

# Making the Crossing

A short story by [Trevor Hopkins](#)

It had been a time of plenty. The winter snows had melted early this year, and the herds of deer had flourished and grown fat. The partridges and rabbits seemed to bound into the traps wherever they were placed, the soft leaves and nourishing roots had been found in abundance ripe for the taking, and all could see that the nuts and seeds and summer fruits were ripening for a plentiful harvest.

A Midsummer Candidature had been commanded by the Shaman of the Seven Tribes, as sometimes happened in bountiful years. From each Tribe, a carefully selected few were to attend at the ancient meeting place marked by a vast standing stone. This stark monolith was said to be visible for miles over the windswept plains on the coast of the Inner Sea, its dull grey surface etched with runes so old that none could now comprehend their import.

The Wise Ones of each Tribe selected a single Candidate from the bravest and most skilful of the young men. The Candidate must have completed the coming-of-age ceremony, with its night-long vigil and solemn vows, but must not yet be married – although I would wager a fine fat coney that, for one selected for this particular honour, the tribal matchmakers and Elder women would already be recommending betrothals to parents and blood relations.

I had been selected as our Tribe's Candidate after an exhausting series of tests and evaluations by the Elders, lasting for fully three phases of the moon. The morning of my departure was marked by a short ceremony, in which the Tribal chief exhorted me to uphold the honour of our Tribe and the memories of our ancestors. By the time I set off, my head was spinning and ears were full of the sage advice and ancient wisdom so carefully imparted.

The Candidate must have an escort, it seemed. In any case, our party consisted of Atilen, one of the more spry Elders of the tribe, escorted by Krakaren, one of the most experienced hunters now acting as our Guide and who, it was said, might join the ranks of the Elders one day, and myself, the Candidate from the Mountain Lakes Tribe. After an easy journey, our small party arrived at the camp on the plain

by the sea before evening on the eighth day. We were the last to arrive, and tents were already being set up in a large circle around the standing stone. The gap where we should pitch up was plain to see.

Aliten had instructed us that the protocol was that we should keep ourselves very much to ourselves on this first evening. We soon set up our own bender lodge, cutting flexible branches from the birch trees nearby and covering it with the deerskins brought with us for this purpose, and refreshed ourselves with a modest meal of game and roots around a little cooking fire. Aliten further advised that we should all take to our beds early for tomorrow, he said, would be long and full.

As all know, at this time of the year the sun only really sinks below the horizon for an hour in the middle of the night. With the habit of long practice, I employed a simple mantra to draw a calming veil over my mind. I slept well enough and emerged from my sleeping furs feeling refreshed and alert.

As I and my tribal companions were consuming a breakfast of porridge and dried meat, a runner appeared with a message. I was immediately summoned to attend the Shaman of the Seven Tribes. I bolted down the rest of my food and set off apace for the Gathering grounds, set at the very foot of the ancient monolith itself.

As I hurried up, slightly out of breath, I could see that the other Candidates had already arrived and were standing in front of a tier of seating carved from the rocks that formed the foundations of the standing stone itself. At the apex of the seating sat a wiry old man, grey-bearded and bald, wrapped in voluminous furs of great rarity and beauty. His eyes were bright and his movements firm and precise, despite his reputedly great age. It was the Shaman himself, I had been assured, and he was surrounded left and right on progressively lower seats by his advisors, the Elders, and flanked by a coterie of servants at ground level.

I did not know any of the other Candidates, of course, having never before ventured from my Tribe's homeland in all of my fifteen years. Politely, I stood upright and held up my open palm in the traditional greeting of strangers. My greeting was returned by the others, in some cases slightly diffidently or perhaps with a degree of nonchalant pride.

In short order, the Candidates were drawn together into a line and scrutinized one at a time, the Shaman himself and his coterie of advisors having descended from their eyrie for this purpose. In turn,

we were each examined closely as the party of Elders passed along the line, each of us inspected and assessed and even prodded with much the air of one examining a particularly fine deer.

After the inspection, the Shaman slowly returned to his seat, clambering steadily up the worn stones, then stood, turning to left and right until there was silence from the groups gathered below. He clapped his hands three times and spoke in a loud voice, declaring for all to hear that the Selection of the Questors had begun.

