

# The Keep

The illustration is a watercolor-style drawing of a medieval-style stone castle. The castle features several tall, cylindrical towers and a central entrance with a large wooden door. The scene is set against a background of crumpled, layered paper in shades of white, grey, and purple, which appears to be peeling away from the top of the castle. In the lower-left foreground, a man wearing a red jacket and a brown backpack stands looking towards the castle. The overall color palette is muted, with earthy tones for the stone and a soft, textured background.

Roger Taylor



# **THE KEEP**

**ROGER TAYLOR**

**a Mushroom eBooks sample**

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First published by Mushroom eBooks in 2011.

This Edition published in 2011 by Mushroom eBooks, an imprint of Mushroom Publishing, Bath, BA1 4EB, United Kingdom

[www.mushroom-ebooks.com](http://www.mushroom-ebooks.com)

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## Chapter 1

Voices were all about him.

Hovering in the moon-hazed darkness they rose and fell like a blustering wind through summer tree-tops. Now near, now far. Now loud, now faint. Now incoherent and wild. Now clear and distinct and full of significance.

Slowly, and almost imperceptibly, a faint but familiar resolve whispered in their wake.

He must listen to them—reach into their urgent susurration—grasp what they were saying. For surely there was meaning to be found in them if he could just touch it?

They had been coming to him since his arrival here, drifting through the half-place between the worlds of waking and sleeping where dreams and reality were inextricably entangled.

Yet with this resolve came the remembrance that his very awareness, his realization that he was, was sufficient to disturb this strange sending. And a too wilful act, a deliberate listening, would end it as abruptly as the fall of an axe.

As it did, yet again.

Slipping intangibly away from him, the voices were already fading into an unknowable distance, dwindling into the soft hiss of his frustrated breath as his eyes flickered open and the dim snow-lit morning world formed about

him, solid and real. Now there would be only memories of memories to linger hauntingly through the quieter moments of the day.

Though he knew it would be futile, he could do no other than close his eyes and try to recapture the sounds before they were lost utterly. There was stillness, contentment even, in the waking comfort of his bed and the soft darkness of the early hour. Whatever problems the day might bring—and it would probably bring more than a few, he knew—nothing could be done here either to precipitate or avoid them.

It was good.

But, less than smoke in the wind, the voices and whatever message they were carrying had gone—scattered by his waking and dispersed beyond any retrieval by his seeking after them. The tools of the mind that normally served him so well lurched after them, though half-heartedly. They were too coarse by far to capture and secure so fragile a quarry.

Were the voices the residue of a forgotten dream?

Not an answerable question. He rarely remembered his dreams but, when he did, those fragments that remained with him were, for the most part, prosaic and unthreatening; usually artless patchworks of recent events. They rarely carried either mystery or terror.

Were they an echo of some distant activity in the Keep, carried to him along unseen ways through its ancient stonework? What activity? He glanced at the window. The low snow-filled sky was greying. No one else would be up at this time. Besides, he doubted that anything could echo

through this place, so massive was every aspect of its construction. And, too, he was not one to be roused by a mere noise.

Were they no more than the sound of his own breathing intruding into his half-wakened brain?

Possibly, he supposed, though it seemed unlikely. They were too varied, too complex, too full of subtle rhythms to be merely a throttled snore.

He rubbed his eyes and ended the pointless inquiries. They had to have their run, like dogs sniffing about a courtyard—intent and with apparently deep purpose—but they would bring back no prey. Lying back he yawned and stretched extravagantly then pulled a wry face. Whatever the voices were—the word “voices” persisted with him—they at least served to wake him early, a feat which a wide range of mechanical devices and parental and wifely reproaches had never succeeded in doing in the past.

“I sleep well because I’ve a clear conscience,” he would protest.

“You sleep well because you’re a lazy sod,” was the non-mechanical consensus. And, in his clear conscience, he could not wholly deny this. Brisk rising was not one of his stronger virtues.

This was just another puzzle. For though the voices did not wake him sharply, they left him wide-awake and reluctant, perhaps unable, to go back to sleep again. Thinking back over a lifetime of reluctant risings, this was in many ways even stranger than waking him in the first place.

Still, that was how it was. He threw the sheets back and swung out of bed, shivering slightly as the room's cold embraced him.

A tall, stiff-shouldered clock, a relic of the previous occupant of the room, stood by the door. Its intimidating presence made him want to cower when he passed it and his first active decision of the day was the same as it had been the previous day: he really should get round to having the damned thing moved. He squinted peevishly at the ornately decorated face which lowered back at him in its turn like a malevolent and tattooed dacoit. Its fingers, drooping like mustachios, confirmed what the dull sky had already told him. It was early. No bad thing, he conceded reluctantly. Laggard he might be at early rising, but he always enjoyed the feeling of advantage that it gave him. It stretched the day.

Perhaps the voices were nothing more than some self-induced device designed by his deeper—better?—nature to ensure this outcome?

*That* was a new thought.

He dismissed it. If good intentions had been his saviour he would have been a regular dawn riser long before now.

