

Nahdep's Journey
By John Anglin

A note from the author: I recently received an honorable mention for this story in a competition for Pathfinder short-fiction put on by Pathfinder Chronicler. I hope you all enjoy it. Pathfinder is a role play game that evolved from the open game license of 3.5 Ed of Dungeons & Dragons.

Nahdep looked out over The Storval Deep. It was quickly growing hot, even in the shadow of Spindlehorn. Nahdep let his hair blow in the warm breeze knowing today would be the last he felt its touch for years to come. A nervous energy fluttered through his stomach at the thought of the coming ceremony. Seven would be braves set out this day on their Journey. It was more braves in a single year among the Shundar-Quah than had set out in generations. The People were abuzz with speculation on who would end up where and what would become of the seven. There were only six other quahs and each youth spent three years among their ascribed quah strengthening the relationship between that quah and the Shundar-Quah. It was the duty of their quah to be mediators between all the people, to try and bring all quahs closer to one unified people. Nahdep tried not to but he speculated like all the rest.

He knew it would come down to what the spirits told Ahtam, the quah's Shaman. He liked old Ahtam and was proud to be one of his apprentices. Nahdep knew he may never serve the quah as Shaman. Ahtam had many years left most likely and then there were other more experienced apprentices that would be prepared to replace him. Never the less, it was something special among The People to even be an apprentice. Perhaps a new tribe would form among the Shundar-Quah and he would be chosen as its Shaman, or another tribe might need a Shaman. That was less likely though as each tribe had their own apprentices waiting and hoping. Nahdep sighed. He was used to letting time flow by during meditation, but it seemed the current had stalled; motionless in a shallow pool.

“Nahdep, there you are little brother! Mother sent me to make sure you were clean for the ceremony.” Tikra smiled at him. She walked up with the prowess of a Firepelt. She tussled his hair “You going to miss it?” She asked.

“No, I am taking the time to let it blow in the wind so I can carry the memory with me. I look forward to being shaved though.” He let out a little laugh. “I remember when it was your day. You barely let father wake before you were sitting at his feet ready to be a woman.”

Tikra playfully smacked the back of his head “That is no way to speak of your elders little rabbit.” She invoked his baby name, getting in a dig she might never use again. The two of them had always been close. He had missed her while she was gone. She had only returned last year. Her three years with the Sklar-Quah had only made her a more fearsome warrior. The Sun People were renowned for their fierceness. Now it was Nahdep who would be gone.

“Well I will leave you to your hair blowing, but don’t be too long or mother will have me come back.” She rubbed one hand over her own smooth shaven head the other making a cutting motion across her neck. She shook her head as she merrily stalked off back toward the yurts.

Nahdep looked out at the sun sparkles dancing on the waters of the Storval Deep. He thought back to the day when he was only six when Ahtam spoke to him of his lifepath.

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The Spire Clan of the Shoanti were at their winter camp. The morning had passed drearily on the Storval Plateau. Most of the tribe’s children were gathered near the back of the camp kicking around a leather hide ball, but not Nahdep. The small boy set in front of his yurt drawing runes and symbols in the dirt with a stick. He had noticed some time ago that the old shaman had been watching him all morning, but he had been trying to pretend he wasn’t aware of his audience. It wasn’t hard. He was infatuated with what he was doing and wondered at the meaning of the strange symbols that had been plaguing his dreams since the solstice. Now it seemed that the shaman was not going to let him pretend any longer. The elder was getting up from his fur and walking straight for him. Luckily he remembered his manners and addressed his elder with the honor he deserved or he would have been in real trouble with his mother.

“Greetings Grandfather Ahtam, how are you today?” he said sheepishly, fearing the old man was about to get onto him for his drawings.

“I am well Little Rabbit. I have been watching you this morning and noticed you aren’t playing with the other children. I thought that strange as I know you love to kick the ball. Then my old eyes noticed you were drawing.” Ahtam watched the little boy squirm as he spoke. “You aren’t in trouble Nahdep. I was just wondering where you learned these drawings.” He studied the glyphs, noting what Nahdep had drawn.