Throughout that long day, I found myself in tests and trials, constantly measured against the other Candidates in sports and competitions of all kinds. First, we were taken one at a time to stand before the ranked stone seats. When I was my turn, I was questioned closely on my knowledge of the world, beset with riddles and made to undertake tests of my learning and reason.

Later, there was a running race on a route that passed from the monolith itself to a boulder at the edge of the beach and back again. There was the throwing of heavy stones and the lifting of even heavier ones. There was even a series of wrestling bouts; for the most part, I managed to retain my footing and fling a few of the other Candidates out of the circle, although I was of course thrown myself a time or two. At other times, our hunting skills were assessed: the throwing of spears and the setting of traps, as well as gauging our proficiency with bow and arrow shooting at distant targets.

All of these competitions and assessment were performed under the watchful eyes of the Shaman and his coterie of advisors. It was also observed, in silence and at a respectful distance, by my companions and those of the other Candidates.

The sun was sinking low by the time I was released from the events and was able to return mentally and physically exhausted to my companions. I was allowed to rest in our little camp for a time but, when it was nearly fully dark, I was required to join the Shaman's acolytes and the parties of the other Candidates for the evening meal around a blazing campfire almost in the shadow of the brooding monolith itself.

A feast had been prepared with great care and skill by some of the Shaman's servants. The Candidates were offered the choicest cuts of venison and the most tender of the roots and leaves, second only to the Shaman and the Elders, of course.

Later on, one of the servants produced a water-skin, which was presented to one of the Candidates on the other side. It was passed around the circle of firelight, each person in the party taking a sip or two before passing it on. I thought little of it, until the skin was passed to me. The pungent smell when I un-stoppered the little sack made my eyes water immediately. I drank as little as I felt I could get away with, even so having to resist the sudden urge to cough and splutter.

The skin did not contain water at all, but the fiery liquor known as Aile, made from fruits and seeds by a secret and arcane process known only to a very few. I had heard about this drink, and its intoxicating effects, but this was the first time I had been privileged to consume it myself. Following the advice of my tribe's Elders, and that of my Father, I again sipped cautiously at the potent liquid, before carefully re-sealing the skin and handing it on to the next Candidate's party. My actions were observed, I was sure of it, with a certain amount of approval by the Shaman himself.

Once the meal had been prepared and consumed, each of the Candidates was called upon in turn to recount a tale from the Old Stories, the ancient shared histories of the Seven Tribes. This too, it seemed, was one of the assessments. Each candidate stood and spoke aloud, recounting the story required of him.

When my turn came, I was instructed to tell the fable of the Darkening of Days. This was one of the direst of the ancient legends, and one which had given me many nightmares as a small child. This story told how the Great Tribes of All the World had long ago made war against each other, sundering the sky and poisoning the land until the power and influence of each had been obliterated by the other. But they had not ceased their battles or their destruction until nearly all of their peoples had been killed and the few that remained fled into the wildernesses and wastelands.

My performance was met with approving nods and glances in my direction by many of the tribes-people gathered around the fire, and it seemed that even the Shaman himself was not totally dissatisfied by my rendition.

After the story-telling, there was little for me to do. I sat by the fire in companionable near-silence with Krakaren, while Aliten went to meet with the leaders and Wise Ones of the other tribes. Long into the night did these elders converse and debate, observing and occasionally pointing out the young men sat around in the firelight. Outside of the Elders' circle, too, there was much speculation upon which of the

candidates would be selected. From what I could overhear, it was difficult to tell the opinions informed by carefully considered wisdom from the idle gossip of the ignorant and jealous.

It had been very late before I had returned with my companions to our camp and the welcoming embrace of my sleeping furs. I slept late, and was still groggy when the summons again came from the Elders' circle. The Candidates were now required to sit together, separated from their companions, and await the Shaman's pleasure. I was again watched from a distance by my silent companions and those of the other young men.

Custom and law dictated that just three of the Candidates would be selected to accompany the Shaman himself, on a mysterious quest whose nature was the stuff of legends and fireside stories. After a period that seemed interminable, but was probably less than a thousand heartbeats, the Shaman, flanked by three of the Elders, approached the place at the fire where the Candidates waited with barely-concealed impatience.