A spasm of irritation shook him. He had enough to do without wasting his time fretting about clocks or, still less, mysterious sounds. Anyway, intriguing though these might be, they must surely be some figment of his imagination, even if he hadn't the imagination to work out what it might be yet. Indeed it would be surprising if working in this place did not stir something in the muddier depths of his minds.

He busied himself with washing and changing but did not turn the main light on. That would have blackened the gradually lightening window and shrunk his world to the confines and comforts of this solitary room which could well have lured him back to the warmth of his bed after all. Better to let the day seep into him.

Better to let the Keep seep into him.

The thought made him pause as he shaved. It was peculiar, he reflected. He had mapped many buildings in his time and some of those that had been acquired during the New Order's recent expansion had been remarkable and unusual. There had been those cities in the east where high soaring, sky-scarring towers sentenced their populations to jostling insignificance in bleak, wind-scoured streets; streets that were shrouded in permanent shadowed twilight except sometimes at the extremities of the day when the sun's blanching touch might sere along them. And in the west there had been those rambling, half-subterranean conurbations of interlinked and ill-defined dwellings. Mapping them had been peculiarly difficult, but their dominant feature was not measurable—the smell, or rather smells. He shook his head at the memory. He did not want to recall too much of that. At least not before he had eaten.

But nothing he had ever seen had been remotely like this great isolated pile. As he had wandered about the place as part of his preliminary study to work out how he might begin this new task, his professional eye had automatically searched for familiar lines and shapes and patterns that would help him order and arrange the building in the

catalogue of his experience. But there had been nothing. Not even distant resonances from the sketchbooks and historical texts of his student days. And, so far, that had remained the case, both inside and outside the building. This place was truly unique.

That it was the work of one mind was all too apparent, but whose was beyond any speculation. And what could it have been? When had it been built? Or why? Or, for that matter, how? The rock from which its huge stones had been cut was not to be found in this region and, apart from the seemingly insurmountable difficulty of hauling them through the mountains, it verged on the inconceivable that they had been hewn, slotted, notched, and positioned with such accuracy by brute manual effort. Yet they must have been, for, whatever else this place might prove to be, it was not new, nor even recent. The weathering of those same stones was at least one thing that was familiar—this was an ancient place.

“One step at a time,” he said to the puzzling image waving a razor at him from the mirror. There were enough routine technical problems associated with surveying this place without wasting his time turning over questions to which there might well be no answers.

He could always ask, of course...

The image became uneasy. The New Order did not appreciate needless speculation, still less too much active curiosity. He had his allotted task. He must do it efficiently and accurately. That was all he need concern himself with. It was sufficient that this place was theirs now and thus part of their greater intent. It was more than sufficient that

they had employed him. It was a mark of their trust in him—an acknowledgement of previous work well done and duties faithfully fulfilled. He should be careful not to jeopardize any of this. True, he was good at his job—very good—but this was not necessarily a guarantee of continued acceptance—and there were always plenty others who would scrabble to replace him if he showed himself to be... unsuitable.

He splashed the remains of the foam from his face with cold water then dried himself briskly. *That* was something that need not be dwelt on. It was not going to happen. He had too shrewd an eye for the reality of his position to risk it with carelessness. He must remain both efficient and inconspicuous.

Do your job. Observe the procedures and all would be well.

Procedures were everything under the New Order.

Keep your curiosity and your speculation to yourself.

He reminded himself again that there were plenty difficult “ordinary” problems associated with this place which would have to be solved if he was indeed to fulfil his instructions.

Some of these were taxing him a little while later as he stood in the fresh-fallen snow by the sole entrance to the Keep.

## Chapter 2

Although it was on top of a mountain, the Keep was fronted by a deep and steep-sided channel that elsewhere might have become a water-filled moat. As it was, in earlier times, coupled with the cliffs to the rear, it would certainly have been an extremely effective defensive feature, completely isolating the Keep from its surroundings and confining all approaches to the single entrance. This, in its turn, was served by a drawbridge which could be lowered and raised quite easily by one man through an ingenious arrangement of pulleys and levers.

Yet, the moat seemed to be unnecessary. Though he knew little of warfare, ancient or modern, Josyff could see that the very location of the Keep precluded any siege techniques that he had ever heard of other than a patient waiting for its occupants to starve to death. There was nowhere to erect scaling towers or to position artillery, and undermining was out of the question. The place would yield to modern weapons, of course. These could bombard it from the valley far below. But then, who would want such a place, either now or in the past? What conceivable strategic or commercial significance could it have, situated here, far from any great centres of population or important trade routes?

His feet crunching the fresh snow, he stepped out on to the drawbridge and peered cautiously over the edge. This was the only place he had found which offered any view into the gloomy depths of the channel, but even here he could make out only the occasional jagged peak rising out of the darkness. This couldn't be a natural feature, surely? Yet, to be man-made, it represented an achievement every whit as daunting as the building of the Keep itself.

This place held so many questions.

