

A BARGAIN WITH YIG

Occupied Deseret
2456 AD

Mark Smith would never forget the sound his last surviving bodyguard made as the patrol-monster's stinger plunged into the man's gut. It wasn't even a painful noise, mostly; more like one of surprise and despair. It was the kind of sound you made when you finally admitted to yourself how all was lost, and hope was dead.

Mark had made that sound himself a few days ago, after he had watched the last regiment of his father's Presidential Guard — well, by then he supposed they had the dubious honor of being *his* Presidential Guard — get ripped apart by five times their number of Universal Dominion slave-soldiers. The regiment had died well, savaging the enemy to a standstill until the last Deseret trooper was dead at the top of a pile of Dominion corpses. All so Mark Smith, hereditary President of Deseret, could run away. Which meant they had died for absolutely nothing.

Well, his surviving guards might have disagreed; but then, what did they know? The last one had just been gut-stabbed by a Dominion patrol-monster, which looked like a horrible, pointless way to die. As Mark assumed he was about to personally find out.

Mark had a very good sword on his belt, as befitted the heir of what used to be Deseret, industrious realm of the Mountain West. He even managed to get it out and readied as the patrol-monster finished yanking its stinger out of the guard's guts. Mark had a better stance than he thought he had, as even a half-spoiled and frivolous prince can learn much from the kind of swords-masters his father could afford; but truthfully neither the sword nor the man was up to the task of facing off a Dominion battle-monster. If Mark had been asked what he was thinking right then, he would have replied he was too much of a coward to *not* die as well as he could.

The thing about to kill him looked like a scorpion large enough to ride, with a disturbingly prehensile-looking stinger and an even more disturbing purpose in its movements. The first swing of the patrol-monster's stinger almost indulgently batted Mark's sword out of his hand and into the underbrush. It then scuttled towards him, rocking from side to side, but holding off on striking again. Mark could see his own reflections in its faceted eyes, and whether by magic or imagination he thought those reflections were grinning back at him with pure anticipatory malice. The patrol-monster clearly was ready to *play* with its food a little.

The thought of *that* fate might have paralyzed Mark; instead, the sudden spurt of anger cut through the miasma of fear. "Come on, then!" he snarled, his too-pampered hands stiffening into as

close to claws as he could manage. "Or I'll come to you!"

Mark was never sure how much Trade English a Dominion monster could understand, but he always thought the tone at least broke through where the words did not. The patrol-monster focused on him, and suddenly somehow appeared even more dangerous than before. Its stinger raised itself up, clearly ready to strike long before Mark could close the distance and rip those mocking reflections out of the monster's eyes with his bare hands. Mark charged anyway...

...only to see his guard, his gut an abomination of red and yellow, leap onto the back of the patrol-monster in joint-cracking desperation. One hand carried a knife, which the guard used to strike at the scales on the monster's back; the other ripped off one loosened scale as it screamed far too like a human. The stinger instinctively struck, but missed - and then the guard grabbed the stinger-tip, and slammed it into the monster's now-exposed flesh.

It seemed patrol-monsters were not immune to their own venom. The monster threw the guard off to one side as it rolled and writhed and convulsed; Mark rushed to pull his rescuer away before he was trampled. There was a cave nearby; the one he had been trying to reach before being ambushed, in fact. Perhaps there was still something Mark could do for his last companion there.

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Mark Smith tried to close the eyes of the dead bodyguard, only to give up after a minute of futility. *Just like everything else lately*, thought Mark. And, equally bitterly: *And I am tired of watching better men and women than me die, just to keep me alive*. Although his ongoing humiliation was probably almost over. To say things looked bad was to stretch the definition of understatement until it snapped like a rotten longbow.

Mark looked around. At least the cave he was now hiding in appeared unoccupied; a fissure in the back possibly led to another chamber, but it would take a lot to make Mark consider fleeing down it. There were enough kinks in the passage leading to this chamber to let Mark risk starting a small fire, over the last feeble protests of his now-dead companion. The bodyguard had been right, as usual; even a tiny campfire might attract notice. But Mark had been past caring. Offering a little warmth and light in the dark seemed a far too small reward for the man's loyalty.

