber, pushing it behind a pile of debris from a ceiling collapse. Mo examined the amulet, noticing an inscription in a language he doubted anyone on Ixir could still speak, including him.

“It’s beautiful.” Said Cal.

“It is, perfect. Just the sort of thing King Denzu was hoping for.... and it wasn’t there when we entered this room. Make of that, what you will.”

Mo felt sleepy and lost consciousness. When he woke, the oil lamp was set at its lowest setting and Cal was asleep. He moved and the pain in his back was still bad, but manageable.

“At least I still live.” He muttered.

“Indeed you do Mo !”

He pulled his wound, spinning to see who’d spoken. It was a child, a girl of no more than twelve or so and human. There was something odd about her though, she seemed slightly indistinct as she walked into his view.

“I’m not awake yet Mo..... Did you like the amulet ?”

“Errrr yes, Denzu will love it.”

“Good.”

She walked towards him, her feet not quite touching the floor as she walked. She knelt in front of him and he could see the oil lamp through her. Her eyes were what he remembered forever, the intensity of their gaze.

“We’ll be good friends one day Mo..... Will you do me a favour ?”

He was usually good with random behaviour, it tended to be the norm in the slums, but he was still half asleep and his back felt like it was on fire.

“Yes, of course..... anything.”

“When Miram dies, take her ashes to a temple of Nethesta, you’re sure to find one in the south. It’ll mean so much to both of them. Promise me you’ll do it.”

“I promise, it’ll be done.”

Her hand reached for his and for a fraction of a second, he felt her hand against his. His back no longer burned and he felt better than he had for some time.

“If I was awake..... I could do more.” She said.

“Thank you, who are you ?” He asked.

“Oh, you’ll know who I am one day, we’ll be great friends. We might, just might save the entire multiverse.”

She was fading away, drifting away from him like morning mist.

“Do you want to know what it says on the amulet ?”

“Yes.”

“The gods are sleeping, but not forever – Estrid Okanan.”

~ ~

They did manage to escape the caverns, though they both got to know the flavour of mud fish, far too well for their liking. King Denzu was extremely happy with the amulet, but he only gave Mo half

the gold he'd promised him. There was nothing personal in it and no insult intended, it was just the way of things in the slums. No one else bothered to try their luck in the caverns and Mo never mentioned his conversation with the young girl. Once, he did mention the name of Estrid Okanan to a temple cleric. The man had become angry, very angry.

"What right has such as you to name the greatest of all the gods?"

Mo kept quiet after that, but twenty years later he did keep his promise. Miram had died from a particularly virulent strain of the usual season flu. Cal was still around and helping Mo run his slum runner business.

"I have a promise to keep. I should only be away for a few weeks." Mo had told him.

Mo travelled far to the south, splashing out on the fare for a tourist shuttle to the forests of Ixir-Strens continent. He found a temple of Nethesta that still had a regular congregation and he stood in line, to offer his mother's ashes to the high priestess.

"I'll take that."

She was young and dressed in the heavy robes of a senior cleric. Mo thought nothing of it, until she placed Miram's urn on the shrine. Not on the shelf where the public ashes go, but on the top shelf, the shelf kept for the rich, the powerful and elders of the temple. She turned towards him and he recognised the eyes, their intensity. Mo nodded at her and mouthed the words;

'Thank you.'

~ ~

-The End-

© Ed Cowling – October 2015