

Remembrance

It is the way of the people to keep the bodies of the departed until Sun's Returning, the day when Winter's grip loosens and releases the sun. When the first rays light the last step of the Hall of the Free, the villagers retrieve the mortal coils of those who have passed and begin the arduous climb to the highest peak. Atop Pars' Finger lies the interred bodies of a hundred generations. Every man and boy above ten closings of Winter's fist endure the ten-day trek, climbing steep rock faces and goat paths, following them ever skyward. At the summit, they spend the week burying the departed, in prayer and remembrance.

Finnel didn't know how to feel. On one hand, he was excited. This was his tenth Closing, meaning he was now old enough to be counted among the men and boys that would soon carry the year's dead up Pars' Finger. On the other hand, he felt a sickening sense of dread. The journey was harsh, a frigid climate and heavy snows still imperilled the way. Not all who made the trek returned, some fell along the journey and joined the bodies to be carried to the summit.

Two Closings earlier his elder brother Shaw had slipped on a treacherous cliff, falling the height of ten houses onto the stone below. His body was unable to be retrieved, and the villagers feared, as to leave his soul wandering without the guidance of their ancestors was taboo and would bring bad luck upon the people. When the news was returned to his mother, she took it stoically as all the women of the village did. No tears are allowed, only during the Mourn held during the Remembrance. Village law dictated that men should not see the pain of their women, lest they lose heart. The men spend the week at the summit in the Remembrance, a celebration of drinking and stories, telling tales and recounting the best of those passed on. No tears are shed and it's a festive, but bittersweet time. The Mourn is a time of grief and despair. The women are free to express their anguish and grief.

Finnel was glad to escape the Mourn. The change in his kin and community scared him. Always comforting and never negative, his mother and the other women of the village lost themselves in

their despair. The prevailing wailing, crying, and screams of sadness echoed and chilled his soul. This year he was to join in the much more uplifting Remembrance.

When his mind went over all this, he decided he would much rather be on top of the mountain toasting his fallen fellows, than listening to the keening of the village women. His stomach churned but he couldn't stop a small grin breaking out. This did not go unnoticed by Yarl the goatherder, who handed him a large pack and smiled his toothy, gap-filled smile. The unsuspecting boy took the proffered load. His knees nearly buckled, and he let out a gasp. He wondered why he was being given such a heavily laden burden and went to protest. He was silenced by the sight of the burly men of the village, each with a similar pack, only near thrice the size of his own.

Preparations finished, the procession moved out of the gates and beyond the village bounds. Finnel fell in beside Gregun, hunter of wolves and ice bears. The opposites walked in silence for a time, each focused on finding a comfortable rhythm of travel. His curiosity could not be contained however, and he pressed Gregun for a tale of adventure, pestering him with questions of the wilds outside the village. Gregun thought for a long moment, then spoke. His answers were simple, but the effect they had on Finnel was profound. His eyes grew huge, and he listened in rapture. Many hours passed as the woodsman spoke.

As darkness fell the group halted at a longhall. The last building along the trail, the members took advantage of the structure. It kept away the wind and snow, leaving the air comfortably frosty. At dawn they moved on.

Finnel looked about the column for Gregun. He found the man as one of four, all bearing the load of a wooden casket packed with ice. It contained the body of a deceased villager. Seeing the boy, Gregun sombrely shook his head at the unspoken question on his lips. Finnel moved away and continued to plod along, lost in his thoughts.

By the third evening, weariness and deep cold had set into his bones it seemed. Wallowing in his fatigue and suffering, he lamented he might never know warmth and contentment again. In his dreams he struggled up the mountain also, but at a section they had not yet passed. He was tired, so tired. His legs ached and his lungs burned. The icy wind blew strong and bit at his skin. The world went black momentarily, and he felt himself pitching sideways. As he fell through empty space a feeling of loneliness flowed through him. He shot awake as the illusion of an impact from a great height rocked his still body, and he gasped for breath. Scratchy blankets and solid stone beneath him reassured that it was only a dream.

The next morning as they ascended, he felt the fatigue he knew in his dreams seep in. The rest to the night he had spent sleepless, and it had left him drained. His feet felt like he was dragging the weight of the world. He barely registered his eyes closing and his body shutting down. Sleep called to him.

“Finnel.” A faint voice tickled his consciousness. It grew more insistent. “Finnel!” He opened his eyes to see who called. But the flow of exhausted men didn’t look up or seem disturbed, only moved past him methodically, each lost inside his own mind. No breath was wasted for idle chatter. He looked about for the source of the voice. A gust of wind brought the whispers to his ears as if from far below. “Brother, help me.”

The remaining fog in his brain instantly cleared. The voice belonged to Shaw. Finnel spun around wildly, searching for his lost brother. He called out to him begging him to know where he was.

“I’ve been trapped where I fell. I tried to communicate with anybody, but no one heard. They all continued on and left me here,” Shaw’s voice was not filled with bitterness, but loneliness. “Until you came. Please, don’t leave me alone again.” Finnel was filled with elation. His brother was alive!

Murmuring reassurances, he called out to the flow of men. He excitedly informed them of what he had learnt. The men shook their heads and told him it was the height and altitude, that he was hallucinating. His voice filled with desperation as he pleaded them to look. There was a quick

discussion amongst the heads of the village. They relented and agreed to a short search over the cliff. To leave a soul wandering and trapped alone without the help of their ancestors to guide them on to Pars' Halls, was a sin. And if Finnel spoke truthfully, they were obliged to find their lost companion.

A rope was secured and lowered over the edge. A brave volunteer descended carefully. "Over here, under the snow," prompted Shaw. A pit opened in Finnel's stomach, but he relayed the instructions. A second man joined the first, and together they dug. They gently extracted the frozen body of Shaw.

Hot bile rose in Finnel's throat, and he fought to keep from retching. Shaw's voice whispered to him upon the fierce wind that blew across the mountainside, "Take heart brother. Once in Pars' Halls, I will be at peace. You have spared me an eternity of solitude. I can now rightfully claim my place at Pars' Table and join our ancestors. Fear not for me."

Finnel nodded and scrubbed away his tears, lest they froze upon his face. The men brought up Shaw's body, bundling it appropriately for transport. The head of village Tolph approached Finnel. Clapping him on the back, he praised him for returning one of their members to be properly buried at the sacred resting place.

The group continued upward. The remainder of the journey passed without event and not a single death. At the summit, the fellows set up camp and began the preparations for the week of the Remembrance. The burial of his many kin and friends filled Finnel with sadness, tempered by the joy of the many tales told by the ones that knew them. He was handed a large mug as the men began to sit around a large roaring bonfire. The combination of fire, ale, tales, and toasts warmed his body and soul, driving away the grief and remembering those who had passed in all their glory. An icy wind momentarily swirled about him, and he heard his brother's whisper. "Thank you."