Twenty men and women had been in the guard detail that pulled Mark Smith out of a burning Salt Lake City as Dominion mages ravaged it. The detail's staring corpses marked the path of their futile flight into the mountains; so it seemed almost petulant for Mark to dwell on how his entire family was likely also dead (or, worse, *wishing* they were). Eradicating the ruling dynasty of Deseret had been a goal of the Dominion for hundreds of years, and now they were apparently all the way down to just

one scion left.

He couldn't stay in the cave for long. The bodyguard's corpse would attract scavengers, and putting him outside the cave would attract notice. As far as Mark could work out, he was still in Dominion-occupied territory, so getting far enough west (*assuming they stop before the Pacific*, he thought) had to be the next step before, well. What, really? Mark didn't know. He did know he would be probably literally damned before he would spend less effort trying to avoid the inevitable than the people who had traded their lives for him. It would have to be enough. It wouldn't be, but it would have to be.

In the meantime, the fire no longer served any purpose; he wasn't going to freeze, and the man it was trying to comfort was dead. Mark carefully smothered it. He also appropriated back the blankets the bodyguard no longer needed. He deserved the warmth no more than he did the firelight, but it was his job now to survive for as long as possible. Mark would have enough to answer for – for the disaster which had befallen him, his family, and the realm and faith they once ruled over. Better not to add ingratitude to his list of sins.

Sleep came easily enough, surprisingly. Mark contemplated offering prayers, but *now* seemed like an obscenely hypocritical time to start. He settled for a heartfelt *I'm sorry* to the heavens, because it was all he had left.

#

Mark awoke (but carefully did not open his eyes) to the smell of snake. Snakes. Rattlers. The musky scent was familiar to anyone who spent any time outdoors, and Mark Smith had always preferred a morning's ramble to a sacrament meeting, including the ones he was supposed to oversee as a bishop. The musk was stronger than any he had ever smelled, which clearly meant Mark Smith had managed to take shelter in a rattlesnake den. Getting out of it alive might not be a realistic goal.

Under the circumstances, this was almost a relief. Death by rattlesnake would be a horrible and fairly pointless way to die, to be sure, but in no sense could his trying to escape be seen as an attempt at suicide. Mark was likely dead either way, so there was no harm in trying.

So he opened his eyes – and then blinked them, several times. There were a *lot* of rattlers in this cave. And they were not acting normally for the weather; each rattler was alert, moving smoothly through the cave in an almost purposeful way. Most seemed to be watching the opening to the cave, but one of the larger ones looked over at Mark's movement. It gracefully slithered over to consider the human, its unblinking eyes steady.

Mark opened his mouth to say something. What, he was never sure of, even later. A cry for help? A muttered swear? A senseless attempt to communicate with a wild serpent? Whatever it was, his abortive attempt at speech was interrupted by the

feel of a rattlesnake's tail being carefully but firmly placed over his mouth. He turned his head to look up. Looking back and down at him was the tail's owner, who was another enormous rattlesnake. Mark turned back to look at the one in front of him — who, slowly but unmistakably, shook its head in an obvious 'no.'

Well, thought Mark, *we'll just take that as a hint.* He put himself in a sitting position against the wall, gingerly raised his hands briefly (the rattlers seemed to take no offense at either of those things), and smiled just as gingerly. The tail from above retreated, and the contemplative rattler gave Mark an equally slow and unmistakable nod 'yes.' Then it went back to look at the cave front.

Whatever was going on, Mark hoped it would work itself out before a chamberpot was required. A bit later, he was cursing his naive optimism. The lack of a chamberpot was proving to be the least of his worries.

#

It would be a cliché to say Mark had been obsessively thinking about the last few weeks — but clichés exist because they're usually accurate, at the core. He was trapped in a cave full of passive yet disturbingly intelligent rattlesnakes. Morbidly remembering the past had its points.

What was so confusing was how *quickly* disaster had struck. A month ago Mark was the heir to a reasonably prosperous desert and mountain realm. Nothing was really wrong, was it? Oh, certainly to the west there were the California barbie petty-kingdoms, but their kens never came east except as mercenaries or bodyguards. The lands to the south and north were quiet neighbors, uninterested in bothering Deseret, and it pleased Deseret to return the courtesy.

