

A large, dark stone tombstone with a pointed top and a wide base. The inscription "NOTHING EVER CHANGES" is carved in a bold, serif font. The tombstone is set in a dark, rocky ground. Several torches with bright orange and yellow flames are placed around the base of the tombstone, casting a warm glow. The background is dark and textured, suggesting a cave or a night scene.

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NOTHING EVER CHANGES

I - A quiet evening and a forgetful morning

Digh Karje walked home through the quiet, darkening streets of Vark, 'The Jewel of the North.' All the larger cities had grand names, as befitted a city of the Eternal Vara of Koar. The Varesh and Varees had never visited this far north but their forebears had given the city its title after hearing a thorough report on its splendour some two hundred years before. Nothing had changed since then. Nothing ever changes.

The city must have grown, of course, as cities do. The 'Jewel' part only referred to the central palaces anyway. The rest of the city was all crowded in around, with little in the way of grandeur. It was all four and five-storey, clay-brick lodgings amid the ten-storey, stone towers of the Hand and the Gardens of the Arm, three in each district.

The rest-house had been relaxing as usual. He'd drunk sluf with his friend Gart amid the incense and talked over the day, nothing of consequence.

He took a right turn down Mose Street and then a left up through the Hand's Avenue. It took a little longer, but it wouldn't do to walk directly home through the Gast. A lot of muggings down that way made for an incentive to stay clear. It had always been this way. The rich lived securely in the Harh district, the poor made homes in the Gast and those in society's middle, like Digh, did their best to avoid both. Nothing ever changes.

Slaves were busy watering plants along the avenue. Some were strange, pale-skinned foreigners, though most were Koari, like himself, with brown skin and black hair. Digh briefly wondered what they had done to become slaves. It was usually some crime or other but an unpaid

debt could lead someone down that path too. That's why he was always careful with his dealings.

He came to his lodging house, made his way up to the third floor and was greeted at the door by his wife. Stout and reliable, Jili was a fine mistress of the hearth. Some of his friends' wives made them recount their actions of the day before letting them enter, but Jili always welcomed him in at once. It was just the two of them here now. Their youngest, Claish, had finally moved out with his new wife, living over in Preat.

They ate a fine supper together, of fried pork and leek, boiled potato and chives. Trestday was always a day for pork and leek. 'Start the week with pork and leek' his Nan loved to say when she was alive. It was good for the stomach to know what to expect.

After supper they conversed over the day's events. He told of his project at work, trying to find magical resonance in some excavated ruins in the hills just outside the city. It was important work for the Hand of Varesh. So far they hadn't managed to find its secrets but they'd get them eventually, of course. Naturally, he'd be unable to tell her of any secrets they did find, but they were both loyal servants of the Vara. Jili told of her time with the city planners. The Arm of Vareses wanted more greenery along the main avenues.

After that, it was time for bed. Peaceful rest was disturbed by some shouting in the streets below. Some of the youth movement were rallying against slavery again. Didn't they realise that there has always been slavery in Koar and always would be? The peacekeepers soon moved in to quell them. Only the youth could be so naive as to think they could change the world. Nothing ever changes.

The next day, Digh rose with the dawn and broke fast with Jili before heading out. He had a good feeling that today would be the day he cracked his project. With the

daylight, came more peacekeeper patrols. Their red and gold cloaks made everyone feel safe, even in the Gast, so he took the shorter route to the other side of town. At the city's Eastern gates, he met up with the group led by Junior-Hand Gilj. Gilj was a 'hands-on' type of boss and Digh found him quite pleasant to work with.

The horse-drawn carts took them to the excavation site in the nearby hills. Most of the group were assigned to continue the search for artifacts but Digh's job was to unlock the secrets of those already found. He lit two of the smokeless torches, handed one to Gilj and followed him down into the cave system that had been unearthed. Along a narrow tunnel and about fifty feet in, the cave opened into a large cavern. They transferred their torch-flame to the large braziers set up at the edges and Digh got back to work.

There were many small items to be checked, most of no significance, but he was mainly interested in the ornate, red-stone arch at the centre. It was like the oval frame of a mirror, hollow in the middle and large enough for 2 men to walk through abreast. It stood atop a low dais and was carved along its edges in images of stars, moons and suns.

Digh examined it again. He had looked over every inch of it for the last two days. Although his process was slow, it was less dangerous than jumping in with a magical delving that might set off a trap or destroy the item being examined. Ordinarily he would feel a resonance from something without needing to delve too deeply. But after two days, he was no closer to knowing where to start.

