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Silence Louder Than Words

Ah, you want me to tell you the story of how the magic began. In spite of what people now think, there was magic before the Day of Enlightenment. True, it wasn't very good, but it was magic.

Back then, in order to become a wizard, you had to master the fine art of chanting, to charm an Aku into working for you. The Aku are three foot high invisible beings that inhabit the Other Side. They really performed the magic.

It wasn't very reliable. Sometimes the Aku wouldn't come when summoned. Even when they did, their work would fade and disappear in a few hours. The best magicians were the ones who had the best chants to attract the best Aku. I was a mere apprentice back then, but I worked for the Grand Master, so I know first hand what went on back in those days.

Chukchi was not the stuff that legends were made of. Standing a little over five feet with jet black hair, he was uncommonly thin. (I know that now he has white hair, but back then it was black.) He loved this town, he loved the University.

All his life he had wanted to be a Magician. It broke his heart when they told him he couldn't because he was deaf. Chanting is an art, and it is next to impossible to master it if you can't hear your own voice.

That didn't stop Chukchi. He had seen other people moving their mouths, making funny faces and had tried hard to imitate them. His father worked as a janitor at the University, but his job wasn't very demanding, so he had lots of time to teach his son.

They spent hours together studying lip-reading, but no matter how hard he concentrated on his father's mouth he couldn't get all the words. So many of them looked the same. He never could learn to tell the difference between "pound" and "pond."

The men at the University were impossible. Most of them had beards that hid their entire mouth.

When he was ten, Chukchi tried to learn how to chant. Each night his father would come home and patiently show him how to position his mouth to make the proper sounds. After about a year of training Chukchi graduated to words.

When he was fourteen, his father brought home a Master Magician, who listened to Chukchi for five minutes and then curtly told Chukchi's father, "The boy will never be a Magician. I can hardly understand his English and his chanting is much too flat."

Chukchi cried when his father translated the Magician's words. His voice was too flat. For the next three weeks he walked around with a ball in his mouth to make his voice rounder. His father found out and stopped him.

The Master Magician was asked to come back and give Chukchi another chance, but he told Chukchi's father, "Stop wasting your time and teach him to do a job more suited to his type."

What did he mean by that? Well, he meant a simple job that could be done by a deaf person. Something that didn't require talking or listening. Chukchi got a job as copyist. I know the Aku do the copying now, but back then, you were luck if you could get an Aku to make a straight line.

He was a good copyist. It was the perfect job for him. In the morning Akutan, the Magician who ran the place, would appear with a stack of work, set it down on the writing table and leave. That evening he would return to pick up the completed work. Once a week he would leave Chukchi a pay envelope, which Chukchi always took home to his father.

One morning Chukchi's father didn't get up when the boy shook him. The old man was cold and lifeless. From then on Chukchi lived alone. There was no one left who understood the gestures he used for talking.

He threw himself into his work. He was proud of his job and did good work and soon

became known as the best copyist in the University. I remember when he exactly reproduced a complex chart for Master Magician Mekoryuk perfectly including a blot on the lower left hand corner.

As I said, I was an Apprentice back then. We were expected to do our own copying so I only saw Chukchi a few times when he was going home from work. He would walk down the street holding a small slate on which he had written “HI” in his best handwriting. He would smile at me and I would grin back and we would go on our way. Most people looked away, they didn’t like to see a deaf person.

Sometimes Chukchi would finish early and would spend his free time exploring the basement room that was in his office. The back was filled stacks of old books that no one wanted. He spent hours by himself reading about the early history of magic and old papers on the nature of the Aku.

One day he stumbled across a book titled The Gesture Language of the Nemuck Monks. They were an ancient religious, order that had take a vow of silence. Because they couldn’t talk, they invented a sign language for communication. Chukchi wished that they hadn’t died out long ago.

He spend most of his free time studying the book and practicing the beautiful flowing gestures of the languages. While practicing the sign for pitcher, a shadow crossed in front of him. Startled, Chukchi looked to find the water pitcher hovering in front of him. Frightened he ran from the room.

Outside he didn’t know where to go. He was supposed to be working and if anyone saw him, he would be reported to Akutan. Luckily there was no one in the courtyard. Suddenly he remembered that it was the day Koyuk was to undergo his Great Test.

Everyone, even Chukchi had been invited to watch, so he quietly crept into the Great Hall and took a seat in the back. I was there, seated with the rest of the Apprentices just behind the Magicians. The Masters sat in a huge stand behind the stage. Koyuk stood in the center of the plat-

form chanting loudly.

It was obvious even to my untrained ear that Koyuk had confused quality with volume. Maybe he was trying too hard. He was certainly sweating. This was his fifth try to attempt to summon his Aku. If he failed again, he would have to be an Apprentice for three more years.