All scrambled to their feet as the older men approached, making the ritual signs of obeisance. With a few gestures and fewer words, the Shaman gathered us all together in a loose group in front of him. There had been no opportunity, or more likely a deliberate attempt to prevent the Candidates from learning each other's names. So it was a surprise when, without preamble, the old man spoke a name in a loud clear voice.

“Bengart!”

A large and muscular young man to my left, one of the few I had been unable to throw in the wrestling matches, let out a huge roar and punched at the air. His distant companions echoed his cry, rending the air with their cheers and applause.

The Shaman waited patiently for silence, then spoke again.

“You, Hantorg.”

The old man pointed at a slender wiry adolescent, one who was particularly skilled with bow and arrow, and whose withdrawn and taciturn nature seemed at odds with his youthful appearance. Hantorg stood quietly, acknowledging the restrained cries of approval from his companions with a single nod of his head.

“And you, Garat.”

I started at the sound of my own name, surprised to find everyone looking in my direction. I blinked and looked around, unsure of how to react to this singular honour. In all honesty I did not truly expect to be selected for this great compliment. I had already recognised that I was neither the biggest nor the strongest of the Candidates. I was not the fastest at the hunt or the most accurate with bow or spear or harpoon. Exactly what characteristic the Wise Ones saw in me, what facet of my meagre abilities had attracted their attention, I was unable to fathom.

Nevertheless, it seemed to be true. Krakaren was making enough noise for ten men, and even old Aliten was cheering unrestrainedly. We were released by the Shaman with a single wave of his hand, and I stood and made my way towards my companions. I was slapped on the back, and loudly and heartily congratulated by my own companions, and less effusively by those of the unsuccessful Candidates.

I walked in a daze, unsure what was expected of me now. Fortunately, and seeing my confusion, Aliten took me on one side, and explained in low and hurried tones what was expected of me now. It seemed that the three Questors, as we were now to be known, had a short period to gather together their travelling packs and then meet, ready for a long trek, at the foot of the ancient monolith.

As I approached the standing stone, I could see around me that camps were already being struck; those whose Candidates had not been amongst those selected were packing up and making ready to leave. My own companions would wait for me, although I had heard that if I had not returned after three phases of the moon had turned then they should depart for home, taking with them the news of my death.

I could see my soon-to-be companions converging on a spot by the hulking monument. Just before we met, the Shaman emerged, suddenly standing before us, although exactly where he had emerged from was not at all obvious. He was alone, without the coterie of advisors and hangers-on I had come to expect, and carried a small travelling back-pack.

Bengart approached the old man respectfully.

“Let me carry your pack for you, Father,” he beseeched, using the honorific sometimes used for the most venerated of the Elders.

“Hah,” the Shaman responded in a direct and surprisingly down-to-earth way, “I’m still perfectly capable of carrying my share, thank you very much.”

So saying, he shouldered his pack, turned on his heel and set off in the direction of the Outer Ocean. He stopped after ten paces or so and looked back at us, all still standing dumbfounded at the meeting-place.

“Come along then,” he urged, “We’ve a long walk in front of us.”

I and the other Questors hurried to catch up with the old man who, despite his years, set a fast pace along the trail that skirted the high-water mark on the strand.

The next few days in the company of the old man proved to be an unexpected and ultimately enlightening experience. I would soon observe that Shaman of the Seven Tribes was not as formal and certainly not as circumspect in his speech and manners as I had been taught to expect, at least in comparison with the leaders of my own Tribe and, I inferred from the reaction of my young comrades, from their Elders either. It was all quite a contrast to the remote and taciturn individual who had addressed us from his high seat at the monolith.

To my surprise, I found the old man was ready enough to answer questions put directly to him, although I would soon learn that foolish enquiries would be treated with the harsh contempt that they no doubt deserved. But he remained silent on one topic: what was our destination.

From the sun and the stars, I could tell we were heading approximately south-west, in the direction of the great ocean at the edge of the world, beyond which there is nothing. We were following the coastline as far as possible, traversing an area not populated by any of the Tribes, a region of stunted trees separated by open areas of sparse grasses and sandy dunes. The wind blew incessantly from the sea, making it feel cool even at this season.

