

Chapter XLVII

Until We Meet Again

One by one, she began to take them aside. Dhel watched her speaking with the Arayin and wondered how a woman who had just told them she had been alive for at least 300 years could look so young. But when he came face to face with her, and could observe the minute motions of her body, he realized that despite appearances, there was no doubt as to the maturity of this woman who claimed to see the strands of time itself. Every gesture she made, every word she spoke was confident in the worn way of long practice. Plus, her eyes gave her away. She might have the face of an ageless goddess but her eyes were those of an old woman who had seen enough of life to view the world plain and unclouded.

As she approached him, he could not think of himself as worthy of those insightful eyes. So he admitted to her, straight-faced, "I don't understand what is being asked of me."

"You can sense the Mark," the Oracle told him, as if he needed reminding. "This is important. The Marked are still scattered and until Kija's daughter makes herself known to the world, the flock requires a shepherd to find them."

"That's what the Arayin wants me to do – find others who have the Mark."

"More likely, they will find you. The Marks were laid out as they were because we saw that your paths would overlap. But without someone like you, you could merely pass each other like ships in the night."

"Well, seeing how many of us made it here to listen to you, finding each other doesn't seem so terribly difficult. And you – you seem to know everything, you say you helped Kija pick who to Mark in the first place. I don't see why you'd need me to find them again for you."

"Who said I did? You have a gift which allows you to know your allies – that gift is for your use, not for mine. There will be those who will try to use you, as Mordth tried to use your young friend. What you must decide for yourself is whether you will use what you have been given to lead or to follow."

"But what am I supposed to *do*? If you've brought us all here to be a part of this Ilas Cyadath, surely you can tell me that."

"As for what I know... of the certain future, very little. There is no certainty in what I see, only manifold probabilities. You want to know why you are Marked, what your purpose is? There is no easy answer because there is no one answer. But if you are up to it, I have a task in mind for you."

"What kind of task?"

"A war is coming, one far more terrible than the one that claimed your father's life. Many armies will be caught in its swell. But should you wish it, I can tell you where to find an object that could end the war before it begins."

"Such a thing exists? What is it? A weapon?"

"Yes. A weapon that can destroy even a god."

Dhel shivered. He didn't want to think of why or how such a thing could have been made. "So this task..."

"This weapon was hidden in a distant land your people have no maps or knowledge of, put under the care of a sect who have dedicated their lives to its protection. It was Kija who made this weapon, and it bears her Mark. With your gift, you are the most likely candidate to retrieve it. I would go myself, but I am bound here by other forces and for me to take too active a role now would jeopardize Kija's carefully laid plans."

"This all seems so..."

"Strange? Unbelievable? Would you rather wait and let Mordth's henchmen find the weapon first? They are looking you know, though they have not the guidance you have in me."

"The Madthrewn had a boy with them, who can sense the Mark like me."

The Oracle nodded. "Mordth will be grieved at that loss, believe me. Would you rather I sent the boy in your place?"

"What? He's just a kid! Who knows what the Madthrewn did to him while they were dragging him around the country!"

"Only one of you must go. The other should remain here, to aid your fellows as more Ilas Cyadath are gathered."

Dhel sighed. "Fine, I'll go. But I don't know how I'll explain all this to my brother. I'm not sure he'll understand."

"I will set a date for a second gathering. If you can, you must try to find the weapon before then."

"How long will it take? I thought you said it was in a far away land."

"Who can say? But there are paths you can take which will make your journey speedier, as I believe you have already experienced."

"More magic, huh?"

"I have never thought of it as magic. But for you who cannot see the dance of the strings, yes, I suppose it is a sort of sorcery."

"You're speaking in riddles again."

"Its my prerogative, as an Oracle." She smiled as though to put him at ease, but the prospect of a long and dangerous journey ahead of him – magic or no – was rather depressing. He wasn't quite ready to go home yet; he was afraid it wouldn't feel like home anymore, but he wasn't eager to go off adventuring either. He felt caught between the past and present, unable to move forward.