“Well Grandfather I’m afraid you will get angry when I tell you because I haven’t spoken with you about it, but I have been having dreams.” Nahdep looked nervously at the old man but his stoic visage gave away nothing so the boy grudgingly continued. “They aren’t like normal dreams. I am always in a great fog, there is light but I can’t tell from where.” The boy sighed. “Then the voice starts speaking to me. It is a deep rumble of a voice. I am sure he means me no harm, I instantly feel at peace where before I felt anxious.” Nahdep continued now more sure of himself. “His name is Moktu. I haven’t seen him yet, he says that can wait. He says we are connected like twins. He is my other half, and that I will be able to call him to our world one day and do magic. We will have grand journeys and he will be at my side.” Nahdep quickly added “I don’t think he is bad Grandfather. I can feel he is good. He is like me!”

Ahtam listened carefully to Nahdep, nodding to him. “I see, and you worried that I would stop this because I am the shaman. Is that right Nahdep?”

Nahdep nodded furiously “Yes Grandfather.”

The old man unceremoniously plopped down on the ground next to Nahdep.

“You know that the People have many traditions of magic Nahdep. We rarely go and learn magic from books like the outlanders do. Long ago the stories say that the People served great wizards; that we were their strength, but they became corrupted by the magic. They meddled with things best left alone. That is why The Shoanti rely on the blood. The great mystery bestows magic on the ones who are meant to have it. I believe you are speaking of a gift that the Shundar-Quah have not seen in some time.” Ahtam smiled at the boy. “I think you may be a spirit caller. The outlanders call them summoners. You are but one half of a whole

Nahdep at one with your spirit brother. It is odd that you would feel the pull so young though, most magic doesn't start to reveal itself to one so young.

Nahdep's eyes were wide now. "Do you think I will become a shaman Grandfather?"

"That is yet to be decided, but I think you should become one of my Donrie. Remember each tribe only has one Shaman, but others with magic in their blood help him to look out for the People. Some Donrie even become more powerful than their Shaman, but it is their sacred duty to listen to his or her wisdom and follow them just like a hero of the people follows their War Chief."

"I will!" Nahdep said, the small boy bursting with excitement.

Ahtam rose, his bones popping as he did. "Come, we must go speak with your parents."

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Heat shimmered in the air of the Storval Plateau. The Shundar-Quah gathered in a large loose circle. A quiet murmur rippled through the crowd, all eyes on the lanky boy in their center speaking with their Shaman. It was Nahdep's tenth birthday and he was going to call his spirit brother to the world for the first time. Nahdep looked around, a sureness in his stature that only a confident youth could possess. With Ahtam sharing his wisdom by day and Moktu instructing him in his dreams the boy knew he was going to see Moktu for the first time today.

"Remember Nahdep, you are not some outland wizard who must transcribe some formula. You are a Spirit Caller of the Shundar-Quah. Your ritual is your own, like your breath, or heartbeat. You will know when it is right. You will know when to call Moktu forth. Today your spirit power is great as it is the anniversary of your birth. You will succeed." Ahtam said, giving him a few last words of encouragement. He looked at Nahdep and proudly put his hand on his shoulder.

"Today is a good day to be Shundar-Quah."

Nahdep let his mentor amble back to the side of the Chief. He felt the eyes of his people on him. He felt their encouragement, their excitement, and their love. He smiled at the thought that one day old men and women would be telling their little ones of the day Nahdep first called his spirit brother and brought this long lost gift back to the People.

Nahdep held his spear high to the sky then he spun the point down to the earth. The tip flowed across the parched ground, its point receiving no resistance from the hard baked clay. Nahdep could feel the magic coursing out his arm into his spear and finally to the earth itself. It seemed as if time didn't move, yet the circle was complete. Nahdep's spear was directly between his feet now and there was only one thing left to do. It was time to make the bridge rune. Moktu had told him how this would bind them forever. It was to be unique. It would be his and Moktu's alone. He made the mark as it came to him; it felt right, he knew it was done. With a thunder to his voice he did not know he possessed he called out.

“Moktu!”

