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Opening extract from

The Truth Sayer Series: Book 3 Plague of Mondays

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'Truth Sayer!'

A fat man in red leather was lumbering sweatily across the garden of the House of Truth, but Nian, the Truth Sayer, ignored him. Nian was concentrating on the pockle game.

Nian saw a chance, lunged forward, and whacked the pockle cone with his flipper. The pock spun away through the air and Nian saw with a thrill that everything was set up. Alin was running into space and had plenty of time to judge his shot at the drey.

Alin swiped out hard and the pock went up, up, spinning past the trees, the wall, the grey and cloudy autumn sky . . .

'*Truth Sayer*!'

. . . and then slowed to a momentary stop and tumbled down again.

Alin had muffed the shot a bit, though it couldn't have been easy from that angle. The pock was going to miss the drey completely and end up in the brambles.

The pock sailed out of play, hit the smooth trunk of a stoneberry tree and . . .

. . . dived into a hollow tree, trundled out of a woodknocker hole, got whipped up along the u-shaped shoulder of a wine bush, sailed through the air avoiding seventy-three branches, a startled hayfinch, and one of Hani's old boots that had been stuck up the tree for weeks—and then plunged neatly into the drey at the end of the pockle ground to bring the score to one–nil.

There was a complete and utter silence for about five seconds while everybody's eyes bulged with amazement—and then Hani let out a howl of outrage.

'*Fluuuuuuke*!' he howled.

Alin tried to look bored and lordly, but he just couldn't do it. A great grin of delight spread itself right across his face. He punched his fist into the air.

'*Skill*!' he crowed. 'That was pure skill, that was! And just *immaculate* timing. CITY! CITY! CITY!'

Nian opened his mouth to laugh for ever . . .

. . . and then someone at his elbow spoke.

'*Truth Sayer*!'

Nian made the mistake of glancing at the great mountain of a man who'd loomed up beside him. It was Snorer. Snorer was probably the kindest of the members of the Tarhun who worked in the House of Truth (though that was rather like talking about the *kindest* stink-weasel). And over the fat blob of Snorer's face was a shadow of worry.

Nian's laughter died inside him. Snorer was secretary of the Tarhun Pockle Association. He should have been jumping up and down and hooting like a swinggibbon after a blatant fluke like that.

‘What is it?’ asked Nian, with a horrible qualm.

Snorer could hardly bring himself to meet Nian’s eyes.

‘You’ve got a visitor,’ he mumbled.

Hani stooped to snatch up the pockle cone. Even he was grinning, now—and the others were on their knees, sobbing with mirth.

‘A visitor?’ echoed Nian. ‘What sort of a visitor?’

‘He says he’s your brother, Truth Sayer.’

Tan. But Tan was the most stay-at-home sort of person you could find.

‘A fair-haired boy,’ said Nian, to make sure. ‘Sort of chunky. Valley accent. Not that quick.’

Snorer nodded his great fat head.

‘He says he’s brought news,’ he went on, quietly.

News from home? News worth travelling for a whole week to tell?

Nian chucked his flipper to Alin and started running across garden towards the great white wall of the House of Truth.

The Strangers’ Room was new. It used to be a storeroom for the Tarhun’s snowboots, but strenuous and determined airing meant that now, fortunately, it only smelled of whitewash.

There was a stocky sandy-haired boy sitting on the bench against the far wall. He looked up nervously when Nian entered.

‘What’s happened?’ demanded Nian. Home was seven days’ journey away, and his younger brother Tan

could not have been lightly spared from the farm, especially while this fine weather lasted.

Tan squinted doubtfully over Nian's shoulder at the great bulk of the Tarhun Snorer.

'It's Grandy,' he said.

Their grandmother was old, of course, but she was never ill. She always said she was too old and tough and busy to be ill. In fact, she'd said that so often that Nian had come to believe it.

'What's the matter with her?' Nian demanded, fiercely, to hide his sudden fear.

Tan's square face flushed. He gave Snorer another quick look and then mumbled to the stone flags of the floor.

'She's started . . . talking,' he said.

'Talking?'

'About the rocks.'

Nian spent a moment wondering if he could have heard right.

'About the *what*?'

'You know,' went on Tan, miserably. 'Grandy's *always* going on about how she can hear the rocks moving under the earth. About being able to hear the mountains grinding and growing.'

Nian frowned.

'Well, she can, can't she,' he pointed out. 'I mean, she knew when the earthquakes were coming last spring, didn't she. She heard the rocks graunching against each other and made everyone go outside. That was what you told me when I was home in the summer. You said that if it hadn't been for her, then Miri

might have been killed when the roof beam fell in the ox house.'

Tan shrugged. He was sturdy, and useful round the farm, but he wasn't one for believing anything that wasn't there in front of him.

'Is Grandy all right except for being worried about the mountains moving?' asked Nian. 'She's not ill?'

Tan wrinkled up his face.

'Well,' he said, dubiously. 'She's not *ill* ill, anyway. I mean, she's up with the first sun, and baking and cleaning and everything, just as usual. But she keeps on and on about the mountains. Getting really agitated. She kept nagging Father about getting someone to come and tell you. Well, Father, he said everyone was too busy, but she kept saying . . . ' he frowned, as if trying to call her exact words to mind. 'She kept saying that someone had cobbled the path of the world. Something like that.'

'*Cobbled the path of the world?*' echoed Nian, completely puzzled. 'Are you sure? What's that supposed to mean?'

Tan shrugged.