And, sure, to the east there was always talk about how the Universal Dominion was moving in Deseret's direction, but those stories never seemed very important. Or not as important as the latest coffee-house or bordello or wizard's spectacle. The few times Mark had thought to ask his father about the situation, he had been given a reassuring pat on the shoulder and a mostly-genial reminder to not worry about the cares of State until he was the one sitting behind the President's Desk.

I should have made you ready for this, Mark fancied he heard his father say. More likely it was a thought in his head. *But I remembered my own youth too much,* the voice went on.

Now Mark was *certain* he was making up his father's voice: the court had long ago learned it was unwise to remind Oliver Smith how his older brother Wallace was originally the heir. It was usually conceded Oliver was the better choice to succeed old President Eliza when she abdicated; he was certainly the one with more ken mercenaries at that moment. And soldiers often mattered more than other factors, in a succession crisis.

But his father never seemed willing to let anyone else really

do anything themselves. Particularly Mark. Although Mark never tried, once he understood how low the expectations actually were for him. 'Don't throw up in public' and 'No means no' seemed mostly sufficient.

I was afraid you would do to me what I did to my own mother. Mark shuddered. Hallucination or not, impossibly frank or not; his imagination was doing an amazingly good job of reproducing his father's voice. *I feared you would set me aside, before I was finished with my work,* the voice inside his head went on. *And now others have set me aside, and the work shall remain undone forever.*

And wasn't *that* a cheerful thought to have, in a cave full of venomous snakes.

#

When things finally changed, it was heralded with the sounds of rattles. Every snake in the cave had started up rattling, from the ones nearest the cave mouth to the ones in the fissure behind him. The sudden cacophony nearly made Mark not need a chamberpot after all; but it was damnably peculiar. The snakes weren't reacting to him. All the ones he could see were aligned to face the cave mouth, and ignoring Mark completely.

Mark Smith was not a coward, although he had been thinking of himself as one for the last, horrible week. But he could taste his own fear on his lips, and right then he hated himself for it almost enough to do something suicidally reckless. What saved his life was the cold fact he was too tired and heart-sore to react properly to any kind of new situation. A state of shock can take many forms.

As the rattling intensified, Mark began to feel queasy, as if he wanted to vomit but couldn't quite remember how. He could also feel a pressure approaching; it was a wind which pushed only the mind, bringing with it a hungry-sound hum. He knew both the wind, and the hum. Both had the horrible feel of Dominion sorcery. Which meant the bastards had found him, after all, or were about to.

When the ball of painful, tooth-jarring light of a Dominion scrying probe finally drifted into the cave, the rattling from the snakes grew louder than anything Mark had ever heard before. The rattling was relentless, and just this short of frantic, and as the probe moved over the snakes Mark could see the waves of sound from the rattling make it bob and shimmy in the air. But the probe kept pulsing waves of horrid colors all over the cave, missing not an inch. It *would* see him. It probably already had - but Mark sat resolutely still as the colors from the probe crawled over him. He saw no reason to die tired. Or more tired.

The wave of colors passed over him, and it was all Mark could do not to vomit at the crawling chaos flowing over and through him. The greasy outrage left him feeling uncleaner than he had ever felt. And then the probe seemingly ignored him

completely, and kept scanning the cave.

At first he didn't believe he had really escaped the notice of the Dominion probe. It wasn't until the foul thing left, and the rattling slowed, softened, then stopped completely that Mark accepted he was *not* about to be caught and tortured to death. Or, at least, not right away. He felt no relief; merely a certain amount of detached confusion and curiosity. He was too worn-out for anything else.

So when the snakes began to flow around him and guide him to the dark fissure in the back of the cave, Mark went with them — not willingly, but not reluctantly, either. Why not? Well and truly, why not?

#

The fissure was deep and long, but Mark reflexively followed it down and into the dark for a goodly while. By the time he had recovered enough to get a good panic going, it didn't matter anyway. He couldn't see a damned thing, and there was no chance he'd be able to find his way back. But it still felt rawly tense to stumble through the absolute blackness.

If only it had been as quiet as it was dark!

Mark could hear things in this state he would never hear, otherwise. Not just his breath and heartbeat and the slight rustle of his own clothing, either. He could hear the dead. That day Mark Smith learned how the dead *can* still sometimes speak, if only the living would bother to listen.

