



AGE OF FANTASY

KEYS TO PROSPERITY



SHORT STORY

Caissos inspected the ground, picking up a length of rope with a hook. The metal appeared to have been salvaged from some armour and hammered into a shape to allow it to grip branches or stones. It was remarkably untarnished, a rarity, one which he suspected its owners were loath to abandon. As a pathfinder, he recognised that something strange was at play.

He took a deep breath and listened. The tall pines around him were silent. No bird nor beast stirred; he realised that he had been so focused on his work that he hadn't noticed. The sight caused sap in the Dryadan's skin to run cold.

Instinctively, he turned towards the safety of Voidhaven, but his view of the great city and its walls was completely blocked by the towering trees that surrounded him, which appeared like an infinite forest.

"I sure ain't paying you to pick bloodroot and black clover, pathfinder." Hanawa's large nose contorted in anger, and his ears twitched. "You're supposed to guide us, and you ain't getting that bonus 'less you get us to the Voidgate before nightfall. You plant people can photosynthesise or whatever, but the rest of us got only so much food, and I'm not keen to munch on much that I've seen out here in the Wilds of Nexus."

Caissos bit his tongue. He needed this job and the bonus. Life in the city at the centre of the Planes was expensive, and he struggled to get by. He grew up along its edge, and his parents, proud Dryadans, had always claimed to possess a special bond with nature. He didn't know about that, but enough believed those claims that he was often sought as a guide.

He did know the surrounding areas of the Wilds well, though, or at least far better than most adventurers who stumbled through one of the city's many Voidgates from their distant lands, chasing after rumour or legend.

In truth, the unpleasant little Goblin had not been the first visitor to step into Voidhaven from a backwater Plane with more gold than sense. As a pathfinder, Caissos had seen more than his share. Still, sometimes he wondered whether he was that different, lured into his job in the hopes of some easy riches or a big score but usually returning with barely enough coin to cover his rent at the tavern and repair his gear.

The rest of Hanawa's hirelings kept quiet behind him; he wasn't sure if they had the good sense their patron lacked or were simply afraid of offending their perpetually short-tempered patron.

"My goal is to get you to your gate alive. The dead make for rather stingy customers and worse references." Caissos replied. His tone was calm but stern; his employer held the purse strings, but he was the one tasked with getting them there alive and back.

Slowly, he held out the hook he found to his patron. "The Sparrow tribe left here in a hurry; this is one of their tree hooks, and they can't easily get ahold of metal to make new ones. The tribes here are the only ones who know the Wilds better than a seasoned pathfinder, and if they're fleeing some kind of danger..."

"Then I'd better hire them next time 'stead of you," Hanawa grunted, looking down at the hook. "Whatever danger you're prattling on about is more reason to hurry up. I got the key to this gate, and once we're through, nobody's gonna follow us through. After that, it's just us and an entire plane overflowing with platinum."

Caissos simply rose and shook his head. Without a word, he slipped the tree hook into his satchel. He already had some misgivings, but he knew this area of the Wilds fairly well, and the Goblin had a point; the sooner they were out of here, the sooner the danger would pass, provided that they weren't walking right into its path.

Still, the urgency of Hanawa's search was strange: the ruins were old, and if he possessed the key, there was little reason to take unnecessary risks pushing his band of adventurers at the pace he had. Though those averse to pointless risk rarely came seeking his services.

He lifted his goggles to his forehead and examined the crudely drawn map his patron had provided him. "We are close. If your map is correct, there's a rock field nearby, but I've never seen a Voidgate there."

"That's where the key comes in handy; now hurry up." Hanawa grunted as Caissos led the way.

There were few paths to be found in the vast forest, but Caissos was able to weave easily enough between the trunks and roots, guiding the adventurers through almost as smoothly as if they had been on an open road.

As the band marched, the woods were silent around them save for their footsteps. Caissos's intuition screamed that something was amiss. Usually this part of the Wilds was swarming with life, from sleeper snakes to mudwolves and even beetlebears, but he hadn't seen so much as a wyrmfly.