We saw few signs of game and there was little to forage, even in this time of plenty. With good fortune, I was able to trap a coney or two, and Hantorg managed to bring down a partridge with bow and arrow, so we did not go hungry at our evening meals and we did not have to break into the dried rations in our packs. I would later discover that we would need those supplies for the Crossing itself.

Over the next few days and nights, I learned something about my companions. To my surprise, I discovered that their lives and tribal

upbringing was nearly indistinguishable from my own. The tales that they had learned and the daily routines that they followed were, for the most part, entirely familiar to me.

Even so, I became aware of differences between their way of life and that of my own tribe, as my companions spoke of the different animals that they tracked and the lands that they lived upon. Bengart, from the Tribe of the Frozen Sea, told of the herds of reindeer and elk they hunted, and the feasts and celebrations which accompanied a successful hunt. Hantorg, of the Tribe of the Rushing Waters, spoke of the salmon and trout that they fished from the streams and rivers, and the waterfowl they stalked from the water's edge.

I could also observe the two other Questors and I came to my own conclusions of their strengths and weaknesses. For all his height and strength, Bengart tired easily, often showing signs of exhaustion at the end of the day's march while the rest of us were still fresh enough. Hantorg could keep up the pace but, for all his skills with bow and trap, he was weak, struggling to move branches or lift rocks which I could manage with one hand.

Hantorg was sharply alert, though, pointing out trail sign and animal spoor that even I would have had difficulty reading. He was so lacking in any kind of imagination, seeming to be so intensely aware of the real and physical world around him that he was unable to imagine anything that was not present in front of him. Bengart, by contrast, was stolid and phlegmatic by nature, always ready to believe whatever proposition or story was put to him, no matter how improbable or inconsistent that might be.

On the evening of our second night, after we had eaten our fill, the Shaman told the story of the Great Bridge, a story I had heard around campfires since before I could run. This tale told of the industry of the Ancients, and their machines and engines, and their desire to demonstrate their superiority over everything and everyone.

One faction commanded the construction of a crossing over the ocean, at the very mouth of the Inner Sea where it joined with the Outer Ocean. With immense labour, and the use of their most puissant machines, this faction built a bridge, so long that it was said to extend beyond the horizon and so high above the waves so that a man could cross dry-shod even in the winter storms.

Many people passed over the bridge, some marvelling at the might and complexity of its construction, but others - a majority, in later

times - took it to be a symbol of pride and were jealous of its makers. During the wars at the Darkening of Days, other factions attempted to destroy the Great Bridge. They failed, although their destructive devices fell all around and obliterated many a village and settlement. The Great Bridge remained, and some say that it stands even to this day.

After the conclusion of this tale, I suddenly realised where we were going, why we were travelling across this inhospitable and nearly barren wasteland where little grows and scant game is to be found.

“Father, are we heading for the Great Bridge?” I asked politely.

The old man grunted with what I took to be approval.

“That is the first step to our destination,” he replied, “And we will be making the crossing together.”

“And what will we find there?” I pressed.

The Shaman shook his head, declining to answer my question.

Our first view of the ancient Bridge was from a high headland delineated by crumbling cliffs on our left. A series of tall pillars strode across the sea, shining brightly in the morning sunlight, and were linked by horizontal sections which seemed impossibly flimsy, although I realised they must be very strong to have survived all this time. I could not see the far end of the crossing, even from our vantage-point; the end of the bridge disappeared into the haze at the horizon.

We lost sight of the bridge for a time as we marched on, but by the afternoon, we could see enough of the Great Bridge to study it more closely. I could now see that the great pillars were stained and cracked by the actions of wind and waves, and the vast spans between them stained with red markings and, in a few places, twisted and bent like the windswept branches of trees on hillsides exposed to the winds. Even so, it did appear to be possible to traverse the ancient structure, although I began to realise that the crossing would not be entirely straightforward.

That evening, we set up camp in a sheltered spot - the winds from the ocean had been getting steadily stronger as we made our way to the west - in a tiny valley marked by a stream, no more than an hour's walk from the point, I judged, where the final spans of the bridge met the coastline. Once again, we were successful in our hunting and foraging. I trapped another rabbit - one of the few creatures which

seemed to prosper in these windswept dunes - and Hantorg found some early berries in a hidden glade not far from our camp. We made a small fire, prepared our meal and ate in silence.