In that instant a searing energy flowed to Nahdep's forehead, he knew it was the bridge rune. Moktu had told him about this as well. It didn't hurt near as much as Nahdep had feared it would. It glowed like molten lava for a brief moment. He would forever more bare their mark. The earth rumbled in front of Nahdep. The people of the Shundar-Quah were now quiet to a one. They watched as the earth started to shift as if a great mole was coming to the surface. Then two horn tips appeared. They too looked like the red clay of the Storval Plateau. The horns were followed by a bovine head; it too bore the glowing mark of the bridge rune, its eyes gleamed like hematite in the sun. Broad shoulders erupted from the ground. Dirt clods flew into the air as the beast charged out of the ground. It appeared to resemble an aurochs made of earth. It was the size of a large dire wolf, and when it was completely risen from the ground it shook itself like a wet dog might and more clay flew in the air. Here and there people, not all of them children, picked up a piece of the clay, sticking them in pouches. Then, as if that wasn't enough, to everyone's amazement the beast spoke as he rushed up and nudged Nahdep.

“It is good to see you little brother.” Moktu rumbled like the very earth. His tail swished back and forth his foreleg stamping the ground. Nahdep felt a joy that he would to his dying day be unable to express to his satisfaction to anyone.

“It is good to see you too brother.” Nahdep replied hugging Moktu around his neck. He smelled of rich earth. His fur was like the clay the potters made bowls from. He could feel the strength that lay underneath and knew that with Moktu at his side he would know no fear. Then all around them people were cheering and

letting out whooping calls of victory. Drums started up. The young and old alike started dancing.

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Nahdep jumped, wondering how long he had been daydreaming. He stood up and ran for his family's yurt. He was breathing hard by the time he got there. His father Cocrut sat on a blanket at the door. He could see the pride in his father's eyes. His father was one of the best hunters in the tribe and a brave warrior in battle. He was happy his children were so promising. Tikra would be a war leader one day. No one doubted that, and Nahdep was the first spirit caller in generations.

"Your mother was about to send me for you. You know she gets anxious on special days." His father said. "Now Sit. Are you ready to be rid of your hair? To join the People as an adult?" He asked.

"Yes Father." Nahdep answered.

He sat down with his back to his father. He watched as his father reached out for the supple leather case next to Nahdep. He lifted the flap, revealing the onyx blade it held. The handle was dragon tooth and it had been in the family since the quahs had become seven. It was used for only one purpose, to shave the heads of the children on the day they embarked on their Journey into adulthood. His sister and father both had their heads shaved with this knife, so had his grandfather and all his ancestors on his father's side of his family back through the ages. Even before there was Shundar-Quah there was this knife. Now his father carefully removed it with a prayer to those very ancestors to watch over Nahdep. To let them know a new man was joining the family. That Nahdep now carried their honor as his own. With each stroke came another line from his father. It was a song of sorts. Nahdep watched as his hair fell about him. The air blew across his scalp, tingling against his skin. With the last stroke came his father's final words.

"May one day Nahdep use this knife on his children adding to our family's fortune."

His father had not so much as scratched his head. It was a good omen. He returned the knife to its case, thanking his ancestors for guiding his hand. Nahdep stood and turned to embrace his father for the first time as a man. He saw a single tear roll down his father's cheek as he smiled at his son. He rubbed his now bald head, proud at the feel of it. Nahdep turned to the yurt knowing his mother would

be standing there. He was sure he was nearly crushed as his mother rushed forward to hug her now not so little boy. She sobbed and smiled all at the same time.

“It is not an easy thing for a mother.” She said, kissing his head right above his bridge rune.

Even his sister gave him a hug. Now that the family ritual was done he had to get ready for the big ceremony. His mother ushered him into the yurt.

“I hope you like it.” She said.

She pulled back his blanket from his mat, revealing a soft looking pair of leggings, a new pair of fringed moccasins, and a beautiful vest with elaborate bead and quill work. She reached down and flipped the vest over. She had done a copy of his bridge rune on the back with quills dyed red like the one on his and Moktu’s foreheads.

“Mother it is beautiful.” He said giving her another big hug. This time she was the one who thought she might be crushed. She smiled at her son.

“You don’t know how hard it has been to keep this secret. Your father of all people has been itching to show you.” They all laughed and his father shrugged.

“It looked so nice I couldn’t help but want you to see it.” His father added.

“Come, let Nahdep get ready. It will be time soon to gather with the others.”