A shiver shook him and, though no wind was blowing, he pulled his coat tight and hunched his shoulders against the cold. He looked up at the snow-covered mountains that surrounded the Keep. This would be a stern and forbidding place at the height of summer but the heavy grey skies, pregnant with yet more snow, added an almost tangible menace to it.

“Still puzzling our problem, Surveyor?”

Josyff started at the sound and turned to see the man who had greeted him on his arrival. One set of eagerly proffered papers had identified him as Badr ak-Herion from the Aggoran province, far to the south. Another set announced him as Josyff's new Chief Assistant. When working in the east, Josyff had had an excellent team and he had recommended that it be kept together for this latest undertaking. However, while no formal reply had come to this, the members of the team had subsequently received instructions that would take them all far from one another.

“The New Order's greater vision,” one of them had said flatly as they parted.

“Yes,” he had replied in like vein.

“I apologize, Surveyor, I startled you.” Badr’s hand was extended as though to prevent Josyff from lurching over the edge of the drawbridge, though he was too far away to have done anything should that have happened.

“Yes, Badr,” Josyff replied, stepping back awkwardly. “I’m afraid you did. This is a very puzzling building. It’s easy to become engrossed.”

Badr was a short, heavily-built man with short-cropped hair and a round face that would have been jovial were it not for the small deep-set eyes that pocked it. He gave Josyff the impression of being two people: the one with the rolling gait that could be seen as he pursued his allotted tasks, and one somewhere else, quiet and still, who watched and noted. Still, his manner was affable, and his work—so far as he had been able to do any—had been competent. Josyff reproached himself for his unspoken judgement. Nevertheless, despite the confines of their working circumstances, he felt it would be politic to make no effort to be anything other than pleasantly professional with him.

Badr nodded. “Indeed it is,” he said. “What do you think it might have been?”

Josyff’s reply was deliberately casual.

“I’ve no idea. It’s enough for the moment that it’s going to be no easy job surveying it. It’s like nothing I’ve ever seen before.” He met Badr’s gaze. “Have *you* had any experience of anything like this?”

The deep eyes blinked slowly and the Chief Assistant turned away to look up at the high curving wall with its narrow windows. “No,” he said. His examination moved

down into the darkness of the moat and he let out a long misting breath into the cold air. “I suppose we’ll have to measure that as well.”

There was a ruefulness in his voice which twitched the edges of Josyff’s mouth into a faint smile in spite of himself. He abandoned it as Badr turned back to him.

“I haven’t had a full brief yet,” he said. “Perhaps when it arrives we’ll be spared that.”

“Perhaps. Perhaps not.” Badr gave a resigned shrug and turned back to the gateway.

More than likely, perhaps not, Josyff thought, watching him. The New Order collected information relentlessly. Not a bad thing in itself, he reflected, but there was an indiscriminate quality about it that was unsettling. There seemed to be no judgement of what was being learned, no ordering of it, as if it were being gathered for its own sake rather than illumination—a jumble of words rather than a narrative, a heap of bricks and timber rather than a house.

Then again, who was he to judge the New Order’s vision?

Who indeed?

Let it go.

Unconsciously he copied Badr’s glance up at the walls of the Keep. Their solidity seemed to anchor him. He had to make an effort to remind himself that it was only three days since he had clambered up the final slope on foot, carrying his fortunately modest baggage.

“We can’t ride the horses any further,” his guides had told him as the snow started to fall. “And if we walk with you we’ll not be able to get back before nightfall.” Their

leader had taken his arm and pointed. “You’ll see the Keep when you reach the top of this rise. There’s only one way, and it’s quite narrow. You can’t get lost.” He had looked Josyff up and down as if to satisfy himself on this point. “It’ll take you about an hour.”

Josyff had had considerable reservations about carrying on alone through the whitening landscape, but there was both a reassurance and a gentle finality in the guide’s tone that forbade any serious argument.

He nevertheless voiced his concern. “What if the snow worsens... or a mist comes down?” he asked.

The guide peered up through the falling flakes, dark against the grey sky, and shook his head. “It won’t,” he said unhesitatingly. Then he looked at Josyff squarely. “You are quite safe, Surveyor. We wouldn’t leave you otherwise. But *we* won’t be if we don’t turn back now.” He held out his heavily gloved hand and Josyff shook it automatically. “You’ll see the Keep and the way to it from the top,” he said again, releasing Josyff’s hand and indicating the path ahead once more. “And you’re expected. *We* are not.”

Josyff tried to look confident. “You’ll bring my equipment...”

“As soon as it arrives,” the guide replied. He was checking the fastenings on Josyff’s pack in an oddly paternal manner. “We must leave now.” He patted him on the arm.

And with a final farewell, he and his companions were striding quickly away.

Then they were gone.