As dusk fell, however, he noticed a dim blue glow. It came from standing stones, seemingly engraved with magequartz, a stone sometimes used as a focus by spellcasters, but it was difficult to mine without affecting its resonant magic.

The stones looked as though they had been laid some time ago, perhaps even centuries past. Some had fallen over, and others were partly covered by moss, while the pines that had managed to grow among the rocky ground there had gotten almost as tall as the surrounding forest. A few appeared to have been knocked down recently, presumably by an overzealous beetlebear using them as a scratching post.

Caissos had passed this place once or twice before, but he paid it little mind; whoever had made it had left few clues about its purpose, and there were far more interesting sights nearby. Yet, examining the map, it seemed this rocky field of standing stones and patches of pines had to be their destination.

Caissos turned towards Hanawa, wondering if he'd found the wrong place, but his employer was staring at the scattered stones in awe. Carefully, the Goblin drew out a carved glyph from his satchel, which glowed with a light similar to the magequartz, the key. He wandered around, nearly tripping on a root, as he examined the old rocks with amazement.

The old Goblin looked at the stones, gently touching the gems as though he had unearthed some never-before-seen wonder. Caissos cracked a smile; outsiders who came to Voidhaven always seemed to be impressed by the strangest things.

Seeing the Dryadan's amusement, Hanawa scowled.

"Don't just stand there, you slack-jawed fools," Hanawa barked to Caissos and the rest of his band. "Ol' Tibtha has a spare key just like mine, and I won't sit 'round here 'til that Ratwoman shows up to claim my Platinum Plane!"

"You didn't mention a rival adventuring band when you hired me." Caissos's eyes narrowed. "My rates are higher when..."

"Why d'you think I didn't mention it?" Hanawa smirked, "We didn't see her, so it wasn't worth paying you extra, was it?"

Caissos opened his mouth to object, but Hanawa dismissed him with a wave of his hand. "Hardly matters now; your bonus oughta cover it... once we get the gate open anyway. First one to find where we put the key gets their own weight in platinum when we split the take!"

A cheer went up as the band of hirelings dispersed, searching among the stones for any kind of divot that might fit the key.

Caissos stood back; bonus or not, he had been paid upfront and done his work.

Besides, something was troubling him. He looked at the trees; some had been knocked over and others burnt. It was possible that the damage had been caused by the Sparrow Tribe, but it seemed far more likely that it had been whatever had scared them off.

"Boss!" One of the adventurers was pointing to a stone ring large enough for a person to fit through, which was illuminated by the magequartz. "I found it!"

Hanawa approached it carefully, looking at a divot on one side of the ring surrounded by the glowing blue.

"Well, I'll be." The Goblin exclaimed, "Fits like a glove. Now, all we gotta do is wait."

The blue lights around them lit up the evening sky. There was no doubt the key was where it belonged, but no Voidgate seemed to activate.

Caissos approached carefully; the glowing magequartz had certainly given away their position, and Hanawa's rivals could no doubt find them easily.

He was about to say this when he noticed something: an identical divot on the other side. "Perhaps the key belongs here instead?"

"Oh," Hanawa gave a canny smile. "Well, I wasn't expecting that you'd be the one to claim the bonus, but I ain't complaining. Let's go!"

He removed the key and quickly transferred it to the second divot; once again the stones lit up brightly, but still, no Voidgate formed.

Hanawa sat down despondently. "Well, I suppose we came all this way for a broken gate."

"Or," Caissos said with a sigh, "it may be that your rival doesn't have a spare key... both are needed to unlock the gates."

"Of course!" Hanawa leapt up. "I'm sure glad I thought of it."

He leapt up and grabbed his key. "Now all we gotta do is get the other half, but how? I doubt ol' Tibtha was smart enough to hire a guide half as good as mine!"