He left the arch and spent some time examining the smaller items. These were much simpler to understand and he began his examination of a few rudimentary pieces. They turned out to be merely ritualistic tools involved in honouring the dead. Nonetheless, Gilj seemed pleased with his progress.

“Your work is exemplary, Digh,” he said with an encouraging smile. Confident eyes locked with Digh’s own. “Your contributions to the Hand of Varesh are swift and selfless.”

The words emboldened Digh. He felt a sudden urge to throw caution to the fire and begin delving the archway. The stone called to him. Yes, now was the right time.

Running hands along the length of the frame, up one side and down the other, he quested into the stone and felt an answering vibration. Encouraged by this, he began varying the intensity of his search, looking for the key points to unlock its purpose. The stone began to warm beneath his touch. The space within the archway began to darken. The air itself seemed to coalesce into a dark mirror. He stared a moment at his own reflection and then it faded. Instead, he saw a darkened room.

“Ha, ha,” sounded Gilj and he clapped his hands together three times in praise. “I knew you could do it, Digh.”

Digh’s heart swelled with pride at the praise from the Junior-Hand.

“Thank you, sir,” he said. “I’m proud to serve you and the Hand.

“Of course, of course,” said Gilj. “But now it is time to let others take over the project. You will report to Truthkeeper Jarn on your way out.”

“Yes, sir.”

There was a small sense of loss. After meeting with the Truthkeeper, he would remember the sense of accomplishment, but not the specifics. Nonetheless, he dutifully exited the cave and sought the Truthkeeper at his tent. Inside, the tent smelled of incense. The Truthkeeper stood at a table, dressed in the dark, blue robes of their order. Gold rings adorned three fingers on each hand, showing his seniority even among that

esteemed group. He was intent on a large book on the table but looked up as soon as Digh entered.

“Ah, the great Digh Karje comes to see me,” said the Truthkeeper with a smile, framed by a long dark beard. His eyes twinkled at Digh. “I take it you have achieved success?”

“Yes, Truthkeeper,” replied Digh.

“Oh, please. Must I always remind you to call me Jarn?” He cocked his head to one side in thought. “Yes, I suppose I do. What have you to give to the Keepers of Truth?”

Digh felt both at ease and honoured to be invited to use Jarn’s name. How many times had they met before? It was hard to recall.

“The stone oval in the ruins,” said Digh,

Jarn looked ecstatic.

“Indeed?” he said. “If this is what we believe then this is grand news indeed. Come, sit.”

Digh moved to sit in the chair as indicated. Jarn lit a stick of incense and gave it to him to hold. Then Jarn sat in the chair opposite.

“Look into my eyes,” he commanded. Digh obeyed and found his gaze locked with the intense stare of age and wisdom that Jarn commanded.

“Tell me what happened in the cave,” said Jarn, his voice almost melodic.

Digh began to recount his morning in the cave. As he continued his head became light and he spoke as if in a dream.

Moments later, he blinked. He was sat in the Truthkeeper’s tent. The Truthkeeper himself was stood over at the table, making notes in a large book. It took him a moment to recall what he was doing here.

“Er, excuse me, Truthkeeper?” he said.

The Truthkeeper looked up at him with a smile.

“Are we finished?” asked Digh.

“Yes,” replied the Truthkeeper. “And congratulations again on a job well done.”

Digh felt pleased. He must have finished whatever he’d been working on. It was always the same. Do a good job but not remember the details. Occasionally, he would remember things in flashes or in dreams but as a good citizen he put them out of his mind and never mentioned them.

“You may take an early lunch and then report to your next assignment with Junior-Hand Grig.”

“Oh good,” he said, though didn’t care for Grig so much. “Well, goodbye then Truthkeeper.”

“Goodbye Digh,” he replied with a nod.

Digh left the tent and went to the carts. One of the cart-men was pleased to drive him back to the city.

The path to his favourite lunch-house ran alongside the outer-wall so he decided to stop by his friend Clag’s worksite on the way.

Just as the open area came into view, the ram-horned head of a giant fathk-beast came crashing through the side of a building.

Near thirty feet tall, thick armoured hide and teeth bigger than his head, the beast groaned loudly and slobbered over the newly formed rubble. Digh stopped still.

Clag and his fellow builders laughed raucously at the unfortunate fathk-handler who was responsible for the mess. Digh remained where he was until the beast was soothed, backed up and settled down to the ground.