Alone, Josyff stood still and awkward in the muffling silence of the deepening snow, looking after his vanished guides. After a moment, an eddy of alarm at his isolation started to whirl in the pit of his stomach and he momentarily considered calling, or even running after them. Then he forced himself to smile at this childlike impulse and the alarm faded. He might not be used to either mountains or snow, but over the past days the grandeur of the landscape he had found himself entering had moved him—awed him, almost—and the silence now descending with the snow brought a peace with it that seemed to enter into the heart of him—quietening him. The guides had been attentive to his needs throughout the journey so far and there had been no hint of concern in their manner as they had left. All would be well.

He hitched his pack needlessly and set off the winding path.

As the guide had said, the Keep came into view when he reached the top of the rise. Josyff stopped and stared at it for a long, timeless interlude. Even from a distance and with its outline softened by the falling snow, the Keep exuded a massive presence: a sense of timeless patience and resolute purposefulness, an ominous focus. It was as though it were pressing down, perhaps even trying to crush, the mountain vantage on which it stood. Yet, too, it belonged there. It was no arbitrary addition.

Josyff could not have said how long he stood there but when he recollected himself he set off towards the Keep with some urgency, concerned that, notwithstanding the guide's assurance, he could yet be caught by the failing

light. As he walked on, he had a sense of the Keep watching him, and of its great weight drawing him forward.

Somewhat to his surprise, it was almost exactly one hour since leaving the guides that, snow-covered and with legs aching and unsteady after the final steep slope, he was standing at the edge of the moat, opposite the closed drawbridge.

“You are expected,” the guide leader had said, but Josyff could see no signs of life about the place—no movement on its walls, no lights at its windows. Nor could he see any way of announcing his presence. There was just the Keep, powerful and dominating—and seemingly unreachable.

Looking from the raised drawbridge down into the dark maw of the moat, the fear of abandonment he had felt briefly when the guides left him began to return.

Then, as if in response, and almost noiselessly, the drawbridge had descended.

As he had walked across it, the sound of his heavy tread had seemed intrusive in the mountain stillness.

Badr had been waiting to meet him, standing under a dim light in the shelter of the arched gateway. He thrust his papers forward before speaking.

Josyff recalled the scene vividly as he turned away from his contemplation of the moat and followed Badr back through the gateway.

Only three days ago, he reflected. He felt as though he had been there much longer. Perhaps it was the stillness of the place. He was used to working in bustling places where, after some initial curiosity, people simply moved

around him as they went about their various businesses, treating him as though he were little more than part of the buildings he was measuring. Then again it might be the pace at which he was working which was hardly spectacular. Not that this concerned him greatly. The early days of any mapping were invariably spent in wandering about, quietly familiarizing himself with the new challenges and working out the best way to approach the work. And it was obvious from the outset that the Keep was going to be particularly difficult with its seemingly innumerable rooms and halls, and its elaborate winding passages and stairways. Still, initial confusion was usual. It would resolve itself eventually and the building would gradually shrink as he found the order that must lie within it. Then he would need his equipment. It was beginning to trouble him that it had not yet arrived. He looked back over his shoulder at the now obscured track as if the very thought might conjure the guides into being, hauling his paraphernalia through the snow. But there was nothing: just the unchanged white stillness.

He remarked on the delay to Badr as he caught up with him.

“It may not even be at the village yet,” the Chief Assistant replied. “I’m not from around here but this snow is both heavy and unseasonal, I believe. Perhaps it’s causing problems further afield. At least we’ve plenty of food.”

“The New Order provides,” Josyff said stiffly, hesitant to become involved in anything that might imply criticism of his employers.

“Indeed,” Badr agreed, tight-lipped, though there was an unmistakably ironic edge to his voice. Josyff’s assessment of the man shifted briefly. He had presumed him to be just another of the New Order’s people. Many of the functionaries of the previous government—insofar as it could be called a government—had been either dismissed or, bewilderingly, found themselves with no duties—or salary—without any form of notification. There had been no pattern to this silent purging that Josyff could see, but the equally silent message he received—hovering ever-present in any bureaucracy—was that he should be still and watchful and not draw attention to himself. Whether it was this or his true worth that spared him he could not have said. He was simply grateful that he was still there when it was all over. And, on the whole, like many, he had not been too displeased with what had happened. The Government that the New Order had replaced had been inept to the point of irrationality, and, startling and unexpected though the New Order’s emergence had been, even from his comparatively lowly position, and with his disdain for politics and politicians generally, Josyff could see that many of the changes they had brought in were both valuable and necessary.

But that was then. Now, an early intolerance of difference had grown, and with it, brutality. Many good people had gone, he knew. People who had much to offer. And those who were replacing them, particularly those in high office, few though he had met, were... strange... cold and distant.

But then, he reflected, strangeness was not a quality that was confined to the upper echelons of the New Order. Take, for example, the other three who were at the Keep when he arrived.

## Chapter 3

“Nah, boss, can’t move that.”

Pursed lips and an unequivocal shake of the head accompanied the statement though they were followed immediately by a flicker of doubt as lean and work roughened hands wrestled with the ornate iron key.

“At least I don’t think so.”

With a piercing screech of reluctance the key eventually turned. The door, by contrast, opened silently.