As though she had read his mind, the Oracle said to him, "Truly, even now, your home will never be as it was before. That is the way of time and change. But do not despair that your path is difficult. Your efforts will not go unrewarded and you will have companions to brave the road alongside you. Not all paths must be walked alone and this battle at least, cannot be won or lost by any single person. Why, two of the companions I have chosen for you are from your own village."

"But Lumar has changed, its like I don't know... wait, two? Who are you talking about?"

"She has not found you yet? I would have thought she would seek you out right away. Perhaps she is shy of you still. There she is, over with the Tellaks."

Thoroughly puzzled, Dhel looked to where the Oracle was indicating. One face he recognized right away.

"That's the Tellak girl from the Blue Firewind! What is she doing here? Or wait, don't answer that. I should have guessed. Our paths are meant to cross, right?"

"Look beside her."

And then he saw. Red hair as bright as flame. His heart skipped a beat.

"Isamyne?!"

And it was only as an afterthought that he wondered why a strip of cloth was tied over her eyes.

“Even now, Mordth’s army is amassing in the north. You must be ready.”

“But I don’t know how to raise that kind of force! And Queen or not, who is going to let a girl like me command one?”

“Next time you see him, ask Dythen Firewind why he convinced your father to name you as his heir. You will raise an army and you will command it. Trust my sight – it is within you to do this.”

“What happens if I fail?”

“You must believe in yourself, princess of Whitecrest. You must be strong so that your people will be strong under you. Look into your heart and you will find yourself not lacking in courage. You are the descendant of a proud and stubborn lineage. You must do what your uncle and father did eighteen years ago. You must find a way to unite the squabbling tribes of this continent or fall to Mordth’s army one by one.”

“How long do we have?”

“Mordth is aiming for a winter war because he knows his troops, trained in the frigid north, will have the advantage. I will organize another gathering of the Marked at the end of the fall harvest in Lylyalanon. You must be there if you can with whatever troops and allies you can muster so that strategies can be prepared.”

“I’ve always wanted to see the Lylyalanon during the Rites of the Plenty. I guess I’ll do what I can.”

“I know you will. Now, is there anything you would ask of me?”

“Well there is one thing... no, its silly and its nothing you could really help with.”

“It is true that matters of the heart are best left to their natural mystery, princess. But I will talk to him, if you don’t mind.”

“Thank you. You must think me some flighty girl-child.”

“Nonsense. Cherish your youth, princess. It will slip away from you all too quickly.”

“Revered Oracle, humbly do I come before you to request a blessing of your perfect wisdom.”

She actually laughed. “Come now, Prince of the Rocks, there’s no need for such formality. I can see you are burning with the impatient curiosity common to youth. I am sorry if I have kept you waiting overmuch.”

“By your looks, Lady, you are not so far grown out of girlhood yourself. What fountain do you sip from that keeps you so radiant? For if it is true that you walked the world with Kija you should be as old as my eldest known forefathers.”

“Oh, I am many times older than that. It is true that the jaws of time do not gnaw my flesh but trust me when I say I pay dearly for such a bargain, in other ways. Would you know the real length of my years? It might astound you.”

Orsol knew he was being baited and had to resist playing along for her amusement. There were too many things on his mind. “No, Oracle. As you say, I am anxious to hear your pronouncements in the matter of the fate of my people.”

“I know what answer you seek from me, good prince. But tell me something. If I were to instruct you now to abandon your quest for the throne of Vorolan and find some other sort of life for yourself, would you comply?”

Orsol considered this for a long moment, wary of a trick. “The Word of the Oracle is not something to be trifled with,” he said at last, “however, I think I would require a good and forceful reason to even consider such a thing. I have invested far too much in my goals to back down for fear of the future.”

The Oracle regarded him coolly. “It is good, prince Orsol, that you are strong willed – you will have to fight for the future you desire. But pray you be mindful of overindulging your ambitions. Our greatest desires are always our greatest weaknesses when it comes to human corruption.”

Sulah had voiced a similar concern. “I will do my best not to fall to my vices,” Orsol promised.