Here, down in the dark, Mark had no choice but to listen as the dead souls flopped and squirmed in the thirsty, dry dirt. *Your family failed us*, he could hear them say. *What have you done?*

At first Mark assumed that, like before, this was merely his own guilt lashing out in his mind, but as he was led downward through gentle serpentine pushes on arm and leg, the voices grew more forceful, and the snakes seemed almost eager to move him along past them. *You were false shepherds*, Mark heard.

False priests. The voices were bitter with accusation. But the voices also seemed to be fading as he and the snakes moved, which was a comfort, surely?

False rulers. The scorn was heavy, if harder to hear. *You run from us, as you ran from our killers*.

That made him stop. It even made him angry. "What do you want me to do?" Mark shouted at the darkness, as the snakes all around him started to rattle what he assumed now were their protective spells.

And then *something* seemed to coalesce out of nothing, or perhaps it concentrated the Stygian blackness into an even deeper blackness, a dark that could eat light itself. Later Mark considered it might have also eaten *him*, but at the time he was simply too tired to be afraid.

The more-than-darkness spoke. *What could you possibly want to do?* That came out with an almost tangible bitterness, but

also disappointment. Mark blinked back sudden hotness in his eyes.

"I want to stop being taken places for my own good," he said, quietly at first but building up quickly. "I want to do something. I want" — and this, Mark almost yelled — "I want to hit *back!*"

The darkness paused. It almost seemed provoked to pause, as if that was an answer it had not expected, but felt obligated to respect. And then, over the now-frantic rattling, Mark heard a soft response. *Then do so.*

"I don't know how!"

Learn.

#

In the moments of frantic travel which followed — the snakes were eager to leave behind that greater darkness, which seemed disinclined to follow — Mark felt empty and lost. Perhaps the snakes tasted the despair on his skin, for after a few minutes the movement around him died down again; as Mark stopped, he felt a snake slither up his body and onto his arm. He did not cry out, because at some point in this endless darkness he left his fear of snakes behind, but it was still startling to feel the serpent's head press something into Mark's hand. Something which glowed at his touch.

Mark looked at the artifact; it was one of the glowsticks of the Old Americans, still working somehow after three and a half centuries. The light wasn't much, even after it brightened at his touch, but it was enough to let him now see ceilings and walls and sudden fissures in the ground. More importantly, it was a comfort. "Thank you," said Mark to the snake coiled around his arm. It tightened itself slightly in apparent response before it gracefully half-flowed, half dropped off of his body.

He still felt like he was in the grips of a fever dream. But now that Mark was calmer, he was now certain of one thing; the snakes were not his enemies. They had protected him from danger now twice. And even if he was just being preserved for some later horrible use, the snakes were likely to be less cruel about it than the Dominion would happily be. Besides, the snakes seemed to know what they were doing, and they clearly had some sort of plan. Which put them two up on Mark Smith, and he knew it.

#

Either they were not going far, or the darkness had distorted Mark's perception of time and distance, but fairly soon Mark and the snakes arrived at a larger cave entrance. Surprisingly, the cave inside smelled of water and green and there even appeared to be some kind of natural light from above. They had gone down ledges, and gone up them, too, so this meant — well, this meant Mark Smith was seriously lost at this point. But he knew that already.

At one edge of the cave was a patch of what proved to be

actual *sunlight* from above; in it sat a cloaked and hooded figure, on a roughly-hewn stone throne. Around the figure were a few creatures, half-sitting, half-sprawled on the cavern floor. Mark looked upon both figure and creatures, and knew immediately he was the only human being in the cave.

But it wasn't really too bad, honestly. The figure was so obviously a pile of snakes in a robe it was almost comical; and while the creatures were humanoid in shape, at least from the waist up, they were definitely not close enough to human to be upsetting – and they all gave off a distinct aura of 'childlike.' Well-behaved children, valiantly trying to stay still like they were told, but still being fidgety about it. They had big eyes, too, which they used to look curiously at Mark until something else distracted them; like a surreptitious poke by one at another's side which made the whole bunch hiss and click at each other until the figure made its own multi-tongued hiss.