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The people were abuzz with laughter and joy. It was always a happy day for the Shundar-Quah. They were proud of their young people and after the ceremony there would be a great feast and dancing. Then in the morning the young people would set out on their own for the camps of the other quahs. Nahdep stood with the others all dressed in special outfits made special for this day. Six other freshly shaved young men and women stood with him, anxiously awaiting Ahtam to pronounce their fate. Nahdep had known them his whole life. They were all born the same year. They all wondered if they would get to spend their time away with one of their own as there were only six quahs to travel to and seven of them.

Ahtam stepped forward holding up a hand that was unneeded to quiet the people as everyone was anxious to know where the young people would go. Nahdep studied his old teacher. Although the years passed Ahtam seemed the same as ever. He was old yes, but he looked no older than he always had. It was a mystery of the

magic in Ahtam's blood. Nahdep wished he had taken the time to call Moktu, but he didn't want to take the attention away from the others. Moktu knew he was going to call him forth when the ceremony was over, Nahdep knew he was in the earth realm pacing back and forth right about now.

Ahtam stepped up to Jinka, a small girl who was always quiet and polite.

"Jinka you will go to the Lyrune-Quah. The Moon Clan will welcome you."

Ahtam moved down the line passing two others to stand in front of Rodo, a tall youth who always seemed deep in thought.

"Rodo you will go to the Skoan-Quah. The Skull Clan will welcome you."

Everyone remained quiet as was tradition no one called out it was out of respect for all. Some quahs were seen as more favorable to some, so it had long been the way to wait and congratulate all at the end.

"Yahdem you will go to the Sklar-Quah. The Sun Clan will welcome you."

Ahtam was in a rhythm now. It was thought by many that an ancestor spirit moved on the Shaman during the ceremony.

"Baku you will go to the Shiikirri-Quah. The Hawk clan will welcome you."

Ahtam continued. "Niki you will go to the Tamiir-Quah. The Wind Clan will welcome you."

Nahdep was growing anxious. Ahtam stepped past him to Gabdi.

"Gabdi you will go to the Shadde-Quah. The Axe Clan will welcome you."

Now Ahtam stood before Nahdep. Everyone waited to see which quah would receive two of their youth.

"Nahdep you will go to the Tshamek. The Outlanders will welcome you."

Nahdep did not understand what he just heard. The People were buzzing like a great bee hive.

Ahtam raised his hand, calling for silence. This time it took a few moments for the crowd to quiet down.

"My People, since the quahs were formed we of the Spire Clan have ever been the peace makers. We have taken the duty of trying to one day again become only the Shoanti. One united people. Long have we fought The Tshamek. It is our duty to begin to make headway with the outlanders, and for that we must know them. We must begin to go amongst them in greater numbers. To learn how we may have peace with these people. It may never be that we are at true harmony with them,

but our peoples enemies are many and if we can turn foe to friend than it is our duty to try.” Ahtam finished and the people began to chew the words of the shaman like a tough piece of jerky. “I would speak with you in private Nahdep.” Ahtam said turning walking toward his yurt.

Nahdep followed the old man almost in a daze. He thought surely this was a mistake. How was he to spend the next three years among the outlanders? Where would he go?

Ahtam sat down motioning for Nahdep to sit. The stunned Nahdep let his legs collapse under him.

“Nahdep, I cannot guess what you are feeling right now. I do know that you will succeed. There are Shoanti amongst the outlanders some stay true to our ways others live as the Tshamek do. You will find your balance and return to us. I have seen that if our people are to survive we must change like a river does in the spring storms. Because a storm is upon our people and if we stay our course than we will be no more slowly we will fall. You are the first to take your journey with the outlanders, but you will not be the last.” Ahtam handed Nahdep a pouch heavy with coin. “You will need this. The Tshamek use it to trade.”

Nahdep took the coin the shock wearing off.

“I will do the Shundar-Quah proud Ahtam. I will learn how to gain allies among the outlanders.” Nahdep promised.

Moktu was going to be surprised they were not going to one of the other quahs; instead they were to spend the next three years wandering Varisia learning of the outlanders. Nahdep wasn't sure what was in store for him, but in the morning he was heading for Riddleport.