“Always a problem, this one.” The hands worked the key vigorously, throwing the bolt several times as if to loosen it, but each time it screeched in protest. Wincing, Josyff tapped the owner of the hands to end its torture.

“Can’t you oil it?” he asked.

The head shook again, and there was a hint of weariness in the face as one of the hands prodded the now revealed lock.

“Not where it’s needed. Riveted you see,” came the explanation. “Can’t get in it without wrecking it—and the door. Can’t think why on a fine old timepiece like this.” The other hand slapped the side of the clock affectionately. The sound was transformed into a deep resonant echo that billowed out of the clock’s dark interior to fill the room.

The lock was prodded again. “Like something off a dungeon, this.”

Nyk was one of the three men who tended the Keep. The others were Henk and Qualto. Badr had told Josyff about them shortly after his arrival but had made no effort to seek them out or introduce them formally. Josyff, in his turn, had presumed that details about them and their histories and duties would be in his brief—when it arrived—and had not pressed the matter. They had thus just drifted into his awareness as part of the Keep, his first encounter with Henk and Qualto being a hesitant acknowledging wave across a courtyard while Nyk, grey-haired and overalled, had offered him a nod and a crisp “Boss,” as he had passed him, sporting a short ladder on his shoulder and striding along with great purposefulness. It had occurred to him that three people did not seem to be very many to attend to the maintenance of a building of this size, but he had not dwelt on the notion.

This morning however, he had held to his resolve to “do something” about the clock that so dominated his room, and he had sought out Nyk with a view to having it moved. Nyk had a sharp accent that Josyff could not place and a disconcerting habit of craning forward and peering intently into the face of anyone addressing him as though listening to a rather slow child.

“And the door too, for that matter.” Nyk’s thumb and forefinger were measuring out the thickness of the door. He held them up for Josyff’s inspection.

Though he knew little about clocks Josyff could only agree. The lock was indeed massive and the door was thick enough to serve, if not a dungeon, certainly a house.

“It’s probably very old,” he said weakly.

“Oh, it’s old, all right. Everything round here’s old. It was old when I started here and I’ve seen... what...? three squires come and go.”

“How long ago was that?” Josyff asked casually

Nyk’s head was disappearing into the entrails of the clock and his reply was distant and echoing. It was accompanied by the rattling of chains and some faint and random bell chimes. “We’ve been here for ever. Me, Henk and Qualto. Henk a year after me, Qualto...” There was a pensive pause. “About two years after Henk.”

Nyk emerged from the clock, riffled noisily through a battered box of tools before retrieving an equally battered torch, then disappeared back into it again.

“Thought not.”

Josyff found himself being urged to peer into the body of the clock as Nyk reappeared. As he leaned tentatively forward, he saw that the interior was bigger than he had expected and he had a brief impression that the darkness was about to close about him. He felt a twist of claustrophobia but it vanished as the light from Nyk’s torch fragmented the darkness. The pendulum swept past his face, startling him. The light flicked about significantly.

“See. Look at those bolts.” The light stopped on a large and well rusted bolt head, then moved to indicate several others.

“Well fastened, that.” There was a chuckle. “More dungeon work. It makes no sense to put a clock in a case as solid as this and it makes even less to go to such trouble to fasten it down. It’s hardly likely to be whisked off by a casual thief, is it? Must’ve been expecting an earthquake or something.”

Nyk’s head joined Josyff’s in the clock.

“Deep, you see,” he continued, fencing with the pendulum to tap one of the bolts with his torch and sending shadows dancing about the interior. “There’s lots of them about the place. Somehow they seem to have fastened them direct into the stone. God knows how. I wish I did. This stuff’s blunted more than a few of my best drills I can tell you. It’s a nightmare to work with.” He withdrew from the clock. Josyff joined him. “But they’re in to stay. Never moved one of those yet without ruining it. Either the corners go, or the head comes right off.” His hands mimicked the wringing of a bird’s neck.

Josyff looked up at the clock. Fingers now horizontal, it returned his gaze with one of startled indignation at this unwarranted intrusion.

“Mechanism’s beautiful though,” Nyk said, looking both to defend his charge and appease his companion. “Really fine work. Keeps excellent time.”

Josyff had anticipated a certain degree of muscular endeavour and bad language in the moving of the clock, but not these peculiar complications. “I’m sure,” he conceded.

Nyk nodded and fixed an expectant look on Josyff, but held his peace. Uncomfortable, Josyff looked for a way to move away from the subject.

“You must’ve been concerned that the New Order might reassign you,” he said offhandedly, as though he were in reality still pondering what to do about the clock.

Nyk was clattering through his tools again. “Not really,” he replied. “Governments come and go, but they’re all the same, aren’t they? They talk a lot but they always need folks like me to do the real work. And we’re not that important, are we? Out here, a long way from anywhere.” The clattering rose to an agitated peak. “Besides, they’re not really anything to do with us. We’re employed by the Estate.” He tapped a faded emblem on his overalls. “Like the squires, though the last one used to pretend this was his family place.” With a final wrench he produced a long, grim-looking spanner from the box. “Do you want me to try and move one of those?” he asked with a nod towards the clock though with a strong hint of “don’t say I didn’t warn you,” in his voice.