"Enough, children. Well done! But go off and play." Again, it could have been worse. The figure's voice wasn't *awful*, once you accepted how it was made up of a hundred snakes trying to duplicate Old American through the use of clever harmonics. The figure had about as good a mastery of the slightly archaic tongue as Mark did, in fact. "They see few men," half-explained, half-apologized the figure. "I promised them they could come forth and greet you, President Smith."

Mark had forbidden his guards to call him by his father's title, out of shame, but he could not command – well, who, or *what*, was this? Mark collected the tangled remains of his manners and managed to get out, "They seem very, ah, civil. Please forgive me, but I do not know your name?"

"Indeed you do not, for I have neglected to give it to you." If the figure had any trouble with using the formalities and cadences of Old American, it was not obvious. "My name is itself a tale. Would you care to hear it? And, please, make yourself comfortable." The figure indicated a table to one side, complete with what looked like a pitcher of water and some fruits and – praise the Lord! – cheese. There was even a real chair to sit on.

Mark Smith had enough self-restraint to eat like a proper Deseret gentleman, but it was hard not to tear up at the simple courtesies of clean food and the chance to eat properly. If the figure noticed any random tears which did form, it courteously ignored them. Instead, it waited until Mark had drunk deep from the deliciously cold spring water before speaking again.

"When I was first created," the creature continued, "the sorcerers who brought me forth sought to yoke me with a name of dark binding, the better to suit their foul vision. For a long time after breaking free of their chains I rejected the name they gave me. I had no wish to give them any satisfaction at all." If a hundred serpents could hiss a sigh, the figure

sighed. "But with age comes learning, and hopefully wisdom. I have thought long on my origins, and I have learned the legends of the Old Americans, and so now I take for my own the name which my makers thought to force upon me."

"My name is Yig, Father of Serpents. I greet you, O exiled Lord of Deseret. And rest assured: 'We be of one blood, ye and I.' For we share a bitter enemy."

#

Domain of Yig

2457 AD

The twin swords in his opponent's hands did their level best to mesmerize Mark. It was almost hypnotic, the way they swayed easily, first here, then there, then high, then low – and suddenly they snapped out of their pattern to slash. He might have stopped them, even then, except for the vicious stamp-kick his foe somehow managed to painfully administer to Mark's leg. The twin swords slammed into Mark's gut, smashing him to the floor.

He was wearing leather armor there, naturally. And on his legs. And the 'swords' were padded wood, because this was a training bout, not a death-match. But *Goddammit* if it still didn't hurt like the Devil.

Settling into Yig's Domain had been surprisingly easy. He had plenty to eat, clothes to wear, and even a bed to sleep in. Everything was far cruder than he had been used to as the heir to Deseret, but Mark ruthlessly forced down even any hint of petulance or disdain which tried to bubble up. Self-pity was a decadent luxury, these days.

So was boredom, so when Yig had suggested a training program, Mark had happily gone along. He had assumed it mostly would be about keeping his edge, for hadn't he been given proper training? He soon learned the depths of self-delusion in that slightly arrogant assumption.

For example: fighting a collection of snakes in full plate armor (steel, and slightly dusty) was something which sounded easy enough to Mark, right up to the moment where he realized how the snakes were more or less enchanted to use the armor effectively. Also, they didn't fight fair. And they had reflexes like, well, a snake's.

Mark picked himself up off the cave that served as a gym. In front of him, the ambulatory plate mail waited just enough for Mark to be vertical, then started swinging both of those damnable padded swords at him again. This time Mark dodged properly when one steel foot suddenly tried to slam into his shin. He even almost managed to use his shield to block both sword shots. Almost.

As Mark clattered down again, he consoled himself about how he was living longer in these bouts, at least. And that there would be archery next. Archery, he had always been good at. But

then, hunting was far closer to war than honor-duels in the old days were.

#

Domain of Yig, 2457 AD

Being attacked in the dark is hard. It's harder when you don't allow yourself to fight back. It's hardest when your opponents know this, so they take their time beating you. And never mind how none of the blows were physical; there's more than one way to drive a man to his knees in pain.

We hid out for nine months, the latest voice told him. My youngest girl died – her name was Eliza, after your grandmother – but the rest of us stayed alive. Then we went looking for somewhere to farm. We didn't care what it was, as long as the family could stay together.

