

The Oracle: Part I

Duntorah

Larena was shocked from sleep yet again by her daughter's shrieks of terror. She wearily stumbled out of bed, making the aching trek to the small girl, only a few feet away, almost tripping over her crumpled up robe she had lazily discarded hours earlier. She bent over the sickly child, mustering the strength to grasp her and pull the pitiful, thrashing thing to her breast in an attempt to offer some comfort from the terrible nightmares haunting her dreams. But as all the other times, the mother was largely ignored and offered no relief. Through the exhaustion and fear in the atmosphere, Larena hardly registered the knock on the door, and only acknowledged the presence of another at the words: "She's arrived, and is ready for you".

These words brought some calmness to the woman, and she at last made the effort to stand and make her way to the door. Upon opening it, she saw the messenger making his way through the dark to a path leading away from the river and into the woods to the south, his thick, brown tail disappearing into the dense trees. Although she had made this walk many times before, Larena had never been so anxious of the destination before, and in the warm, windless night, she felt a chill through her bones like no other, making her fur stand on end. Finally, she ventured from her hut for the first time in over a week.

She followed the path through the woods, taking her time. Her daughter had finally calmed down, resting in her arms. The rocky trail bit into the soft pads on the bottoms of her feet, making her wish she had brought shoes with her. As she neared the clearing, the sun was already beginning its ascent into the sky, casting dancing orange lights on the large hut standing there. The trees around the clearing all bowed away from it, avoiding some unnatural force created by the strange twisted walls of roots growing out of the ground. The roots met with an overhanging roof made of thick, interwoven vines sprouting from the center, forming a hole from which thick smoke billowed into the sky. The entrance consisted only of a round hole facing the path, with a thick, blue curtain drawn across it. Duntorah leaned against the side of the entrance, arms crossed across his chest and ears folded back.

"You shouldn't keep her waiting, she might just turn you into a tree." He said, hiding a grin while gesturing to the fleeing foliage

around them. Larena glared at him. "I think you'll be relieved to hear what Trila has to say." His face became serious again. "She and I have travelled a long way to find some answers about your daughter." He said as she approached the hut.

Her expression lightened as she looked down, avoiding his gaze, and she crossed the threshold into the oracle's hut. The young girl's black eyes snapped open as they passed under the door way.

In the center, surrounding a large fire, the vines that formed the roof grew from the dirt to form a cage around the fire pit and tapered into a column before spreading outward like beams supporting the weight of the ceiling. Along the circular wall, cloths and trinkets dangled from bits of string, glittering like fiery stars in the warm light. A single flat wall partitioned a small section of the hut opposite from the entrance, broken by a wooden door with a heavy lock. The smoke smelled deceptively pleasant, and a taste of freshly cooked fish permeated the air. Larena let her daughter down, keeping her webbed hand in her own, still frightened as always by the distant look in her eyes. Without hesitation, the girl moved toward the dark robed figure gazing into the fire before them. Duntorah entered the hut and made his way to the back room. It was only after he shut the door behind him that the oracle finally looked from the flames to the girl and her mother.

"Ah, Larena. How nice to see you again. Elra, you've grown so much since I last saw you. You were still crawling around last your mother brought you to me." She said, her eyes showing the smile that her black beak could not.

"She didn't bring me to you, I brought her." She seemed ashamed.

"Yes, I suppose that is the case. But it matters not. You are here, and now I can help. Come, sit. You will find the fire to be comforting regardless of the hot weather we're having." She gestured to them with a scaly hand, bare of any sort of jewelry most other oracles seemed so fond of.

As they positioned themselves in front of the flames, Duntorah returned carrying a tray of various bottles, a pitcher, and a small glass cup. He immediately began mixing them together in the pitcher, producing a dark brown liquid. He poured it into the cup which he then grasped in his webbed hand, and held it in the fire. Magic had always made Larena uneasy, and to see him unharmed

by flames she could clearly feel the heat from only reinforced her mistrust of the craft.

“Elra,” the oracle said, staring at her, “I am going to draw the visions out of your mind. This is not going to be easy, for either of us. But I need you to be strong so that all of this can be over for you. Do you understand?”

She was staring at the black feathered woman, a look of wonder on her face as she nodded. “You look like the sky. You’re so blue.”

Trila looked at Larena, a look of shock on her face. “How long has she been saying things like that?”