Josyff avoided the renewed gaze as if still undecided, but his curiosity was aroused. He was no bureaucratic schemer but it might be useful to know the fate of those previously responsible for this place.

“What happened to the last... squire?” he asked.

Nyk shrugged. “No idea. Went out on one of his usual jaunts one day, never came back.”

Josyff was momentarily silenced by this blunt reply.

“Did *he* work for the government?” he managed eventually.

“Nah, I told you. He worked for the Estate.”

Josyff had to ask. “What Estate?”

Nyk gave him a puzzled look. “The one that owns this place,” he said slowly and with forced patience.

“But it belongs to the New Order.”

Nyk shrugged again. “That’s as may be. I told you, it makes no difference out here. We just keep the place going, that’s all. And I’m not bothered just so long as my wages are paid, we get supplies, and no one interferes with me.” He paused and retreated quickly from this radical position. “To tell the truth I don’t think anyone’s really interested in this place.”

Josyff’s mind was now awash with questions. He snatched at one.

“How long has the last squire been gone?”

Nyk puffed out his cheeks and looked up at the clock as if for inspiration. His face became absorbed in a calculation of some kind and his fingers twitched. “About ten years I’d think. Nine or ten. I wouldn’t swear to either. It’s a long time.”

Despite himself, Josyff gaped.

“Ten years! And you don’t know what’s happened to him?”

Nyk’s reply was almost offhand. “He was always wandering off. Visiting relatives, as he used to say, when he said anything. He’d be gone for weeks on end. Never a word.” He paused and looked thoughtful. “I must admit I hadn’t realized it’d been so long. But no one’s ever been to ask about him.”

Josyff stammered. “But... but who’s been doing his work? And who tells you what to do?”

Nyk replaced the spanner in the box and gave Josyff a knowing, almost paternal grin. “Like I said, we’re a long way from anywhere here. In fact, we’re even a long way from *here*, here.” The grin became a soft chuckle at his own joke. “There was nothing for him to do,” he said. “There never has been, for any of the squires that I’ve seen. They wander about like lost souls. I think the Estate used to send people here when they wanted to get rid of them quietly—out of sight, out of mind, you know. As for us, we know what we have to do. And there’s always plenty of it.” He faltered and his eyes became briefly distant. “This place is a lot bigger than it looks. Must’ve taken ten times our number to look after it once.” He eyed Josyff. “At least *you’ve* got something to do. Mind you, not that I know anything about surveying, but I don’t think you’re going to find this place easy to measure. It’s very odd. What do you want doing with this clock?”

Josyff was glad of the sharp lurch back to his original problem.

“You’d better leave it if it’s going to be such a problem. It’s just not to my taste, that’s all. I thought you could just move it into the corridor, but I wouldn’t want to destroy it.”

“Keeps excellent time.” Nyk confirmed again by way of consolation as he closed the door and turned the screeching lock. He picked up his box of tools with a loud grunt and, leaning to one side to accommodate its weight, made for

the door. "I suppose I could always cover it up for you," he said over his shoulder.

Josyff risked an informality. "No, it's not that important. I'll learn to love it. Thanks for your help."

Nyk nodded.

When he had left, Josyff sat on the end of his bed, staring at the clock for some time. He had not thought about it before but at least he knew now why its tick was so soft, confined as it was in the substantial casing. But Nyk's observations about the clock were unsettling him for some reason. Why should anyone have built it so massively? And why would they fasten it to the fabric of the building so ferociously? It didn't seem to make any sense. Then again, this whole place was strange. Even to the way its staff was employed, it seemed. There had been no mention of any Estate when he had received his instructions. Still less of any squires. What an odd, archaic word. Some local tradition, perhaps?

But gone for ten years! Just walked away. Josyff shook his head and leaned back on his elbows. Maybe he shouldn't be so surprised, he decided after a little reflection. Nepotism and favouritism were rife in the previous government and greater follies than a few incompetents being put out to grass had been committed in the past. As for Nyk and the others—and whatever this Estate was—even the New Order was entitled to a little vagueness in the handling of its more distant concerns, and, as Nyk had said, this place was a long way from anywhere. It was difficult to see what importance it might have.

Doubtless all would become clear in time.

As he looked at the clock he recalled that its interior had seemed bigger than its exterior. An unusual illusion, especially given the considerable thickness of the casing. On an impulse he stood up and turned the key in the clock door.

The lock opened silently.

## Chapter 4

Josyff pulled his hand away from the key quickly, taken aback by the ease with which it had turned. Though smaller and lighter than he was, Nyk had given the impression of considerable wiry strength and he had had a determined struggle with the protesting lock.

Probably just because it's not been opened for a long time, Josyff reassured himself. Nyk must have shaken something loose. He would mention it when he saw him again.

He eased the door open very carefully.