The Magician's Guild was organized into four classes. The lowest were the Apprentices, the people who were still learning how to summon their Aku. Once they proved they Aku would come one out of five times, they became Magicians. A Master Magician could get his Aku to come every time he summoned it. If two Aku responded to your chant, you were automatically made a Grand Master.

There were only three of them and they formed the council that ran the Guild.

From his seat in the back Chukchi could see that Koyuk was having trouble. His Aku had not come and he was almost out of time. Finally Grand Master Mekoryuk raised his staff and brought it down with a loud thud that signaled that the test was over. Koyuk collapsed, sobbing.

Chukchi was very frightened. An Aku had moved the pitcher. What if it was Koyuk's? He might be afraid of stealing his Aku. He would lose his job. How would he survive?

It seems silly now, but Chukchi was afraid of talking to the Aku. Magic was the responsibility of the Magicians and he was just a deaf copy boy who couldn't chant. All his life he was told that it was impossible for him to do magic and he believed it. But even though he was afraid he went on.

The next morning Chukchi arrived at work early. He peeked through the door and saw that his office was exactly the way he left it, except the pitcher was sitting neatly in the center of the room. Quick he ducked in, shut the door and made the sign for pitcher. The sign was short and choppy, but he was not thinking about his pronunciation. Nothing happened. He tried it again, slower and more carefully. Still nothing. Relieved, he put the pitcher back in its place and began to work.

At the end of the day, he finished his last page and tried the sign for pitcher again. The pitcher rose and floated over to him. This time Chukchi stood his ground and made a huge NO sign. Slowly it returned to the table. The glass next to it rose toward him. <<NO!>> he signed, making a huge shouting sign. <<You should be with Koyuk.>>

The glass moved back and forth. Chukchi didn't understand. Almost involuntary his index finger wiggled up and down, signing huh. The glass wiggled back. Chukchi looked down at his hand and then it dawned on him that the Aku was signing <<huh?>> also.

<<Isn't Koyuk your master?>> signed Chukchi.

The glass remained motionless for a moment, then slowly turned left and right like a man shaking his head no.

<<Who do you belong to?>>

The glass sailed through the air tracing out a complex and graceful pattern. Chukchi couldn't understand it at all.

<<I don't understand,>> he said. <<I'm going to have to stick to yes/no questions.>>

The glass nodded <<Yes.>>

<<Do you belong to an Apprentice?>>

<<No.>>

<<A Magician?>>

<<No.>>

Chukchi was beginning to get a little nervous. <<A Grand Master?>>

<<No.>> The Aku was beginning to get a little impatient.

Who else was there? thought Chukchi. He had exhausted the possibilities. Finally he asked, <<Are you trying to tell me that you don't belong to anyone?>>

<<Yes!!!!>> the glass danced up and down ecstatically.

<<Why aren't you with a Magician?>>

The glass spun and hopped in a silly pattern and Chukchi realized that this would never do. <<I'll bring a pair of gloves so you can talk tomorrow.>>

<<Good>> was the curt reply as the glass returned to the table.

That was the first conversation between men and the Aku. Chukchi didn't realize he had just made the greatest breakthrough in the history of magic. He felt afraid. After all, the Magicians handled the Aku, and Chukchi wasn't even an Apprentice. He was just a lowly deaf copy boy. If they found out, he would be in trouble.

But he was too interested in the Aku to give up, so the next morning he arrived an hour early carrying a pair of his father's old work gloves. After he finished all his copying he took the gloves gingerly out of his pocket and carefully put them on the top of his desk. Watching them intensely he took a step back and waited.

They started to move as the Aku put them on.

<<What is your name?>> signed Chukchi.

<<Yakataga,>> replied the Aku.

<<Why aren't you with a real Magician?>>

<<Why should I be?>>

<<Because they can chant for you and I can't.>>

The gloves made the sign for "silly(emphasized)." <<Only children like that noise that the humans make. They grow out of it after 50 years or so. As long as they keep out of the way, we let them do their tricks for you humans. But you're different, you can talk. I've been listening to you for some time. Why do you only talk in the afternoon?>>

<<I have to work,>> explained Chukchi. <<I make copies for the scholars at the Univer-

sity. I'm one of the best copyists around.>>

<<Tomorrow I'll help you,>> said Yakataga. <<That way we can get your work out of the way early and you'll have more time to talk to me.>>

<<That wouldn't be right.>>

<<Why? Does it matter who makes the copies?>>

<<No, but the Aku can't do good work.>>

Yakataga's hands moved violently as he responded << I do good work. Just because you play with children, don't assume that we're all like that. I'll be here tomorrow and you'll see how accurate I am.>> He tossed the gloves on the table, ending the conversation.