Fathk-beasts were generally timid creatures, despite their great size, but it didn't do to spook them. The poor thing must have been turned too fast and found itself crashing through that wall. They were notoriously difficult to control as they would shift from being stubborn to having no will of their own in a flash. Prized for their great strength and incredibly useful in building work, they were nonetheless useless in wars as they were as likely to trample their own side as the enemy's when the fighting started. They were also carefully protected due to their limited numbers and slow breeding. One of Digh's jobs involved helping with the beasts' training and he was rather fond of them.

Accidents with them weren't uncommon but their handlers were expected to maintain control. In this case, the building work must have been set back at least a couple of days. The supervisor was yelling obscenities at the handler and comparing his worth unfavourably with that of the beasts, even the lame ones. Nothing ever changes.

Once things had settled down, Digh called to his friend, Clag, to see if he'd like a lunchbox brought over. He said that he would and Digh went on to the lunch-house. Madam Frem greeted him warmly and soon had 2 wooden boxes of workman's lunch ready for him.

Digh and his friend spent the lunchtime chatting about work. Mostly about Clag's building of a new rest-house since Digh couldn't remember much of his. While they were talking, a troop of performers passed them by, all dressed in bright clothing to attract attention. They

were proclaiming their imminent showing of the classic tale “War of the two crowns”, which would be held at the amphitheatre, tonight.

“Fancy going, Digh?” asked Clag.

“Might as well, doesn’t cost much.” he replied. The performances were usually entertaining, even if the stories were always the same.

“Oh, that reminds me,” said Clag. “Did you hear? Some merchant by name of Bres Graeg just paid a fortune for a painting. They say it was done by Vago, one of a kind.”

“How much did he pay then?”

“Ten thousand vanes.”

Digh nearly choked on his potato. “Ten thousand? That much could build a healing house and stock it for a year!”

“I know,” said Clag. “Madness. Just shows that some people have more money than they should.”

“That’s right,” said Digh. “And here’s us working for a living.” He smiled at his friend.

“Nothing ever changes, eh?” chuckled Clag.

After lunch he reported to Junior-hand Grig and found that they’d be training a young fathk-beast for forest-clearing. Even the yearlings were a good 15 feet tall and required a soft but firm approach to their training. Digh had a way with the beasts but Grig made life difficult as usual by demanding that the fathk be pushed to obey before it was ready. Digh spent most of the afternoon frustratingly wishing for time to speed up so he could relax at the performance.

That evening, a large crowd gathered at the amphitheatre in the Galle district to watch the play. He sat with Jili, Clag and Clag’s wife, Shal, in the upper-rows. The play was about the third great war between the crowns of Koar and Sorilan. There was usually a strong patriotic element to these plays and this was no different.

The handsome Varesh of Koar led a small force of soldiers against the evil, power-hungry Emperor of Sorilan and saved a border town from falling to the enemy. There were only a handful of performers on either side, but the narrator's thunderous voice reverberated around the amphitheatre and amplified those few to thousands until Digh could almost see the full scale of events. The Sorilani threw their Spirits into the battle, these represented by black-clothed performers trailing coloured silks on sticks held high, but the Koari held their nerve to turn the tide of battle.

The Varesh stood on a tall dais, a painted halo of sunset behind him, and proudly declared that not one Koari village would be lost to the evil empire of Sorilan. There was much cheering from the audience.

Something stirred Digh's memories. The spirits, the dais, the oval of light, all plucked at some forgotten nugget in the back of his mind. He reached for it but grasped only smoke. That night, his dreams were troubled by images of ghostly hands reaching through a mirror on a dais in a dark cavern. He woke, unrested, with Jili shaking him.

"Wake up, you'll be late for work," she said.

After breaking fast with her, he headed out to work. Confusion set in halfway down the Hand's Avenue. He wondered where he was supposed to be today. He wandered, feeling slightly dazed, for a while until he remembered. The cavern! He was supposed to be there early to work on the stone oval. He dashed to the Eastern-gate, only to find the carts already gone. Gilj would be upset with him. He ran to the horse-stables and borrowed one of the mounts. With luck, he wouldn't be too late.

Arriving at the excavation, site he jumped down and threw the reins to a startled looking attendant, who shouted something indiscernible at his back as he raced to the cave. He grabbed a torch, lit it and headed inside.

As he approached the inner cavern, he heard a group of men talking.

“Why not bring us directly into the tower?”

“I can’t, the portal here isn’t large enough. It’s only for communicating.”

“This still seems suspicious to me. Why would a Spirit help us?”

A Spirit?

“I told you, we’ve been here too long. There is no end for us. It’s a tortuous existence. I seek only my own release. I can send your men to the cavern in the northern hills. You could surround the keep and—”

The voice cut off as Digh entered the cavern. All eyes turned to stare at him and he realised who was present. Standing there were Junior-hand Gilj, an elite Officer of the Vara in the blue and gold uniform of a Commander and not one, but two Truthkeepers. They were talking with a shadowy figure, reflected in a dark mirror filling the very stone oval that Digh had come to work on.