Finally, the Shaman tossed aside the bone he had been gnawing and cleared his throat.

“Tomorrow we cross,” he said sombrely, “And I wish to speak some words of advice.”

I sat quietly and listened intently, as I had been taught.

“There will be little or no water on the crossing, especially in this season,” the old man warned, “So it is necessary to carry it with you. And I hope you all have much food in your packs?”

He looked around quizzically. I nodded, as did my young companions.

“We will not eat anything that lives or grows on the Bridge,” the old man resumed, “Men have gone mad, or sickened and died, after consuming forage or game caught on the crossing itself.”

He paused again, looking at each of us in turn

“You must follow my instructions with great care. There are other dangers in our path, some less than apparent to those who have not seen them before. You must heed my words!”

He said no more, but rolled himself into his sleeping furs and fell asleep.

The following morning we set off, following the Shaman’s directions and making our way inland. We filled our water-skins from the stream nearby, being sure to trace the flow far enough from the sea to avoid brackish water.

It was not long before we were approaching the point where the spans of the bridge reached the coast itself. For a period, we walked alongside a vertical rock face, ribbed at intervals about twice the width of my palm. I ran my hand over it; it seemed to be made of the same stone as the monolith at the meeting-place.

“How was this made?” I asked, ever curious.

The Shaman had an answer for me, of course.

“The Old Ones had a way of making rocks liquid - like wet mud - then forming it into shapes and making it hard again.”

I nodded, realising that this stone face and the monolith were both constructions of the Ancients, using whatever arcane arts they had for cutting and forming the solid rock.

We reached the end of the vertical face, and made our way up a steep bank, forcing a passage between the birch saplings which cluttered the route. As we scrambled to the top, we were presented with a smooth flat surface dotted with mosses and plants in places, although dry and brown in this season for the most part. Elsewhere, the dark grey surface lay unbroken, or pocked with holes, or bubbled up as if it had somehow been liquefied.

“This way,” the Shaman said, indicating the path that led out over the sea.

The bridge was thirty paces wide, the edges marked in places by poles made not of wood but by a strange material I had not seen before, cold and hard and frequently scabbed with red patches.

“This is iron,” the Shaman said, “Trust it not. It may seem solid and strong but it etches away in the winter weather, and may give way without warning.”

I looked over the side, taking care not to touch the poles. The sky above and below was alive with seabirds, wheeling and screaming as they searched for scraps to eat, or returned to their roosts on the sides of the great structure itself. Far below, the waves were breaking on the rocks, their tops whipped into whitecaps by the winds from the outer ocean.

It was an easy walk, for the most part. The sun was shining, although the wind kept us cool enough as we marched. The Shaman occasionally pointed out areas where it was not safe to tread. In truth, they were fairly obvious: vast cracks in the ancient surface which we skirted carefully or areas buckled and sloping, slippery with moss and bird droppings where it was necessary to grip carefully with hands and feet.

After more than two hours, we reached a point where the surface fell away in front of us. There was a huge chunk missing from one of the spans, as if bitten away by a giant. Our party came to a halt right on the edge. I expected to see nothing below other than the distant waves, but in fact a tumble of broken rocks and twisted beams of iron lay on another surface less than ten paces below. It seemed that the ancient bridge had a second level, a lower shelf under the surface we had been walking upon.

“This fell down many years ago,” the Shaman said, “In the time of my grandfather’s grandfather.”

“But how do we cross?” Bengart asked, rather plaintively.

“This way,” the old man said.

We made our way back from the chasm, thirty or more paces to a place right on the edge of the bridge. There was, I could see, a way down to the darkened lower level: a lattice framework twisted its way downwards, made of the untrustworthy iron heavily mottled with red blotches.

“We need to be careful here,” the Shaman pronounced, “We must tread lightly, and go one at a time. I will go first.”

So saying, he worked his way down, testing each step carefully and holding onto the rails on either side. He achieved the lower level without mishap.

“Very good,” came the voice of the Shaman, “Who’s next?”

Hantorg was, his feet moving quickly and lightly on the slippery iron latticework. He was followed by Bengart, moving stolidly as always but, perhaps a little too quickly. Before I could shout to warn him, he slipped on the iron framework. As he put out his hand to catch himself, the railing gave way, one end snapping away from its fixing like a rotten twig and the other bending with a sickening creak. He looked up at me as he toppled over the edge, a look of horror on his face as he fell the thirty paces to the waves below.