Tomorrow came and Chukchi was a little worried. Yakataga was waiting for him, ready to go. Chukchi picked up the first piece of work and set it carefully on the copy table. He reached into a bin and pulled forth a blank sheet of paper. Immediately another sheet floated out and settled beside him. Then another and another and another.

<<What's going on?>> he signed frantically.

The work gloves rose. <<I brought along three of my assistants. With four of us helping we finish in a fifth of the time. That way we can do a lot more talking.>>

Stories grow in telling. Chukchi did not command hundreds of Aku that day. There were only four. I once asked him about that day and how it felt to be the first person to command more than two Aku. He just shook his head, sighed and said, "I didn't command four. I talked to Yakataga, he handled his assistants. Besides, I didn't command, I asked."

Yakataga's estimate proved to be a bit optimistic. It took longer because Chukchi insisted on painstakingly checking each copy. (A talent he still practices on Apprentices' term papers.) When he was satisfied that everything was perfect, he sat down with Yakataga and talked.

The next few months were the happiest in Chukchi's life. The world outside was cold and

friendless. Inside the copy room he created his own little world. Here he had friends talk to and who liked him.

But it all ended one day when he came to work and there was nothing in his IN basket except a curt note that read: "Belkofski's raiders are coming. All the Magicians have been called out to defend the University. There will be no work until it's over. Go home until further notice."

But Chukchi didn't go home. He was curious, so he climbed to the roof of the library. In the haze to the south he could see the approaching raiders. Just outside the University town, the defenders were bustling about getting ready.

Off to the east he could see the edge of the woods. He could see people returning with spear shafts and handing them to the metal workers to have points attached. A group of people worked on the bank of the stream collecting stones. In the middle of this all the fletchers frantically constructed arrows.

The Magicians lined up just behind their piles of ammunition and waited.

Soon Chukchi could see the yellow robes of the enemy Magicians coming over the top of the hill in the distance. Following just behind them came the supply wagons, filled with arrows, spears and other implements of war.

A bugle sounded, the whole army stopped and dressed up their formation. The defending Magicians began to chant. They would need their Aku now. Suddenly a rock rose and propelled itself toward the enemy. A spear shot up from a wagon on the other side and flew out. Soon the air was filled with missiles.

<<Bad,>> Chukchi signed to himself. He looked down as he felt the gloves being removed from his pockets.

<<What's bad?>> asked Yakataga.

<<All those Magicians trying to kill each other.>>

<<Aren't they playing some kind of game?>>

<<No. This is war and war is bad.>>

The Aku thought for a moment. <<Well, in that case, I'll tell the kids to stop playing with the humans.>>

The gloves dropped to the ground. A second later all the missiles froze in mid air. The Magicians chanted harder, but everything remained stuck in mid-air, hovering. Suddenly all the weapons fell to the ground.

The Magicians screamed and shouted their loudest chants, but nothing worked. Chukchi saw the gloves rise again. <<It is done. The kids will do nothing for the humans till you tell them it's safe.>>

One of the fighting men got an idea. He stopped chanting, picked up a spear and with a yell charged the other side. The person next to him saw this, grabbed his weapon and joined the attack. Soon the two sides were running toward each other at full speed.

<<If they get together they'll kill each other!>> said Chukchi. The gloves dropped. Yakat-aga had gone again.

As the two sides neared each other the men in front gripped their weapons hard, held them high and attacked. When they got about two feet away from each other they raised their spears, charged and fell backwards.

Getting up, they tried again, with no effect. The front ranks were trying to figure out what was going on when the back ranks piled into them. After a lot of initial confusion, they discovered that they were separated by a two foot wide invisible wall.

Since it was obviously built by the Aku, they knew that it would crumble and fall in a few hours, so they stood around shouting insults at each other for three hours. They didn't know that this force wall was built by adults, not children, so they waited all night and into the next morning.

I was one of the soldiers during that battle, but I spent most of the time in the field hospital. Just after I hit the wall, one of my fellow troopers in the second wave ran into me and broke my

arm. This was the only battle I know of where all the casualties were caused by our own side.

At the time Chukchi didn't quite understand what he had done. He had stopped a major war, caused the cessation of all magic and in effect set himself up as the one human being the Aku could look to for guidance. But he still considered himself a copy boy and copy boys did not go around commanding armies of Aku.

Two days later the armies were still sitting around waiting for the wall to crumble. We tried going around it, but it was too wide. We tried digging under it, but it was too deep. We tried building a tower and going over it, but it was too high. Meanwhile the University was in an uproar. Everyone asked, "Why did the magic stop?" "Where did the wall come from?" "How long will it last?"

Chukchi knew none of this. Being deaf means that you don't get to listen to gossip. The copy department worked overtime. Everyone had his pet theory about what had happened and wrote a paper on it.