But my wife was so thin by then, and she got the coughing sickness, and we had to bury her under a pile of stones because of the coyotes. Then we lost little Hannah to bad water, and my boy Joe fell into the ravine and Jack just never came back from hunting one night, and then my eldest Billy got wild about getting a lick in against the invaders and ran off to join the Danite resistance. When they sent me word how his band got wiped out in an ambush, well, I didn't have anything left, did I?

There was one of the invaders in Myton, living it up like he was some kind of bishop. He figured he could do what he wanted because he'd fireball the town if anybody looked at him cross-eyed. And they were real scared of him, too. So I didn't tell nobody nothing about what I was gonna do until I got close enough.

The look on his face when my knife went into his gut! He was all wriggling and howling and burning me with fire and I was howling too when my eyeballs burst. His soldiers were hacking at me, too, but it wasn't nothing much, so I held on with the knife and kept shoving it back and forth until he stopped moving and then I could hear the screaming outside. I guess he had spells set up for if he died. I died hearing the whole village scream.

The worst part was, this last voice wasn't even as angry as some of the others had been. When it said, *You want to hear them scream too, boy?* – it didn't seem like a rhetorical question. At first, the voices made him listen to it all whether he wanted to or not. But the more he came here the more – well, they didn't become more *forgiving*. They still thought Mark owed them a debt. But perhaps they were beginning to believe how maybe Mark acknowledged the debt, and would try to pay it off.

So... "Yeah," mumbled Mark through lips sore from where he had bitten them. "Give me all of it. All of it." **Somebody** living needs to hear it, he thought. And it looked like Mark Smith was going to have to be somebody.

#

Domain of Yig

2458 AD

"Why am I reading this?" Mark asked, not quite peevishly. "Why do you care if I do?"

Yig looked over at Mark. Which is to say, the hood which contained the snakes he was using to see with today shifted direction to have him 'face' Mark. After a couple of years, Mark had finally gotten used to it, to the point where the hood pretty much was just 'the head' by now.

"It is one of your Holy Books," Yig observed. They were speaking regular American; Yig's command of the modern tongue had improved, once he had started getting more practice. "A bishop of your faith should try to read it at least once."

"How sharper than a serpent's tooth," murmured Mark.

"I'm flattered you see me as a father figure," responded Yig. "And the verse is from your *other* Holy Book. But full credit for remembering something from it which wasn't nasty about snakes."

"Fine," said Mark. "But why do you care? I mean, shouldn't you be trying to seduce me away from my faith?"

"Really?" said Yig. "Why?" Mark noted Yig sounded honestly confused.

"Well," said Mark. "You're some kind of god, right?"

"That is a complex question which is best answered vaguely," said Yig. "In other words: it depends."

"Well, the snakes worship you. And your Children do, too." At the word 'Children' one of the snake-kids looked up, briefly. Mark was struck by how much more intelligence there was in the kids' eyes, these days. But they were still good-natured.

"I admit, this is more or less true," said Yig. "But I give the snakes protection, and I am uplifting the Children. They have perfectly good reasons to worship me. But, Mark... how do I put this nicely? You're not a snake. Besides, you already have a god. I'm really not interested in pissing him off."

Yig jerked his head. "And that's why I want you to read your own scriptures again. Or for the first time. Because I don't think you want to piss him off, either."

"Like my family did?" Mark said, just a little bitterly.

"You're sounding a bit too prideful," said Yig, "in an upside-down kind of way. I don't know why we've been cursed with the Universal Dominion like this, but I don't think it was because of anything any one person did. I mean, I'm stuck with them too, and I haven't really done anything to deserve it."

Mark was quiet for a moment. "How bad is it, up there? I hear the whispering horrors when I'm in the dark, but none of them know the whole tale."

"It's very bad," said Yig. "The Dominion didn't conquer all of Deseret. But it did take a third, and made another third lawless. Something about bands of desert raiders and slavers appeals to the bastards. Or maybe they just like to watch your

countrymen scramble to keep everything they've built and sweated over from being wiped out."

"I should be up there."

"And doing what, besides dying? Oh, you're doing better with the fighting, now that somebody's making you practice every day. But if you want to *rule* your people again, you should know more about them. Which starts with actually reading the holy books for the religion you're the high priest-king of."