It was indeed unusually thick and, as it swung out, it came between the light and the clock, seeming to darken the whole room.

Josyff leaned forward to examine the interior of the clock and once again felt as though the darkness was luring him forward. He had to force himself to smile at his foolishness, but he was nevertheless gripping the edge of the door as he began methodically staring into the gloom. As his eyes adjusted he made out the pendulum, shade within shade, swinging slowly from side to side. A purposeful, loud and resonant click accompanied each passing. And was it his imagination or could he hear a sound like the rushing of a wind as it passed? As though it

were infinitely long and heavy and working a vast machine somewhere? It seemed suddenly to be a long way away. He reached out with the intention of stopping it then changed his mind. He might not be able to start it again and he had no desire to make himself foolish in front of Nyk or the others by having to run after him to get it started again. But that was a feeble excuse at the forefront of his mind. Behind it, ill-formed and menacing, was a feeling that he would not be able to stop it, that if his hand closed about it, it would draw him inexorably forward and bind him to its eerie fruitless journey arcing out a measure of the time of this place.

A dangling chain brushed the back of his hand making him jump.

Then he was falling.

Through the darkness.

His hands flailed wildly, snatching at the chains he could feel swaying about him, but they kept slipping away, as though taunting him.

Cold air rushed past him. Faster and faster.

His head was filled with the sound of his own terrified screaming mingling with jangling bells and rattling chains and...

Voices.

Voices chaotic with consternation and fear. Rising and falling with the scything hiss of the pendulum. Louder and louder.

He reached out to them—desperate—appealing.

Even as he did so, light flooded over him painfully and his body was shaken by a racking impact.

Gasping violently for breath and deafened by the pounding of his heart he made no attempt to move for some time.

Slowly he opened his eyes and, as they gradually focused, so the brightness of the light dimmed and both his body and his mind became quiet enough to identify where he was.

He was lying on his bed, staring up at the ceiling of his room.

He put his shaking hand to his face. It was damp with perspiration.

A dream, or, more correctly, a nightmare, he decided, as he cautiously levered himself upright and let out a noisy and unsteady breath. He must have dozed off after Nyk left. He forced himself to stand though it was no slight task—his legs were trembling as much as his hands.

He gave the clock a reproachful look which, with one finger drooping now, it returned.

As the trembling gradually faded he managed a nervous laugh though it sounded oddly flat after the echoing space within the clock. Ironic that only earlier he had been reflecting how rarely he remembered his dreams and how benign they were when he did.

“Enough,” he said. Voices, eccentric clocks, squires with nothing to do who just walk away. There was enough to think about here by way of straightforward technical surveying problems without all this nonsense. The words, “mountain madness” drifted into his mind.

No, he thought crossly. There’s no madness here. He was just unsettled by this place and its isolation. He was used to busier climes. The enforced idleness did not suit

him. If only his brief and his instruments would arrive. Surely the people in the village were used to bringing goods and the like up here through the snow? How else could Nyk and the others survive the winter? With this thought came the unwelcome thought that perhaps the snow was particularly bad. He had no way of telling. Unseasonal, Badr had called it. What if it was so bad that the villagers *couldn't* reach them? What if there was a chance they might run out of food and themselves be unable to reach the village?

He gritted his teeth, straightened up and swore at himself. If that had been a possibility, he was sure, even on his limited acquaintance of the man, that Nyk would have already mentioned it.

He went to the wash basin and splashed cold water on his face. Starting new jobs was always a little ragged and disorganized and this one was proving particularly so. He could ask Nyk about the snow and his equipment in due course. Things would take shape soon enough.

He looked at the clock as he dried his face, then through the window at the snow-covered mountains as though somehow they might have changed. He laughed again, though not as self-consciously as before. A nightmare—he couldn't even remember having such a thing when he was a child—and in the morning too. So much for his early rising. But, in spite of this attempt at dismissiveness, an unease lingered.

As he put on his jacket he moved back to the clock. Gripping the key tightly and not without a hint of trepidation, he made to turn it. It resisted sufficiently for

him to bring two hands to bear. Then, with a recognizable screech, it turned. Josyff yanked the door open, though more violently than he had intended. Inside were chains and counter weights and the steadily swinging pendulum with its reassuring and solid tick. The sound of the harsh opening was reverberating distantly.

He closed and locked the door and patted the side of the clock as though it were now an old friend.

\* \* \* \*

Josyff smiled as Badr ushered him into the little room.

“How did you come across this?” he asked.

“Nyk mentioned it,” Badr replied. “When I was asking him about your equipment.”

“Did he have anything to say about that? About the snow?” He was about to ask, “Are we cut off?” but changed it. “Will the guides be able to bring it through?”

“It shouldn’t be too much of a problem, apparently. The snow *is* early but it’s not bad enough to block the paths. Presumably the equipment—and the brief—simply haven’t arrived.”