"We likely announced our presence to a good chunk of the Wilds," Caissos said with a sigh. "The lights were shining bright enough that they were probably able to see us from Voidhaven itself. If your rival is searching for the Voidgate, they will find us."

"Ah, so we're going to lead them into my cunning trap." A devilish smile crossed Hanawa's lips. "An ingenious trap that I hadn't even intended to set."

Caissos sighed, "Perhaps, but whatever frightened off the Sparrow Clan probably noticed it as well. We should keep our distance from this place for a while; let whatever comes deal with the results before returning once the fighting dies down."

Without missing a beat, Hanawa retrieved his key and started barking orders as the glaring light of the magequartz slowly faded. Soon, the entire band was lying in ambush beneath the cover of night and the surrounding patches of forest, prepared to strike as soon as their rivals came into sight.

Yet, something was wrong. The roots of the tree vibrated slightly as Caissos lay against them; something heavy was coming. It was still far away, but it marched with the earth-shaking power of a cavalry charge.

He turned to speak, but Hanawa held up a hand to silence him. He turned to look; the rival adventurers had arrived, examining the rocks. The glow of the magequartz was just strong enough that Caissos could recognise them: a Ratwoman, presumably Tibtha, and a familiar green-scaled Firebreather, a fellow pathfinder named Zaitoth.

"You might want to wait," Caissos whispered to his employer from the treetop, "There's some--"

Zaitoth turned her head in their direction, and Tibtha followed her gaze. It wasn't clear whether these two were able to make out Caissos and Hanawa's faint silhouettes in the dim light of the stones.

Zaitoth took a step in their direction, and Hanawa scowled.

"It's now or never!" The Goblin called out loudly enough to echo through the area, "Attack!"

With his words, the ambush that they had set was sprung. Hanawa charged forward, brandishing an iron bar, and his band followed his lead, moving from either side of the ruins to try to surround their unwary rivals.

It was difficult for Caissos to see the fighting. Figures in the distance appeared as little more than silhouettes near the dimly glowing ruins in the distance, with nothing but hints of movement among the patches of pines. Still, the battle seemed to be going in Hanawa's favour: shouts of pain and alarm rose mostly in unfamiliar voices, while those he had travelled with were calling out with battle cries.

Yet, in the distance, Caissos noticed as the trees began to sway and shake with movement, accompanied by the sound of thick wood bending and snapping. Whatever he had felt before was still coming towards them.

Caissos called out to Hanawa and his warband to stop, but the only response he got was an arrow shot in his direction, which only narrowly flew wide, striking a trunk beside his head with a hollow thud.

Then, a blast of flame lit up the ruins. In the darkness, Zaitoth's voice cried out, "Dragon!"

The fighting paused for a moment, all eyes on the direction that the flames had come from. The entire band seemed frozen in fear as the dragon stepped through the smoke, illuminated by the smouldering fire.

Tibtha squeaked out, "Get to the Voidgate! I can unlock it!"

"You heard her! Get to it!" Hanawa shouted, as he had already begun to flee in that direction.

Adventurers from both sides scrambled; the melee only became more confused as the bands skirmished with each other while trying to avoid the dragon's sight and the sporadic spouts of flames, which even singed the stones themselves.

Others fled blindly into the cover of the forest, preferring to brave the Wilds rather than risk a fight with a dragon. Caissos considered his options; he took a deep breath and drew out the Sparrow Clan tree hook and an axe.

Zaitoth came at him, approaching with glaive in hand. "I thought you were wiser than that, Caissos. These outlanders aren't worth your life."

"No one will hire a pathfinder who abandons their charge." Caissos shook his head. "Besides, if we work together, there should be enough platinum that none of us have to risk our necks again. Don't you want to take that chance?"

Zaitoth took a moment to consider his words.

"Very well."

With those words, she turned around and moved towards the Voidgate. Caissos followed close behind her; to his right, the Dragon was striding closer to them. As it opened its mouth, its teeth glistened in the moonlight. He saw a gout of flame building in the dragon's mouth.