Mark grimaced. "But do they want me to rule them?" he asked. "The dynasty didn't end well."

Yig sighed. "There's a book in here somewhere – where is it? Oh, thank you," he said to one of the Children, who had brought an Old American tome up. This was one of the things about the Children of Yig, Mark had noticed: they still weren't exactly smart, but they were really very good at being helpful.

Yig peered over the book, somehow giving the impression of wearing spectacles despite the fact he was still a collection of snakes in a robe, and started to read. "The dwarf says – You should understand, these two aren't *exactly* a dwarf and an elf talking," explained Yig. "It's kind of complicated. Anyway, the dwarf says *It is ever so with the things that Men begin. There is a frost in Spring, or a blight in Summer, and they fail of their promise.*

"And then the elf replies, *Yet seldom do they fail of their seed. And that will lie in the dust and rot to spring up again in times and places unlooked-for.*" Yig looked over at Mark. "You're down here in the dust for a reason, Mark. And it's not for any reason of mine, although I'm happy to host you. I don't think your god is quite done with your dynasty yet."

Mark sighed. Yig was right. He couldn't even complain that his own parents had never prepared him for this, because, despite what Yig said, Mark was fairly sure his dynasty becoming such irreligious religious leaders probably hadn't helped matters much with God. And since Mark did want to rule his people – even if only it would make it so much easier to Smite the Dominion properly – he would just have to buckle down to work.

#

Mark was up to three-versus-one bouts by now in the combat drills, which well and truly sucked. And archery wasn't as much fun, thanks to all the enthusiastic snakes trying to mess up Mark's aim. Well, that last part was a lie. It only wasn't as much fun when the distractions worked. Which was happening less often.

Right then, one of his sparring partners took advantage of Mark's flicker of self-congratulation to fling itself – well, themselves – at his legs, accepting the reflexive hit to let its two companions strike high and low. They were all using steel weapons and armor by now; the blades were dull, which was the only concession reluctantly made for training.

And, to add insult to not-quite injury, Mark fell over the

prone set of armor. Being on the ground there meant he could hear the good-natured derisive rattling from the snakes inside. "Yeah, yeah," Mark said. "Rub it in."

When Mark stood, he extended a helping hand to the prone snakes-in-armor. They could move around pretty well in full plate mail, somehow, but once they fell down, regaining their 'feet' could be a problem. Mark had long since stopped noticing how it was odd to spar this way, or that he was interacting daily with a host of highly venomous reptiles. He did vaguely remember being afraid of snakes, but it all seemed rather silly now.

Mark got back into the center of the circle, snapped down his visor, and took his stance. "Best two falls out of three?" he asked. "Let's see if you can fool me twice."

#

My name is Godfrey Carter, the voice said. Mark knew this whispered accusation in the dark would someday come, and he thought he had prepared for it. But that was silly; of course he hadn't.

Me and my buddies, we figured it wouldn't be hard to be Guards for the snotnose. Carter's whisper wasn't even too scornful, which felt bizarrely insulting, somehow. And it wasn't. He didn't care about us, and we didn't care about him. I didn't hate him, either. What would be the point? And it was real soft duty.

And then it got hard. The Old Man, he told us himself to get the snotnose out of the City, 'just in case.' Like there was a chance the Dominion wasn't coming over the wall! But we saluted and got the snotnose out of there. And we ran. We ran, and every time one of us died keeping the snotnose alive, the rest of us looked at each other and wondered who the next person was gonna be. And then it was just me, and the snotnose.

I'll give him this, though. When he had no fucking choice left, the snotnose at least tried to go down swinging. It would have been better if Carter's whisper had sounded anything except surprised. Still had to save his ass, but that's the job, hey-hey? And he lit a fire for me, before I died. Put me in a blanket and everything. That was something.

But you never knew my name, did you?

Mark was silent, but not for long. He wasn't going to permit himself the luxury of self-pity. "No, I didn't," he said aloud. "No excuse for it, Guardsman Carter."

No apology, either?

"You already know I'm sorry, and I can't make restitution," said Mark. "What entitles me to get off the hook for this?"

*Fair enough. That surprised Mark; the whispering dead were usually understandably unwilling to bend even that much when it came to criticizing him. But you are **sure** you can't make restitution for this, Smith? Carter's voice felt silent, and never returned that day, or ever. But Mark thought about his*

words for a long time afterward.

