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## *The Way*

**L**amech bolted awake with a sudden gasp, his eyes searching wildly in the darkness, his face clammy with sweat, and his heart pounding. He gulped down a breath, and then another, as the nightmare slowly faded and reality flooded back. The thumping of his heart slowed. In the sliver of starlight through the narrow slit in the stone wall, the dungeon chamber came faintly into view. The shuttered moonglass mounted on the wall near the bolted door showed only dim lines of light now. *A dream.* His breathing trembled in his chest, and he let it drain away in the dark. *That's all it was.*

As the incubus of the night swiftly dissipated back into the misty netherworlds from which nightmares arise, Lamech tried to cling onto the tattered fragments before they'd completely vanished. He remembered a battle, swords ringing, proj-lances flashing their deadly missiles. Mishah had been there, fleeing for her life, with Amolikah at her side. He remembered blood, and feeling Mishah's fear. He'd seen men die ... and giant golden statues come to life.

He drew in another breath and let it hiss through his teeth, remembering how Mishah had been haunted by night visions. Was this

dream like the dreams that had wrenched his wife from sleep, trembling at his side, clinging to him as if she feared being torn from his arms and plunged back into her night torments?

*They're only dreams, Mishah. They can't hurt you.*

The memory opened a door to the emptiness in his heart. Oh, that he could hold her now. That she could comfort him. And what of his son?

It had been so real ... but it had only been a dream.

He studied the shadowy hammocks hanging about the dungeon. The other men were still asleep. At least he hadn't woken them. He settled his head back onto the rolled blanket and looked across the dark room at the slumbering bulk of one of the prisoners. Somehow, Klesec reminded him of the man in his dream. Was it because of his size? As he peered at the dark form, a glint of reflected starlight peered back at him.

Lamech looked away. So, his sudden start *had* woken one of them. Did nothing ever get past this big man?



The next day, at the end of their work shift, Quort Whip En'tuboc ordered the six weary men of Lamech's work quart into a row against the stone prison wall. The men dragged themselves into a ragged line. If En'tuboc had ordered them to attention, which he didn't, the results would have been only slightly improved: a straightened shoulder here perhaps, a groaning spine forcing itself from a fatigued slouch there. After fourteen hours of chopping wood for the Temple construction work fires, there was little left in a man.

Lamech stood slightly straighter than his companions, except for Klesec, whose size and muscles put him far ahead of the five other convicts of Quort Nineteen. But for Lamech, this was more than a backbreaking stint. A battle of wills had taken shape in his mind the moment they'd wrenched him from the arms of his beloved wife and

had marched him down the dark stone corridor to a waiting prison wagon.

“Hear me, village grubs!” En’tuboc growled, pacing before them. He stopped and planted his fists upon his waist, his long whip held in coils in his right hand. The low sun glaring at En’tuboc’s back forced Lamech’s eyes down toward the crushed gravel. “You’ve been promoted.”

His sneering tone warned Lamech this promotion might make wood gathering seem like a holiday. Lamech forced his eyes to En’tuboc’s pugnacious face, framed in long reddish brown hair, a hank of it held off to one side in a blue enameled clip. He concentrated on the thick ropelike braids of En’tuboc’s dark beard and endured the glare.

“Tomorrow you get to work with the animals.” A contemptuous grin spread the beard.

What did that mean? Lamech owned many animals on his farm, back in the Lee-lands of Morg’Seth. But there was something else here, something En’tuboc found humorous. Since arriving at the prison, Lamech could not remember ever seeing the Quort Whip crack a smile.

Standing beside Lamech, Orm’el gave a low groan.

En’tuboc silenced him with a narrowed look. “Ah, so you understand.”



Later, in the dank holding cell with only a narrow slit for light and fresh air, Ker-bar and Fa-elak cornered Orm’el. “What does it mean? What’s the matter with working with the animals?” Ker-bar demanded.

Lamech filled a cup from the flowing trough cut into the stone wall as Orm’el flopped on the rope hammock and stared at the moldy stones overhead. “It means we’ll be shoveling behemoth girt.”

“Behemoth!” Fa-elak scrunched his face into a mask of disgust and slumped to his own cot.

Mantir chuckled. “Watch your tongue, Orm’el. You might offend the preacher.”

Lamech looked up from his cup of tepid water.

Orm’el, an ex-miner from the Ugmot district in the land of Havilah, only laughed.

Lamech walked to the stone slit and stared out at the darkening sky, catching a faint breeze before it had a chance to sour in the tight confine where the six men of Quort Nineteen slept. *So be it, Creator. If shoveling behemoth dung is where you want me, then that’s where I’ll serve. You’ve taken me from Mishah and put me here for a reason, though I don’t see it yet.* He drew in a breath and turned back. Klesc’s eyes darted away from him.