Caissos threw the tree hook forward, letting it catch on a branch. He launched himself forward, using his momentum to lift off the ground and catch Zaitoth along the waist. She grunted with shock as he shoved her forward.

Moments later they were both on the rock, bruised but otherwise unharmed. Zaitoth pushed herself up, looking for her weapon. "What were you thinking, you..."

She paused in shock as she looked at the scorched stone and trees behind her, and without another word, she grabbed Caissos' arm, forcing him up as the pair of them scrambled for circular ruin that contained the still-sealed Voidgate.

They hurried, charging towards through the darkness towards the magequartz illuminated stone. The Dragon lumbered slowly behind them as they tried to weave through the stones and pines to avoid its sight.

Though it was barely a couple of minutes of running, it had felt like an eternity before the two arrived to find their employers fighting bitterly right in front of the Voidgate. Both Hanawa and Tibtha had lost their weapons in the scramble to escape.

Instead, the two were gripping each other's ears tight while kicking and biting at each other. Their snarling and panting were occasionally punctuated by accusations and threats.

Zaitoth shot Caissos an understanding gaze.

Then, the ground shook as the dragon stomped closer. Thrown off balance, the Ratwoman left an opening, and Hanawa delivered a swift blow to her ribs, causing her to collapse.

"Hurry up, Caissos," Hanawa commanded, "Grab her key!"

Caissos approached closer, kneeling down and extending an arm to help the Ratwoman up.

"What are you doing?" his Goblin employer shouted again.

"We don't have time for this nonsense. Get your keys and activate the Voidgate!"

Hanawa and Tibtha alike seemed taken aback, but both scrambled for their keys, shoving them into the Voidgate just as the dragon came into view.

"Hurry!" Caissos called, charging into the gate first. Hanawa, Tibtha, and Zaitoth followed, hot on his heels.

They emerged on the other side of the Voidgate, in an antechamber of some ancient stone building. The floor was made of some sort of clay, smoothed and polished as though it had been cooked on the spot. Faint rays of daylight peeked through the ceiling above them, illuminating the massive chamber well enough that there was no need for torchlight.

"Are we safe?" Hanawa grunted, picking himself up slowly. "Do you think the dragon will follow us?"

"I suspect it's too small for the dragon to fit through," Zaitoth commented coolly.

Hanawa looked back and scrambled forward, moving as quickly as he could out of view of the now open gate.

"I doubt it will try to wait us out," Caissos said, "if it hasn't already moved on to chase the ones who ran for the trees. Though, it's strange; I've never seen or heard of dragons in that corner of the Wild..."

"It's strange... I believe figuring out where we are now is a more urgent issue," Zaitoth said as her eyes darted around the unusual light.

Massive stone statues, at least a dozen meters tall, lined the chamber. They depicted heroes or gods whose names Caissos did not know. He could not tell which species they depicted, though this hardly surprised him considering the near-infinite nature of the Planes.

These statues had been allowed to fall into disrepair for what appeared to be centuries, sinking slowly into the stone and gathering dust; it was possible that the subject was a Void Plane, entirely devoid of life, but it was also possible that they'd merely found an abandoned temple, just a short day's walk from a thriving city.

Such thoughts did not concern Hanawa or Tibtha, though. Their eyes were instead fixed on the massive platinum spheres, which lay partly buried in the stone.

"Take your hands off of my platinum, Tibtha!" Hanawa said, leaping forward to grab the treasured sphere, "You took my spare key, and if it wasn't for my pathfinder, you'd have been cooked alive by that dragon! It should be mine to divide as I see fit!"

"You lost the key fair and square in a Brascoli game," Tibtha grunted as she ran to inspect another. "We could have agreed to split whatever we found from the start if you weren't such a greedy little cretin!"

"Who are you calling little, you pipsqueak?"

The two began yelling at the top of their surprisingly powerful lungs, throwing accusations and insults but never stepping closer to the other. Though both were eager for another fight, neither of them was willing to let go of their respective platinum treasure.