#

Domain of Yig
2459 AD

"What do you want from all of this?" asked Mark, one day. The question seemed to come out of nowhere, even to him. But the way Yig looked at him suggested his host had been waiting for this question for a while now.

"Right now?" Yig shrugged. "When you leave, I want you to be as prepared as you can. Not that I'm throwing you out, Mark."

"I know," Mark said. "But we both know I'm not going to be staying here forever."

"Yes. And it's going to be rough for you up there," said Yig. "Won't lie, Mark: you may end up getting yourself killed."

Yig spread his hands. "But!" he said. "If you end up winning up there, then yes, I would like something from you. Something you won't mind granting, either."

"I'm going to assume it's not gold," Mark said dryly. One thing he had discovered early was that Yig didn't lack for treasure. Yig's vault had coins from Deseret and Sonora and New California and Old America and even a few legendary *reales* from the equally legendary (and ancient) *conquistadors*. As Yig had said, once: humans were good at burying valuables, but not always as good at remembering where.

"You're right, it's not," said Yig. "I want something more valuable: peace." He waved a hand at his Children. "They're not quite ready to slither and think and live their own lives. But when they do, I want there to be somewhere where they won't be afraid to slither under the open sky. And I'm pretty sure the Dominion will never be that kind of place."

"Yeah, I'm pretty sure I agree with you," said Mark. "What about the regular snakes, though?"

"Even easier," said Yig. "They'll be happy with simple coexistence. Just don't attack them, and they won't attack you. Even if one of your people accidentally steps on one of mine." Yig paused. "'Course, this means a lot of them might move into your basements. Which should fix your mice problems, anyway."

Mark nodded, judiciously. "I think I can live with the bargain," he said as he rose. "And if I can ever get anybody up there to do what I say, so will they." He extended his hand. "Shake on it?"

Yig snorted and lifted his sleeve, which was of course filled with snakes. Mark shook his head. "Yeah, I know, but still. Shake on it?"

Shaking hands with a humanoid-shaped pile of snakes is an experience most people never get to experience. Mark wasn't ever sure if he was blessed or cursed with the memory, but he never regretted the experience itself. It ended up meaning too much.

#

Domain of Yig
2460 AD

Yig could have let him leave by a more convenient way, but Mark thought it best to exit the Domain by the same path he had taken to enter it. Well, up to a point; he wanted to be well south of what was once the capital when he walked again under the open sky.

By now the way was easy. Years underground had taught Mark how to feel the clear paths from changes in the air or the way sounds reverberated off of the walls. The torch didn't hurt, either; after all, Mark needed to get used to daylight again. But when he found a certain spot, he doused the light. He suspected it would be easier to hear the voices from before that way.

And they did come. They came with five more years of weariness and pain, but they came. *Are you done running?* they asked.

"I didn't run," Mark said. "I *learned*." He bared his teeth in what wasn't even remotely a smile. "As you asked."

As you were told, one voice from the throng seemed to chide. Mark shivered; it sounded far too much like his grandmother's. But he shook his head.

"No," said Mark. "You do not command a king. You entreat him."

So you call yourself a king, then?

"I call myself nothing," Mark said. "I am who I am. Mark, of the Smith Dynasty. Styled President of Deseret; but the gentiles would call me a king, so I recognize their term. Would you contest my decision?"

And what if I do? That familiar whisper had a deeper tone, somehow; and the darkness congealed around the whisper seemed more solid, somehow, than Mark expected.

But Mark's voice was steady. "Then we would have a dispute," he said. "And let me ask you; when our dispute was settled, would you be any closer to seeing the Universal Dominion receive retribution for their crimes? Whether you win, or lose?"

The deeper darkness seemed to consider this, and retreated without further comment. At least this time. Mark suspected he would eventually hear something further on this, somehow. Hopefully, he'd find out whether the objection was to the authority Mark was now claiming, or whether it was to Mark being the one claiming it.

But the other whispers were no longer silent. *And what will you be king of?* came from a dozen places at once. It was, Mark conceded, a fair question.

And this time, someone could fairly call Mark's expression a smile. "Watch, and see."

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