

Merrill – Short Story

“Watch your step, da’len.”

The Keeper’s warning comes too late -- as usual -- and I trip over the rock, bruising my knees and losing the skin on my palms to the jagged mountain rock. Mythal’enast! Someday, I’ll learn to watch where I’m going. I struggle to my feet, hands covered in blood, and look around.

We’re here.

The cave mouth is unbearably spooky, even for Sundermount, which you’d think was trying for some sort of spookiness medal. Most Terrifying Mountain in Thedas, maybe. Mist swirls out of the blackness as if it’s breathing, and the hillside around it is barren. A gaping maw, devouring all the life within its reach...

Not a good mindset, Merrill. Think positive! At least the weather’s fair.

“You feel it too, then.” The Keeper’s voice snaps me back to reality. She’s looking at me expectantly. .. which means I’ve forgotten something. I try to smooth my tunic and succeed in smearing blood down the front. Wonderful. And I still don’t know what it is she’s waiting for—oh! Answer. Right.

“Yes, Keeper. The voice is much louder here.” The whisper tugs at the edge of my thoughts, and I can make it out if I concentrate. In the camp, I could only hear it in my dreams, and the words were lost upon waking. Only a memory of terrible loneliness remained. Even the Keeper woke sobbing the second night.

Come to me.

I shiver. This is definitely the source.

“Follow me, da’len. And keep your wits about you.” The Keeper vanishes into the hungry mouth of the cave. I take a deep breath and go inside.

The dark is a shock after the sun-drenched mountainside. Like jumping into a pool of icy water on a hot day. My eyes adjust to the dimness, we pass through a narrow passageway into a grand chamber and I see... ruins. Light shines through cracks in the ceiling, broken by the shifting of time and tree roots. Not a cave after all then? A temple or a tomb or... I don’t know what this is. Strange.

“It doesn’t look elvish, does it, Keeper? Tevinter, maybe?” I look to the Keeper, who is peering silently at some sort of archway with a disapproving frown that I know all too well. Poor archway. It didn’t do anything.

“If this place was part of the war, then it doesn’t matter who built it. It is dangerous.” The Keeper turns from the archway, apparently dismissing it. “If it isn’t from the war, it is unknown, and probably still dangerous.” I’m certain there’s a flaw in her reasoning somewhere, but it seems like the middle of the

creepy tomb-cavern is a bad place to argue the point. She descends a short stairway into the temple below.

I trail after her, giving the archway a reassuring pat as I pass.

Come to me.

The voice comes from the far end of the temple, from an ugly statue of a big squatting... thing with too many arms and legs. Well, that's not promising at all.

"Who calls us?" The Keeper demands, drawing herself up. She looks the way I imagine the elves of Arlathan did, regal and wise, and the timbre of her voice says, *I don't care if you are a spirit, I will thrash you if you give me a reason.* She scolded a wild sylvan with that voice once, and it stumbled off looking ashamed of itself. Well, as ashamed as a tree can look, anyway.

Help me.

Oh, that was not the right answer at all.

Keeper Marethari seems to grow taller, becoming a towering pillar of angry Dalishness. "Name yourself! Or be left to your silence."

I am One Who is Trapped. Help me.

"Your name!" I have never seen the Keeper this angry. Not even when Tamlen disappeared.

Three seems to be the magic number. *Audacity.* The voice is like a winter wind, bitter and ragged.

"A demon." The Keeper spits the word as if it tastes foul. She nods at me, "Bound to the statue. It will not threaten the camp." She turns to leave, satisfied.

Wait! I have been trapped here for time beyond counting. I bore witness to the fall of your kingdom. Help me, Keeper of the Dalish, and I will give you knowledge of all I have seen. For a moment, I see visions of the world as it once was. An empire that spanned all Thedas, glittering cities of the elvhen.... *All this could be yours.*

"Come, da'len." The Keeper beckons. The vision fades.

I turn and follow her out into the light.