I still remember my theory, sun spots. Don't laugh, we had a lot of activity during those days. It was a good theory. Wrong, but still a good theory.

Grand Master Mekoryuk called a meeting of all the Magicians to discuss the matter. At the last minute, the agenda had to be changed so he went down to the copy room to give the corrections to Chukchi.

When he got there, he received the shock of his life. Chukchi was sitting there with four quills following his every move.

"What's going on?" exclaimed the Grand Master. Chukchi kept on copying. Annoyed, Mekoryuk repeated his question, louder. Then he remembered that Chukchi couldn't hear so he tapped him on the shoulder.

Chukchi was so surprised that he jumped and made a long black mark on the paper. The Grand Master gently picked up a quill, pulled out a fresh sheet and wrote, "How did you get so

many Aku to work for you?”

Chukchi was shocked. First by the fact that Mekoryuk had wasted a clean sheet of expensive paper and secondly by the fact that he had been discovered.

He didn't want to waste paper so he wrote at the bottom of his ruined sheet, “They don't work for me. They work for my friend Yakataga. He is an Aku teacher, and they are his students. He asked me if they could help, and I said ‘yes.’ I hope I haven't done anything wrong. I checked their work most carefully.”

Mekoryuk was puzzled. Even though he was a Grand Master, he had never talked with an Aku. He just chanted at them. “They asked you?” he wrote, “How?” He ended the sentence with a huge question mark.

“They know the gesture language,” wrote Chukchi.

Yakataga picked up the gloves and signed, <<What is going on?>>

<<Later!>> Chukchi replied.

Now Grand Master Mekoryuk was no fool. It takes intelligence and wisdom to run a guild full of egotistical magicians. He was smart enough to realize that he just uncovered the greatest breakthrough in the history of magic and that Chukchi made it.

But Chukchi was worried about being punished for letting someone else do his work. Mekoryuk watched the exchange between the copy boy and the Aku and said, “The council must hear of this immediately. Come with me.” But Chukchi couldn't hear this and didn't know what was going on. He didn't even know that Mekoryuk wanted him to follow until the Grand Master grabbed him and led him from the room.

They walked out through the courtyard into the Great Hall.

Everyone was inside, milling about and talking. When they saw the Grand Master they took their seats. Just before Mekoryuk reached the foot of the platform he paused to give a page some instructions. The boy disappeared for a moment then came back with two chairs which he

placed in front of the table directly below the speakers stand.

The Grand Master motioned for Chukchi to sit down. The page placed paper and quills on the table and sat down beside in the other chair. The Sergeant at Arms sounded the Great Gong and the meeting came to order.

Chukchi hadn't heard the boy's instructions so he had no idea what was going on. He thought that it might be some kind of trial and that he was going to be punished.

The page pulled out a blank sheet of paper and put it in front of Chukchi. Then he got one for himself. Mekoryuk spoke and the boy next to Chukchi wrote, "The meeting is called to order."

Suddenly Chukchi realized why he was here. Carefully he wrote, "The meeting is called to order."

The page grabbed his hand. "I am here to translate for you," he wrote. "Just write what you want to say."

Chukchi nodded understandingly even though he had never had a translator before and was not quite sure what to do.

The Grand Master described what he had just seen and then asked Chukchi, "Can you show us how you communicate with the Aku?"

<<They want us to talk,>> signed Chukchi.

<<About what?>> replied Yakataga.

<<I don't know.>>

The auditorium burst into confusion. Chukchi didn't hear the noise and couldn't see the audience so he didn't know how much trouble his simple conversation had caused.

Finally Mekoryuk was able to restore order. "Ask your Aku why the magic went away," he said.

"It's my fault," wrote Chukchi. "I told Yakataga that war is bad and he ordered the Aku to

stop playing with the humans.”

It took Mekoryuk five minutes to restore order. He and the other two Grand Masters huddled for a whispered conference. One of them looked out at Chukchi and asked, “Is it true that four Aku do your copying for you?”

“I do my share!” protested Chukchi, “besides I check their work.”

“But why four?”

“Because that’s all that will fit in the room.”

The old man nodded and went back to the huddle. Finally they finished, and Mekoryuk got up and walked down to where Chukchi sat. He led him back up to the dais.

“I now pronounce you Grand Master,” he said. “We are making you the leader of the entire Guild. Teach us the gesture language and all about the Aku, Imperial Grand Master Chukchi.”

His words were lost on Chukchi, but his expression told him a lot. He wanted to sneak a look at his translator, but he would have to lean over the speaker’s stand to do so. He just stood there, confused, until Grand Master Mekoryuk took off the gold pendant, his badge of office, and put it around Chukchi’s neck.

The new Grand Master just stood there as the audience applauded. He couldn’t make an acceptance speech, but he could smile.

The End