There was nothing for it. I made my way down, slowly, skirting past the opening where Bengart had fallen. I was shaking by the time I made it to the lower level. Hantorg also looked green, and even the gnarled face of the Shaman himself was twisted with grief.

“Bengart was a good man,” the old man intoned, “He will be remembered.”

Provided, I thought to myself, that we return to our tribes to remember him.

We picked our way over the fallen debris on the lower level, then walked more easily further along the irregular surface. It was gloomy under the roof, which was evidently the roost of numerous bats and birds, the ground made slippery and the air foetid by their guano.

The bridge had been built with two levels, although why this was so escaped me. Perhaps those of an inferior class were required to

walk the lower level, I considered as I marched along following the others - now one fewer - in my party. I asked the Shaman this question. To my immense surprise, he looked confused, even mortified, at the question.

“I do not know,” he replied softly.

We found a second stairwell and way back to the upper level without further incident. It was late afternoon by the time we descended from the bridge onto solid ground. I soon realised that the island that was the endpoint of the Great Bridge was really not very large: perhaps a hundred paces wide and ten times that in length. around us I could hear the lapping of the waves against the sand and rocks of the beach - gentle, even soporific in this season, but I imagined that the winds and waves would lash this tiny island unmercifully during the winter months.

“Why did the ancients build this structure - just to reach this tiny island?” I asked, my curiosity once again getting the better of me.

The Shaman chuckled, possibly to himself

“So many questions,” he said, “It is not the end of the original crossing, but it is as far as we can travel nowadays.”

The old man explained that part of the original crossing had been a great passageway under the sea. He pointed out a curious rectangular lake at one end of the island, filled with sea water, which was once the entrance to the undersea tunnel. The ancients built this entire island just to join the bridge and the tunnel together.

I was astounded once more at the powers the ancients were able to wield.

“But why?” I asked, “Why not just continue the bridge all the way across?”

The Shaman knew the answer to this one, too. Then, as now, the great whales migrate from the Inner Sea to the Outer Ocean through these straights. The ancients believed that a bridge over the entire length would disturb these great animals, and instead built a tunnel under the channel used for the migration.

We set up our evening camp in a sheltered spot protected from the winds by the bulwarks of the Great Bridge itself. I beach-combed for a while, finding enough driftwood to make a small fire, but I was really exploring the bounds of this little island. Around the campfire

and over that evening's meal - no hunting this day - the Shaman explained the purpose of our pilgrimage.

"This is a ritual, a coming of age for those who might just become the future leaders of the Seven Tribes," he said, "It is a test of your training, what you have learned from the Wise Ones of our own tribes."

I suspected that there would be further revelations and I readied myself for a long vigil that night.

The sun was clipping the horizon and it was nearly as dark as it would get in this season. A hissing, chittering sound from somewhere close by, a sound I had never heard before. No creature I knew, none that I had hunted, or hidden from, made a sound like that. I started visibly, as did Hantorg, but the Shaman seemed unsurprised, as if he was expecting this particular interruption.

"Come!" he said loudly.

A sinuous figure slipped into the little circle of light from the fire. The newcomer brought with it a damp smell, which I recognised as that of seawater. The creature stood upright, stretching up to a height which might have reached my shoulders. In the firelight, I could see the overlarge webbed hands and feet, the mottled brown and green skin with the slight suggestion of scales.

"Greetings to you all," it said, lisping very slightly through his lipless mouth as it nodded to each of us in turn, "Call me Snake."

"Is that your name?" I asked quickly, before my normal reticence re-asserted itself.

The creature snorted softly and repeatedly in a way which I took to be a derisive laugh, as it regarded me with its mobile and faintly luminous eyes.

"I have a proper name, in my own language," it replied, "But it is considered too complex for your tongues to manage."

The Shaman uttered a series of sounds which sounded to my ears very like the sibilant chittering we had just heard. Snake made the same disdainful snorting noise.

"Not bad, old man, not bad," he said, "Your pronunciation has almost reached the point of intelligibility. I might nearly have recognised my own name."