The sound of the food slot opening invigorated the men. As the tray slipped through, they dove for the bowls of gruel, the orofins and bananas, and the berries. Lamech darted in to claim his share. He had learned early on that the arrival of food turned every man for himself. If someone decided to take your share, it was up to you to wrest it from him or go hungry.

Animals. They had sunk to that level. And now on the morn they’d be tending to animals. A smile creased his face at the irony of it. He took his food back to his hammock, and after whispering a prayer of thanks, devoured it. Rule of law and civility did not apply here. Once the door was bolted and the prisoners caged together, the rule of tooth and claw took over.

Klesc sat by himself against the stones near the trough where a trickle of water flowed. He was a big man. He reminded Lamech of another big man who’d briefly stepped into and then out of his life a few weeks back ... or had it been longer?

Klesc did his work without complaining and kept to himself. He appeared simpleminded, except his eyes were forever in motion,

constantly wary, never surprised. What secrets did Klesc hide?

Rumor had it he'd been arrested for killing a man over a matter of a few glecks owed to him. He'd wrecked a festival hall in the process, and it had taken more than twenty green-cloaks to bring him down. Afterward, half of the Lodath's Guards who'd been involved in the skirmish had been carted off to the local healer. Lamech gave a quiet laugh. Judging from the man's size, he could believe it.

The others were freer in their speech. Orm'el claimed to be an ex-miner, in prison for murder as well. Fa-elak and Ker-bar were thieves, arrested while leaving a precious stone merchant with pocketfuls of emeralds. And Mantir had been caught stamping counterfeit glecks out of a tin-lead alloy and, through some alchemy of his own devising, coloring them gold. The bogus money felt and looked right, but when a Web merchant accidentally set one on a stove only to return it to a silvery puddle, Mantir found himself in the clutches of King Irad's soldiers. Mantir had laughed when he'd told the story and afterward sat shaking his head mumbling how he had to get the mixture right next time.

Theirs had all been civil infractions. Lamech admitted to no crime, except that of preaching about the Creator and speaking against the Oracle in Nod City. His had been religious, and his punishment harsher than usual. Fifteen years on the Temple gang.

*There must be a reason?*

Night drew over the dungeon, the darkness tempered only by a rectangle of light from the moonglass set in the wall behind narrowed shutters: hardly enough to read by, had there been anything to read. Lamech peered through the stone slit to the night sky, smelling the smoke of the fires around the Temple site. He studied the stars. There, written in the heavens, was his book and the story of his hope.

He sighed and climbed into the rope hammock. Already, soft snoring filled the room. Tomorrow would be here soon enough. He closed his eyes and imagined Mishah in his arms. Had she completed

her pilgrimage? Memory of the dream reared its snarling head. He forced it from his thoughts. He had to believe she was safe. To think otherwise was dangerous, yet even as he drifted off to sleep, his spirit was troubled.



The sun that burned upon his naked shoulders and the acrid smoke that stung his nose were both only vague, distant annoyances....

Nothing smelled worse than the watery dung of a behemoth. The stench of it in the sweltering heat battered Lamech's nose. Its sharp odor permeated the pores of his skin and burrowed permanently into the material of his breechcloth. The Quort Whip had not permitted the men to work in their clothes, growling that he'd never hear an end to it if he allowed his charges to return to the Temple Prison reeking of behemoth dung.

"Clear the runway!" a voice from above bellowed through a funnel.

The men scurried out of the way. Lamech and Fa-elak grabbed their dump carts and moved them aside as the behemoth's knees passed by Lamech's nose, each earthshaking step covering seven spans. Lamech kept one eye on the giant beast's tail, fully as long as a cedar tree.

He parked his dung-filled dump cart and then gathered with the others under En'tuboc's watchful gaze. The behemoth lumbered down the runway, its taut harness a cable of woven spider silk, thick around as a man's arm, moving through the pulleys. High overhead, suspended by a gigantic balloon, the heavy-lifting platform dipped sharply as a block of dressed stone, harnessed in iron straps, rose off a cart and swayed a moment, three spans above the ground.

Lamech caught his breath. This was always the most dangerous part of the operation, especially in the heat of the day. The behemoth

strained under the weight, while overhead the heavy-lifting platform canted more steeply to one side. Activity around the Temple site came momentarily to a halt as all watched—all but those feeding the roaring fires that drove heated air up long fabric tubes to the massive balloon.

As the block of stone rose higher, men aboard the heavy-lifting platform began signaling with flags. Here and there tether lines were adjusted, some hauled in, others let out. Lamech marveled at the precise choreography of handlers, behemoths, and signalers. Slowly the platform shifted, its massive oval shadow drifting across the construction site as the quarried block swung into place. Once the massive stone was positioned, the behemoth, following the commands of its handler, slowly backed up until the block had settled exactly in place upon the huge structure rising up out on the Plains of Irad.