“Then I will tell you this: the key to leadership is in the hearts of the many, as you already well know. Earn the heart of the many and you will have the crown.”

“But holding on to it...”

“Is a more difficult task, I agree. However, do not forget that you are numbered among Kija’s Marked now, Prince of the Rocks. We are entering a dangerous time and there are others beside yourself who will be looking for allies. Have you been paying attention to the other pilgrims who have gathered here?”

“I’ve been a bit distracted,” Orsol admitted.

“In Kija’s interest, I suppose I may grant you an introduction. Do you see that girl over there in the blue gown with the long brown hair?”

“I see her.”

“That is Kaythe Rycha, soon to be named Queen of Whitecrest.”

“Queen? What happened to King Aster?”

“You’ve been out of the ports for a while, I forget. The poor fellow was murdered by the connivings of his own wife and brother. Kaythe is his daughter. You would do well to speak with her, I think. She too is looking for allies and she has reason to trust Tellaks of your particular political alignment for their part in her own recent coup.”

“Indeed? Well well... out of the loop for a few days and look what happens. Murder plots, intrigues, and fair Whitecrest to be ruled by a stripling girl.” *It was time to act, gods-be-damned!*

“Oh prince?” he’d almost forgotten the Oracle. He looked back to her expectantly. “One more thing,” she added, “and please do take it to heart. Sulah N’Sehan may have no noble blood or backing in your world but in my eyes and in Kija’s she is an Ilas Cyadath, same as you, and your equal. Take care of her and show her your respect.”

Surprised, Orsol could only promise, “I will.”

“You look frightened my dear! Am I that fearsome looking to you?”

Sulah was trying her best to keep from shaking like a leaf. Her voice was accusing, “Should I not be afraid? I am thinking perhaps it would be best if I heard none of your prophecies after all.”

“Are you not a seeker of truth, child?”

“I am learning, perhaps belatedly, that truth is a matter of perception. And I am tired of riddles.”

“Then I will endeavour to speak to the point. Are you not curious what news I gave your friend the prince?”

“I am sure it was everything he wanted to hear.”

“Kija has need of him, just as Kija has need of you.”

“I agreed to join your Ilas Cyadath, is that not enough? Although I’ll admit I don’t understand why you need to recruit followers like this. Kija is revered everywhere south of the Ironwall. If she needs human fodder for her armies, she has but to awaken and send out word.”

“Which she will do, if and when things come down to that. The Ilas Cyadath are a different matter. I knew you, Sulah, before you were ever born, through your ancestors. That is my gift, and Kija put it to use. Her and I, we found a path to a future in which the threat to this world was vanquished and we have done what we have done in order to ensure that future is a viable possibility. But the time-ways do not deal in certainty and the success of Kija’s vision and promise hinges on the choices of a few key players. You are one of those hinges, Sulah, you and the other Ilas Cyadath. Influence in the time-ways is not correlative to social rank or any other such mortal hierarchy. Believe me, Sulah N’Sehan, as you call yourself, when I tell you that the decisions you make, the person you choose to be – they matter. They are relevant.”

“Please, enough with the flattery. I’m feeling too cynical today.”

“You have chosen the butterfly as your personal sigil, have you not?” persisted the Oracle, “I assume because of its connections to the soul, the emblem of the individual spirit?”

“Something like that.”

“A potent symbol indeed, reaching beyond even those seminal meanings. Life is a fragile thing. It renews itself through death and decay even as new life is born. Death and birth, birth and death, death and birth. That is the cycle we’ve known since the beginning of time. But not all cycles are set, Sulah N’Sehan – not all destinies are marked down in our stars at birth. What you must understand is that Kija has chosen you not for what you were born to, or even who you are, but for the person you have the potential to become.”

“Kestan Firewind.”

He regarded her with eyes both surprised and suspicious. “What do you want from me? To join this Ilas Cyadath everyone is talking about? I think I’ll pass.”

“You may pass that fortune on to your brother, if you so choose, but I think you do not give yourself enough credit.”