Even Caissos looked longingly at the spheres; they were scattered along the floor, some mostly buried, but even the smallest looked as though it could buy him a life of comfort and ease.

Yet, questions rattled in his mind still.

"It's an odd shape; not a perfect sphere, but almost like overlapping fish scales." Caissos looked it over. "There's something strange about it, I think. We should try to investigate a little more before we do anything too rash. Anyone want to follow me?"

"Sure, you can go on ahead," Hanawa said with a smile across his face as he hugged the chunk of platinum several times his size. "I'd best stay here and keep an eye on the treasure, in case ol' Tibtha there tries to snatch it up."

"Who are you calling old!?" Tibtha spat loud enough that for a moment, Caissos felt the ground move under him. He was not alone in this feeling, however.

"I thought you said the dragon would move on!" Tibtha scolded Zaitoth, without breaking eye contact with Hanawa, "But the ground's still shaking here."

"I doubt the tremor travelled through the Voidgate." Zaitoth looked at her employer defiantly for a moment before being nearly knocked off guard by another tremor.

Caissos turned to face the Voidgate, and then he saw it: a gargantuan beast emerging from the shadows. The dragon before had only been a juvenile compared to it; indeed, perhaps just one of its offspring that mistakenly wandered out of the gate the last time adventurers had been foolhardy enough to wander into its lair.

"I... don't think those are just old relics," Caissos tried to say, but his employer was already caught in another argument with his rival. He shouted again, but the two rivals were locked in argument. Zaitoth simply nodded and watched from the Voidgate entrance.

"Hanawa!" Caissos shouted, "You're hugging a dragon egg!"

"Haha, excellent! Do you have any idea how much those go for at the market? Not as much as solid platinum but it'll--"

"And its mother is here!" Caissos shouted, charging towards the Goblin as the dragon drew ever closer. He grabbed Hanawa's legs, but his employer refused to release the egg, kicking at Caissos's face.

"Do you have any idea how much I've sacrificed to get this far?" Hanawa shouted, "I'm not leaving empty-handed!"

"Then, you are not leaving at all," Zaitoth said, looking out from the Voidgate. "Caissos, if you do not wish to die, leave these fools to their fate."

Caissos turned to face Zaitoth, giving Hanawa the opening he needed to send the pathfinder sprawling to the ground. Moments later, the dragon's fangs came bearing down, snapping at where Caissos had been.

For a moment, he thought he saw his employer devoured, but moments later, he heard a mad cackle echoing through the ancient hall, "I won't give up my treasure so easily!"

Caissos watched as Zaitoth stepped through the Voidgate. The heat from the dragon's chest made him sweat, and molten spit leaked from its mouth. Caissos knew he did not have long. He took a deep breath and dashed for the exit even as he felt the branches on the top of his head start to bake in the heat.

The dragon batted a claw at Caissos, catching the bottom of his tabard and nearly dragging him back through the gate. Just as he was about to get dragged back in, Zaitoth caught him and held onto his arm.

Caissos felt himself pulled in both directions until the fabric of his clothing tore, and he fell to the ground back in the Wilds.

The two pathfinders struggled to catch their breath.

But before they could say a word, a draconic nail reached through the Voidgate. Thinking quickly, Caissos leapt forward and tore out one of the keys. In an instant, the Voidgate sealed, slicing off a part of the dragon's claw.

"Well done," Zaitoth said. "It appears we've found the source of the dragon infestation."

Rising to her feet, she removed the second key from the Voidgate. "I think it's only fair that we keep one each."

"...Shouldn't we go back for them?" Caissos looked through the empty stone ring, but now all he could see was the destruction caused by the juvenile dragon.

"Even if they didn't die," Zaitoth said with a shrug, "I doubt they'll walk away without those eggs. Still, some in Voidhaven might pay handsomely for the location of a dragon's nest. Not as much as for an actual egg, but enough to clear my tab."

A smile flickered across her razor-sharp teeth as she spoke. "And that's got to be worth something."