'Well, I don't know,' he admitted. 'Mother says Grandy's going age-mazy.'

Nian made a face. That didn't sound like Grandy: she was old, but she'd always been as sharp as a thistle.

Tan sighed glumly and stretched out his legs.

'I don't think all this travelling agrees with me,' he said dolefully. 'My legs feel as if I've been climbing this mountain for days on end.'

Nian sighed, as well. He felt as if *he'd* spent a whole week being interrupted every time he tried to play pockle. One of the things about being the Truth Sayer was that everybody expected you to know what to do whenever there was a problem—and sometimes he really wished he could have a day off. He was feeling like that now. And it was only Monday, so he had just *had* a day off.

Nian wondered rather irritably what on earth he was supposed to do about all this. Go back home with Tan? Try to work out what on earth Grandy was going on about?

A waft of beer breath told Nian that Snorer was preparing himself to speak.

'Probably off her rocker, Lord,' he murmured helpfully. 'My old mother, Lords bless her, she went through a stage of saying that there were mouselets gnawing at the timbers of her shack.' He chuckled, indulgently. 'I mean, *mouselets*! Can you imagine it? And then, when the shack *did* collapse on top of her, she wouldn't accept it was the storm that'd done it. No no, she kept hobbling round waving planks from the wall in people's faces and pointing out the teeth marks.'

'Teeth marks?'

Snorer rasped the stubble along the side of his jaw.

'We never *could* quite explain the teeth-marks,' he admitted.

Tan flexed his legs gingerly.

'Father didn't want to send anyone, but a party of Tourists came through the village and Grandy nagged

them into letting me travel with them. But they're still down at the inn, of course, as the House isn't open to Tourists on a Monday. Nian, is there anything to eat?'

Nian's own supper would be waiting for him, but he couldn't take Tan into the Inner House because it was reserved for the Lords of Truth and their pupils. The Lord Rago would go berserk if he found out Nian had brought a stranger in.

On the other hand, Tan was his brother, and Nian could hardly expect him to spend the night back down in the inn.

Nian turned to Snorer.

'Do you think Snerk would do us a bit of supper?' he asked hopefully. 'And could someone find us a couple of sleeping mats so I can stay here tonight with my brother? And some covers? Oh, and let the Lords know where I am?'

Snorer hunched his brawny shoulders.

'Is that all?' he asked. 'You wouldn't like a rezkler orchestra and a troupe of dancing girls while I'm at it, would you?'

Tan sat up.

'You have *dancing girls* in here?' he asked.

Nian rolled his eyes.

'No, the Tarhun's being funny,' he told Tan. 'The nearest we've ever got to dancing girls was the time Reeklet and Bulls-Eye stepped in a tiger-bees' nest.'

'What?' And Nian remembered that Tan had never been the sharpest stake in the fence.

'It's all right,' said Snorer, heavily, as he shuffled out. 'You just take it easy, Lord, and I'll arrange everything.

It's not as if I've got anything better to do than run errands for you, is it?'

'I doubt you have,' snapped Nian, tartly, after him. 'Because that means I'll have time to work out what's gone wrong with the fabric of the worlds!'

Nian turned back from the almost-slammed door. His brother was looking around him rather blankly at the bare room, and Nian suddenly remembered all the preparations and fuss that the family made when he himself returned home. The welcome, the feast, the stories. Nian looked at Tan's square, determined-not-to-be-overawed face, and remembered how terrifying Nian had found the House of Truth when he'd first set eyes on it.

Nian swallowed down his annoyance about the pockle game (for this was the first time, after all, that anyone in his family had ever come to the House), and then made a further effort to swallow down his annoyance about the way people kept dumping all their worries and problems on him.

He sat himself down beside his large younger brother and asked him all about the farm, and the family, and Tan's week-long journey to the mountain of the House of Truth.

Snerk came up trumps with a couple of huge portions of fantastically delicious stew. ('What sort of meat is this?' asked Tan, dribbling with rapture. 'Don't ask,' advised Nian, from experience, because Snerk the Tarhun cook was always experimenting with ingredients like

mildew and snails' eggs that were best not thought about.) And then Nian and Tan lay down on their mats and listened to the Tarhun having a drunken sing-song and colossal fight next door.

'Do they do this every night?' asked Tan, hugely impressed, as what sounded like another bench thumped and clattered against the wall.

Nian didn't know, because he'd always slept in the peace of the Inner House until then. He'd have thought the Tarhun would have been ready for a quiet Monday evening after the big influx of Tourists that the weekend had brought. But then, knowing the Tarhun . . .

'I wouldn't be surprised,' he told Tan.

There was something very comfortable about sleeping beside Tan. He and Tan had slept side by side every night of their lives until Nian had come to the House of Truth.

Nian drifted off peacefully.

Nian woke up on his mat in the pupils' sleeping room in the Inner House.

Nian pushed back his coarse fair hair and wondered what he'd been dreaming about. It might have been something about his brother Tan . . . but no. No, he couldn't remember.

Hani was yawning and complaining and groaning. The Lord Rago was due to take them for a weather-lore lesson that morning, and being taught by Rago was about as safe and relaxing as being trapped in a bottle with a crack scorpion.

Nian pushed off his cover. His dream, whatever it had been, had left him with an unpleasant upside-down and inside-out feeling.

Over by the window Alin was doing the horribly bracing exercises with which he felt the need to start the day, and beside Nian Derig was folding up his mat.

Yes. Nian yawned and settled himself into wakefulness.

House of Truth.

Sleeping room.

Monday.