Josyff was not sure that this was any more reassuring than the news that they were not snowed in. He had done the necessary paperwork before he left and ensured it had been received and acknowledged by the correct departments and that everything was in fact available. Even so, the New Order judged by results and was notoriously indifferent to excuses no matter how legitimate, especially where these might in some way reflect on shortcomings within its own bureaucracy. He had been sent here to

measure this place, to prepare plans of it. Failure to do that, for whatever reason, would not be good for him. He might still find himself quietly dismissed from the service like so many others before him.

Still, there was nothing he could do here immediately. Give it a little longer, he decided. One of the advantages of this place was that there were no distractions. Once he was started he should be able to make good progress. Judging from Nyk's attitude towards the New Order it was quite possible that villagers might just be "relaxed" about obeying its instructions—life was reputedly slower away from the cities he had heard. Or they could perhaps be waiting in the hope that the snow might clear. If necessary he could have Nyk take him back to the village to see what was happening.

He opened a box that was lying on the table. In it was a theodolite.

He shook his head and laughed as he examined it. "This is like travelling through time," he said. "These things were old when I was just starting studying." He was about to lift it from the box when an old memory asserted itself. Which way does this damned thing fit? More than once in his early student days irritating time had been lost at the end of a country-slogging exercise as he and his colleagues had struggled in failing light to replace recalcitrant instruments back in their boxes.

One way and one way only.

He noted carefully the marking dots and the position of the levelling screws then gently lifted the instrument out and placed it on the table.

“It’s been used a lot,” he said, rotating the telescope and running a finger over its scratched frame. “What on earth could it be doing here?”

Badr shrugged. “Perhaps this was a mountain survey station once,” he offered. “Or maybe this place has already been measured up.”

In the ensuing silence the two men looked at one another with a hint a dry amusement. Josyff was beginning to lose some of his early uncertainty about Badr. Perhaps he too was just another individual considering himself fortunate to have avoided the New Order’s “adjusting” of the civic order.

“I think we might perhaps ask Nyk about that,” he said conspiratorially. “Just in case he’s forgotten to volunteer the information. Even an inaccurate plan would be a great help.”

“It would indeed.”

Badr was retrieving something from under the table. It was a tripod.

A few minutes later the theodolite was mounted and roughly levelled. Josyff stood back and looked at it, not without some nostalgic pride. “I suppose I should be pleased about this,” he said. “Anything’s better than nothing. But seeing it makes me want our equipment more than ever. I really don’t relish working round this place in the ‘good old-fashioned way’.”

Badr grimaced in professional agreement.

Josyff gazed around the dusty, windowless room.

“What else is here?”

There was more than he expected. A rummaging search left them both dust-grimed and mildly triumphant. Another theodolite had been unearthed, but it was damaged. There was also a level together with various staffs, rods, chains, tapes, unused recording books, a drawing board and drafting instruments and, prompting a fatalistic in-drawn breath from Josyff, a book of mathematical tables.

“Now we’ve no excuse at all,” he said showing it to Badr in affected horror.

“It would seem so,” his Chief Assistant returned in similar vein. The instruments might allow them to measure the place, but calculations would be necessary if the measurements were to be transformed into accurate plans. And those same calculations could be time-consuming, grievously prone to error and generally deeply wearisome when done by hand.

For a moment a hope was held out as the removal of a sheet revealed a chest of long, shallow drawers for the storing of plans. Josyff opened each of the drawers in great anticipation but they proved to be a disappointment. Apart from copious dust-laden cobwebs and more than a few bewildered spiders, they were empty.

“Any use?”

It was Nyk, head peering around the door and his question addressed to the room generally.

“To a museum,” Josyff replied.

“Or desperate men,” Badr added darkly.

Josyff asked him how the equipment had come to be there and if there were plans already drawn, but was left unenlightened.

No idea where the equipment had come from. Been here as long as he could remember. No *plans* of the place that he knew of, but some very nice pictures in some of the rooms. “No good, then, all this?” Nyk concluded, indicating the spoils of the surveyors’ search and wrinkling his nose.

“It might get us started,” Josyff conceded, reluctant to seem ungrateful. “We’ll have to test it. See what state it’s in. But we really need our proper equipment. When...”

“Anything’s better than nothing, eh?” Nyk interrupted with an echo of Josyff’s own initial response. “That’s good.” And he was gone.

\* \* \* \*

All eyes turned to the tall figure standing in the doorway of the inn. He returned the collective gaze with an unnerving steadiness then inclined his head slightly in acknowledgement.

His voice was soft and cultured, but everyone heard it very clearly.

“I have to go to the Keep. I am looking for someone to guide me there.”

**That's the end of the sampler. We hope you enjoyed it.  
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## About the author

Roger Taylor was born in Heywood, Lancashire, and now lives in the Wirral. He is a chartered civil and structural engineer, a pistol, rifle and shotgun shooter, instructor/student in aikido, and an enthusiastic and loud but bone-jarringly inaccurate piano player.

He wrote four books between 1983 and 1986 and built up a handsome rejection file before the third was accepted by Headline to become the first two books of the Chronicles of Hawklan.

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