And then he remembered.

“Oh, I ... er...” was all he could say in the face of this much authority.

“Who are you?” demanded the officer. “What are you doing in here?”

“I..er...I’m...” Digh stammered.

“This is Digh Karje, Officer Fane,” said Gilj, and Digh was grateful that he’d spoken up since he didn’t think his own voice would work at the moment. “He’s the brilliant man who unlocked the portal for us. He’s a loyal worker and I’m sure he has a good reason for returning.” His voice pressed that last point slightly as he turned his gaze on Digh.

“I...I forgot...I’d I...”

“Ah,” said one of the Truthkeepers. Digh recognised him as Jarl. “I believe I can unveil the problem. It would seem that my last attempt to conceal his memory was

somewhat less than successful.” He smiled as he said it, as though it were a minor mistake. “Perhaps we shall try again, yes?”

“Y-yes, Sir,” Digh managed to stammer out. “I didn’t m-mean to—”

“It’s quite alright, Digh,” said the Truthkeeper, sounding much like his own grandfather had when he’d smashed a vase that time. “It’s not the first time.”

Everyone else turned their attention back to the ‘portal’, as Gilj had called it, and seemed to forget Digh completely. He supposed he would forget them too soon enough.

The Truthkeeper led him back outside to his tent, where he sat down in a comfortable chair and inhaled some calming incense. The Truthkeeper asked Digh to look into his eyes as he—

Digh blinked. He was sitting in the Truthkeeper’s tent. The man himself was standing by the entrance looking out. When he looked back at Digh, he smiled.

“How are you feeling, Digh?” he asked.

“Er, fine, thank-you,” said Digh. “Are we, er, finished?” He had the strangest sense of repetition, of something found and then lost, but he couldn’t place it.

“Then I would like to thank you, again, for a job well done. This afternoon you should report to Junior-Hand Grig. I will send a message explaining your absence this morning.”

“I was absent?” asked Digh. He didn’t remember the morning’s work, not that that was unusual after a visit with the Truthkeeper, but usually there was a memory of where he’d been, even without the details.

“Yes, a minor problem needed to be solved but it’s all better now.” He smiled again. “Now, I must excuse myself, there is more work to be done. Return to the city for lunch, yes?”

“Yes, sir,” said Digh. And he did just that, returning a horse that he’d apparently borrowed to go out to the cavern.

The afternoon found Grig in a foul mood, grumbling under his breath about lost time but never saying anything of it directly to Digh. The Truthkeeper’s message could keep Digh from official trouble but it couldn’t make Grig pleasant to work with.

They were attempting to train one of the young fathk-beasts to run in a straight line and charge a target. Mostly a waste of time, since fathk males only charged other fathk males and then only in breeding season. The beast could be made to run happily enough but encouraging it to focus on the target proved fruitless.

Grig muttered something about getting it ready in time and being asked to do the impossible. Digh wasn’t concerned. He always seemed to figure things out in the end. It was a strange assignment though. Everyone knew fathk couldn’t be used in war. And it was too large to fit through anyway.

Digh stopped in his tracks. What had he just been thinking? He tried to remember but the ideas faded like a dream on waking. He shrugged. It couldn’t have been important.

As evening came on, a large force of soldiers passed the city, heading north. The movement of troops was none of Digh’s concern, however, so he put it out of his mind.

The next day he solved the problem with the fathk-beast. First he blended the target with the scent of another male fathk, then he added the scent from a female to a cloth held near the young male’s nose. The fathk still needed a little kick to get it to charge but it worked well enough. Digh wondered what it would be used for. He didn’t think it could have any military application. Even with a female’s scent, the beast would be too unpredictable in a battle.

That night, he went to the rest-house to meet up with Clag and a few others. They drank sluf and enjoyed the incense while talking over the day.

Suddenly, the door was thrown open and a youth shouted into the room.

"The war has started. The war has started. There's fighting up in Halor."

There was quiet but nobody paid the boy any mind. Most just continued drinking.

"Don't...don't you care?" asked the youth in disbelief.

A few people made non-committal grunts into their cups while the rest turned back to their conversations.

The boy raced out, no doubt seeking some who would be more impressed with his news.

"What do you reckon then, Digh?" Clag asked him. "A few thousand dead on both sides then a truce to put the border back where it was?"

"Same as always," replied Digh. "Nothing ever changes."