

The Doorway

©2011 Gary A. Hughes

Meredac walked across The Greenspace to meet Crentus, the mentor he'd drawn in the lottery. His time was drawing nearer, and Meredac needed to learn everything he could while he still had opportunity. Their paths converged and they continued on to the white columned edifice where lives were forever transformed.

"I was thinking about what you had to say concerning the next life. So much of it sounds bizarre and barbaric."

Crentus, looking like a venerable statue in his flowing white robes and placid expression, nodded. "Everyone wonders what's next. A great deal of science, even religion centers over the world to come. But whatever it is seems to be a one way street. Nobody comes back to report or visit."

"And the words of the spirits?" Meredac looked anxious and eager, hoping that some of what he'd been hearing might be true.

"They've been less than reliable." Crentus nodded, the seriousness on his face a warning to his pupil. "We've been warned they're not our friends. It's been said people have paid in the next life for consorting with spirits in this one. You know what we've been told, and I admit there seems little proof of any of it. But I do know the words of the spirits don't agree. They bring no consensus, only division."

"Why must there always be division?" The strongest emotion of the morning showed in Meredac's voice. "Whenever *The Creator* is mentioned, we find division. If He was really so great or good, couldn't he bring peace?"

"He does," whispered Crentus, fearing they might be overheard. "But peace is an individual gift. Those who promise wholesale peace put a price on it, and it's very high."

Meredac paused, noting well the caution evident in Crentus' demeanor. The price of peace did seem to be submission, a rigorous obedience that felt oppressive.

"Was it always this way?"

Crentus shrugged, "I don't know. I can't think of any way to be sure."

As they drew near the temple they paused, seating themselves on a stone bench close to the entrance. "Will we see Gorfintas today?"

Crentus nodded.

"I wish we didn't have to. Seeing someone take the path is horrible, watching them lose everything that made them what they were, becoming weak, dependent, vulnerable."

Crentus nodded again. "It's been especially hard with Gorfy. We can spar over ideas and concepts, but there's a definite tension between nurture and dominion that comes to a head in the next life. Many try to deny it, say there's no difference in anyone, but that seems to go against reality, for each man is different. How the mix balances out, or fails to balance, seems to leave room for a whole lot of conflict and conjecture."

"Crentus?" Meredac's voice was barely above a whisper, "Has The Creator really been down this path?"

Once more he nodded, a deep, slow movement that spoke of peace itself. "I can't prove it, but it goes far back in legend. As I face my turn, it's the only comforting thought I can call forth."

"Have you ever seen The Creator?"

Crentus shook his head, "No one has."

They sat for several minutes in silence, apparently steeling themselves for what awaited them within the marble structure.

"Crentus?"

"Yes?"

"Will we continue to look like we do?"

"I don't know."

"Will we have the same names?"

"I don't know."

"Will we be able to recognize one another?"

"I don't know."

"What do we know?"

Crentus frowned, as though a demand was being placed on him he wasn't ready for. "We really don't know anything. As the time draws nearer, though, we begin to sense things. Gorfintas did, and fought against every bit of it. I'm beginning to suspect things myself but I'm not having the same degree of anguish, not yet anyway. I've never had the same issues with control and authority Gorfy does or felt the conflicts between the dominant and nurturing axis' within me. The balance seems unique for everyone."

"Why should it make a difference?" Meredac was totally clueless.

Crentus sighed as he arose and resumed his journey into the hospice center. “I don’t know why but it does. And in answer to your last string of questions, I think everything changes, our appearance, our name, and our relationships. I can’t prove it, but it’s part of what I sense.”

The once proud figure of Gorfintas tugged at the hearts of both visitors as he reclined on a bed, no longer able to rise and greet them. With a great deal of exertion he sat up for a few moments, lying back down exhausted. No longer eloquent, his conversation was degenerating. *Yes* and *no*, nods, gestures, and unformed sounds were coming to express more and more of his thoughts and feelings.

Meredac looked on, trying to emote support and encouragement, wondering all the while why the exit had to be so humiliating. Crentus had been quick to point out we’d brought nothing into this life and could take nothing out of it, but the stripping seemed to include one’s personhood and even memories! None of Gorfintas’ many accomplishments seemed to matter now. And yet, his stubbornness, bitterness, and selfishness remained, no longer masked by cleverness but revealed as shackles, weighing him down.

In his eyes, the fire burned. *Somebody* did this to him, *Someone* should pay! He seemed anxious to pass the barrier, to renew his battle with the Creator none of them had seen. Perhaps that more than any other factor began to fix in Meredac’s mind that there might really be some truth in the nebulous rumors he’d heard all his life.

Crentus held out his hands to his mentor, offering whatever he could in terms of support and comfort. Gorfintas turned aside, the nurturing paradigm particularly abhorrent to him. His passion had been domination, any type of submission or subservience seen as capitulation, even bondage. It made his present circumstance nothing short of degrading. And yet, Meredac sensed that a measure of humility would have bestowed nobility, turning the proceedings into a gracious rite of passage.

But Gorfintas would have none of that, venting his anger with weeping as his fountain of speech went dry. The sobs receded and his words lost power, the thunderous voice shrinking as life receded from the tired body. The final whimper seemed to arrive from a distance, a tiny echo of Gorfintas’ anguish. And yet, there was something in it beyond the indignity, a spark of hope, new and untried...

Meredac shook his head, trying to forget what he somehow felt he’d needed to see. It truly had been a glimpse into another world, and yet it brought more questions than it answered. Being there imparted something, a touch of wisdom that could be gained no other way, and yet it was not a wisdom of certainty but of inquiry. The next world would be complex, even contradictory, and relationships much more difficult. He had a sense of what it might entail, but no words to express his feelings.

He looked at Crentus, even more silent than usual. His mentor appeared deeply shaken, although this was not his first departure, but second. It was not normal for anyone to pass on before their time or apart from the procedure. Although there were rumors of it occurring spontaneously, no one he knew had ever witnessed such a thing.

“So did you learn anything? Any new insight?”

Crentus looked uneasy. "I received five words. If I share them with you, you have to promise me something, that you will ask nothing further, especially about the first word. I think I know what it means, but I have no desire to be brought before the council and try to prove it. What I think, and what I sense right now is my own right and privilege, but careless words bring trouble."

"So what are they?"

"Uh, uh, first you need to promise."

Meredac stared at his mentor, "How can I promise when I don't even know what they are?"

"Doesn't matter, either you promise or you don't."

"And if I don't?"

"Then I'll carry my secret into the next world."

"What good will it do you there?"

Crentus grinned, "None whatsoever. It's the mischief they could make for me in this life I'm concerned about."

"Oh, come on..."

"You know our society, how just the tiniest whisper they consider reactionary brings down the full force of inquiry. I have no desire to spend my last days in rehab."

"So what's the matter with the word?"

"It implies things, makes one suspect there will be divisions in the next life we for the moment have no concept of. It just leaves too much room for disputation."

"So tell me..."

"You need to promise!"

"What's the phrase?"

Crentus turned his face to Meredac, shrugged and smiled.

"All right, I promise!"

"You're sure?"

Meredac nodded. "So what do we think we know about Gorfintas?"

Crentus closed his eyes and whispered into his fellow's ear, something no eavesdropper could ever pick up on to report, prove, or disprove.

“She has just been born.”