The maneuver completed, En'tuboc ordered the men back to work.

Ker-bar grabbed a shovel and grouched, "If they'd stop feeding them beasts, we wouldn't have to clean up after them!"

Mantir chuckled, levering a shovel over his shoulder. Orm'el followed after Ker-bar and Fa-elak. Without a word, Klesec strode to a pile and began heaving dripping shovelfuls into Lamech's handcart.

They labored far into the night; the heaviest blocks were always lifted after sundown, the cooler air giving more buoyancy to the balloon. At the third watch of the second quartering, En'tuboc marched them into the communal bath, where Lamech labored in vain to scrub the stench from his skin.

Back in their cell, the moonglass shutters stood wide open, and the soft glow of the magnetic light filled the musty room. Lamech gave a groan, put his back against the cool stone wall, and sank to the floor, lowering his head between his knees. The stagnant air smelled almost sweet compared to the stench of behemoth dung. Their food arrived and the men, driven by hunger, rallied, groping for anything

within reach. The smell of cooked flesh wafting from the food tray was tempting to a famished man, but Lamech chose instead cheese, fruit, vegetables, and gruel—his usual fare.

“You’ll not keep your strength, Preacher, eating like that,” Fa-elak groused. “We’ll all have to work the harder for it.”

It hadn’t been the first time Fa-elak had turned Lamech’s beliefs on him like a prod. Lamech knew it wasn’t his failing strength that Fa-elak was concerned about, but his refusal to compromise.

“When the Creator says I can eat the flesh of animals, then I will. Until then, the bounty of the ground will be my meat.” He waited for their derision, but most were too tired to bother. Orm’el would not goad; he never did. And neither would Klesc. But the others usually scoffed at his principles.

He finished his meal and stood wearily, taking his tin cup to the trough for a drink. Klesc, sitting in his usual place against the corner, watched him, his strong jaw grinding a tough keelit husk. Lamech gave the big man a haggard smile and crossed to the slim window. A brisk breeze tonight carried the smoke from the Temple’s construction fires southward over the Little Hiddekel River, and the stars showed clear.

“What is it you keep looking for, Preacher?” Orm’el tossed a bone onto the tray and grabbed the edge of his hammock, hauling himself wearily to his feet.

A question. Mishah had accused him of not knowing when to keep his mouth shut, but when one asks, how could he not answer? *Creator, watch over my tongue.* He turned from the slit as Orm’el limped over. “I look to the stars and the stories they tell,” Lamech said.

“A stargazer!” Ker-bar laughed. “Always figured you was some touched in the head, Lamech.”

“The preacher’s got a book in the sky,” Fa-elak scoffed. “Does this book have a name?”



“In fact, it does. It is called *The Way*.”

“You’re a dreamer.” Ker-bar threw a gnawed leg bone at him. Lamech ducked, and it smacked a greasy splotch on the stone wall.

“What stories do they tell, Preacher?” Orm’el asked, ignoring Ker-bar’s jab.

“From this window, I can see the story of Arieh, the Lion.”

Orm’el appeared skeptical but interested.

“The Lion represents the King. And beneath the Lion’s feet is the serpent, that ancient deceiver. In the midst of the sign is the cup, the divine cup of wrath being poured out on the serpent. And finally there is the sign of the raven. The raven is devouring the snake.”

Orm’el looked askance. “I don’t see nothing but stars, Preacher. Where’d you get all that?”

Lamech smiled. “That is all anyone sees, until they are taught. The night sky reveals twelve star pictures, but until you know the names of the stars and their meaning, you won’t be able to read it.”

Fa-elak laughed and tumbled back onto his hammock. “You read your star-book up or down? Or from left to right or right to left?”

“Neither. It’s read according to the brightness of the stars.” He looked back at Orm’el “The Creator has written his plan to redeem man in the heavens for all to see: from the Virgin to the Lion. The Creator has not left man without a witness.”

Orm’el stared at him a moment, then grinned and shook his head. Ker-bar and Fa-elak guffawed.

Mantir chuckled. “In here, talk like that will get you in trouble, Preacher. You’ll get a helping of En’tuboc’s whip if you don’t still your tongue.”

Klesc just watched him with that curious expression. Lamech grimaced. Mishah would have elbowed him and whispered sternly to keep his mouth shut.

His stomach knotted with renewed concern. How was she? Was she already on her way back home to the Lee-lands of Morg’Seth?

Surely she must be. And what of their child, their son? Memory of the dream roared back, sending a bolt of fear through him. It was only a nightmare. No more than that. Still, it left him shaking, and he quickly whispered a prayer that the birth of his son would be without problem and that Mishah would be protected through it.

With a clatter of a lever from outside the cell, the moonglass shutters slammed shut, throwing the dungeon into darkness. He left the window and crawled into his hammock, listening to the others wearily climb into their own rope slings and one by one fall asleep.