Kestan let out a snorting chuckle. “Look, you don’t have to lay it out for me, okay? I get it. There’s some big end-of-all things war coming and you’re all plotting to hold a good hand when it all goes down. Kaythe is your key to Whitecrest so of course you want her under your thumb. Whatever my father’s plans, you’ve got your own and I’m sure I don’t fit so nicely into them. Well, that’s fine with me – I never asked to be part of any of this. Give me a few days and I’ll be out of your hair forever.” His eyes clouded darkly. “I just hope you know what you’ve got in her. Kaythe doesn’t deserve to be anyone’s puppet.”

“You’d like me to be straight with you, is that it?” asked the Oracle, “everything up front?”

“Well it would be nice, for once. I mean, do you really expect us to swallow all of this bull about Kija’s Great Promise?”

“If I were to tell you the whole truth, young mortal, not only would you not believe me, you would not understand a wit of it. But I will tell you this: you do not know how lucky you are.”

“If you’re trying to make me feel better by telling me about all the people who have it worse than I do, save your breath. I’m tired of apologizing for who I am.”

“Do not get presumptuous with me, young Firewind. Your people are ignorant enough of their heritage. Those of you with the True Blood are who you are because of a gambled sacrifice made long ago by your ancestors – a sacrifice for Kija. They became instruments of war, two souls in one, ever after to be subjugated to the beast within, the ancient carnivorous monster who phased its body to meld with theirs. And yet you, prince, were born different.”

“Different... that’s a polite way of putting it.”

“Whatever you have been taught otherwise, Kestan, the True Blood is its own curse. Your brother, who has the soul of a poet, is tormented by the monster that abides within him. You have the soul of a warrior but your monsters are all in your head. The Firewind blood within you has been checked and dominated by your humanity. As such, you have more control, more freedoms in terms of your self than your True Blood brethren can ever hope for. That friend, is evolution, not deformity.”

“Try telling that to my father.”

“The old cling to the precepts of their youth, that is ever the way of things. This is even so in terms of Kija. Change is never easy, or quick. And by change I mean revolutionary change, not the ebb and flow of natural cycles. When Kija made her plans and forged her promise, she did so on the strength of humanity’s most inborn innate cycles. Without these cycles, my gift would be useless. An Oracle cannot prophecy from chaos. But listen closely now, Firewind, and listen well. You may be the beginning of a new race. You have the power of choice and change. True change. Think on that, Kestan Brightwing, before you judge yourself too harshly. You say it is your wish that Kaythe not be made a puppet? In this, she would have no better champion at her side than you. This is not your destiny, this is your choice.”

They all stood silent and expectant before her, hanging their ears on the wind to catch her words. She had never gotten used to human pliancy to her pronouncements, the way they hungered for any scrap of insight, eager to attach some form of meaning to their lives. She knew she was manipulating them all for the sake of a friendship. How unfair of Kija to leave her alone during this time. Doubt kept seeping in and there was no one to reassure her. It was always worse when she was away from Tier Yirn, away from the tree. Moving amongst all these people wore her patience. Damn Kija for convincing her to do this – it felt so unnatural. She much preferred to be aloof to mortal machinations: an impartial observer, like the gods. Or rather, as the gods were supposed to be. The god-in-the-tree would surely interrogate her for hours when she returned, eager for any scrap of human contact she could pass on. And the weapon, the weapon... Kija had insisted it was necessary but so many time-ways only led to doom and darkness. The weapon frightened her more even than the bloodiest vision of war.

She wanted to tell them the truth, the whole truth. They deserved to know. But telling them could change the cycle, the carefully prepared time-way, and they would be lost before they began. There was naught to do but go forward.

“I have set tasks before you. I have reminded you of Kija’s Promise and of her conditions. For these next few months, you will be on your own. But if all goes well, we shall meet again in Lylyalanon, the City of Leaves, and toast each other during the Feast of Plenty. I wish you well and bless you all in the name of Kija. May the gods be with you, those whom Kija’s has chosen to be the Ilas Cyadath.”