The creature who called himself Snake drew himself up to his full height.

“Now who have we here?”

The Shaman introduced us both in turn. As my name was spoken, I stood slowly, holding up my right hand in the greeting of strangers. Snake nodded politely in response.

“I know you have lost a companion,” he began, then stopped in response to my gasp of alarm.

“I have been watching your progress this day,” the creature continued, “Let us remember his name now.”

“He was Bengart,” I said quickly, before the Shaman could answer, “He was our companion.”

Snake nodded, looking solemn for a few moments then coughed to gain our full attention.

“You are here for an ancient ritual, one of Initiation in the history of the Crossing,” he lisped, “Although there is much truth in your lore, your tribal stories, it is not the whole truth, of course. Perhaps, now, the entire truth is not known to anyone.”

He paused, to make sure that we were all paying attention. I was rapt, as was Hantorg. Even the Shaman himself was breathing shallowly, not wishing to miss a single word.

“Now look across the waters,” Snake directed, “Well, perhaps you cannot see in this light, but you must have noticed the Temple of Power on the far bank.”

We had all seen this shambling pile of rocks during the walk earlier. It was the wreckage of a vast construction from another age, explained Snake, destroyed by a single massive explosion. I knew of this from the story of the Darkening of Days I had been asked to recount during the Candidature.

“The war you call the Days of Darkness is a fiction,” Snake continued, accompanied by nods from the Shaman, “There never was any kind of holocaust.”

Again he paused.

“It was all a deliberate and carefully orchestrated programme to return to a simple way of life. Oh, the path of your people diverged from mine many years ago, but we are all children of the Ancient

Ones. And our peoples are all here to live, exist in this world, forever.”

“But what did destroy the Temple of Power?” I asked.

“It was broken down and left in ruins deliberately, by the Ancient ones, again to convey a message.”

“And what message was that?” I insisted.

“The message,” Snake said carefully, “Imparted by the Great Bridge, and indeed the Temple, was that even the greatest of man-made structures, the most impressive engineering achievements, are transient. Nothing made lasts for ever, and the way to a secure continued future is a simpler way of life, with few people and unchanging societies living in harmony with the world and its creatures.

He looked around at each of us in the firelight.

“And we must not change it!” He said earnestly. “That is the message. Your tribal lore delineates the regimented existence for the wanderers that make up the Seven Tribes. And the semi-aquatic peoples that I represent have similar cultures, which we too must not alter too much.”

I now realised that my solemn duties were clear. I nodded formally accepting the charge that had been placed on me. Hantorg did the same.

“Now, I must go,” Snake said, stretching himself, “It is not safe for me to linger here too long. And you should leave as soon as you can too.”

He slipped away. There was a soft splash, barely audible over the lapping of the waves, and he was gone from us.

After Snake had disappeared back into the waters, there were slow and quiet conversations around our fireside. I silently remembered Bengart for a time. Then the Shaman spoke.

“I, too, once made this crossing for the first time. Since then, I have returned twice more,” he said, pausing thoughtfully before continuing, “But I doubt I will come back again. But you will, bringing a new group of Companions to be initiated. Make the most of it.”

He was right. In a generation or two, ten at the most, it would no longer be able to make this pilgrimage - the Bridge will be impassable.

Then our descendents will have to create a new version of the tribal lore, a new way to communicate to the youth of a new generation exactly why we are the way we are, and why it is so important to maintain that state.

None of us seemed ready to take to their sleeping furs, and the Shaman told us long rambling tales - ones I had never heard before, but which I committed to memory to the best of my ability - of the steps the Ancients had taken to remove almost all of the technological wonders they had created, leaving just a very few to remind the hidden remnants of humanity, the ones who would propagate the human race, of the great and glorious past, and just why that past must never be again.

In the morning, we packed up our camp and started the five day journey back to the standing stone and our waiting tribesmen. Both I and - I firmly believed - Hantorg were ready to take our places in our tribes as men and hunters and Companions to the Shaman, those who had undertaken the crossing and survived. We could count ourselves amongst those who knew the true history of the world, those who would guide the peoples of the Seven Tribes to a safe and continued existence, crossing time out of mind, generation after generation, into the distant future.

6678 words

17 pages

21/12/2008 13:52