“A few years now. One of the first things she said to me was that I glowed like the morning sun. Her ability to see people’s intentions frightened the other villagers more than anything else she’s done.”

“Rightfully so. Very few have such a gift, and I’ve never seen it manifest naturally, without the knowledge and will to develop it.”

Trila removed her thick dark robe, revealing her charcoal feathers, and two stubs from her shoulders sticking out under her shirt. She caught the woman’s gaze, nodding solemnly to her. “To prove our desire to aiding those on the land, we must be willing to burn our bridge to the sky. Now, no matter the temptation, my path leads in only one direction.”

Duntorah brought the glass back out of the fire, the liquid now as blue as the sky. He handed it to Elra. Much to her surprise, the drink was still quite cool. Her mother restrained herself from intervening, holding a worried look on her face. As the girl began to drink, Trila stood up and walked around the fire to her, placed a talon on each side of Elra’s head, closed her eyes, and a whirlwind assaulted the room, beating out the fire and plunging them all into darkness.

There came a gasp from Larena as she lost sight of her daughter. In the otherworldly blackness, she searched for the hole in the roof through which the morning sun should be shining, but it was lost. Chills began to overtake her, and frost formed in her fur. She strained to stand up but found she could not move a muscle. She attempted to call out, but found her muzzle held by the invisible hands of a giant. Then she felt it. The darkness bent and warped around her and she could feel things moving through it. They came

from behind, passed right through her, and continued forwards. She felt a misery in them, a sense of utter hopelessness as they sang without voices. The song was familiar, but she could not place it in her mind. The lyrics slipped from her memory like oil, and then a match touched the oil surrounding her, blinding her with the sudden light. In that moment, all which surrounded her became clear, and she could see the creatures marching in exodus towards the end of the world, disappearing over the edge.

She listened to them for hours, trying to make sense of the lyrics before the precession fell away from her, and she could see the whole march. They fled from some dark forest. As they made their way east, serpentine chains overtook them and flames erupted throughout the crowd. Uncountable numbers burned or were dragged into the forest, but the rest pressed on. From the crowd, ten figures began to glow. Seven of them made their way to the front, leading the crowd to the edge of the world. Three of them fell back. They kept the shackles and fires at bay, but as they approached the edge of the world, the rear of the crowd was overtaken. The flames and chains pushed to crowd to jump into the dark abyss beneath them, taking more victims who could not make the leap. In the end, the creatures either followed, perished, or were dragged away, and the light began to fade once again.

Larena panicked as the darkness encompassed her once more, breathing in ragged gasps. Somehow she could see her breath in the dark, lingering for only moments as a small fog before her in the cold. As she recovered, a warmth began to flow over her, thawing her bones and joints. She found herself floating in the abyss. Looking around, she caught sight of seven golden figures, shining too bright to see any features save for the wings spreading from the center figure behind all the others. They stood as if on an unseen platform, with millions of voices speaking in perfect unison.

“We give this vision to you. We will bring you here. We will save you.”

Larena had so many questions to ask, but before she could muster her own voice, they replied to an unheard question.

“She will be the mother, she will destroy us, and she will carry us out of the flames.”

Another pause brought silence to the air.

"Many will not, but it is too late to change that. You, at least, can set the pieces to save those who remain." It became clear to Larena they were not responding to her, but looking around she saw nobody else. "Yes, she will sacrifice herself, though not knowingly. Our time here is running short. Go to Aramontel; you will find more answers there, but know that time is of the essence."

With that, the glow began to fade and without that dominating light stars began to reveal themselves to her. She gasped at the beauty of it all. Never had she seen this many stars, and none of the familiar constellations could be found, but they still felt so familiar, so comforting, so close. The stars gradually grew larger, brighter, blinding her with their light. The whiteness completely engulfed her. As her eyes adjusted to the daylight, she found herself laying on the floor of the oracles hut once again, sunlight streaming in through the hole in the roof. Trila was grasping her head, eyes clenched tightly, and Duntorah was holding Elra. When Larena attempted to stand up, the pain in her head brought her back down, writhing on the ground.

After the pain subsided, she opened her eyes to see Trila sitting next to her. "Did you hear the voices as well?"

"What were they? Who were they?"

"I'm not sure, but the world is ending, and you and your daughter have important roles to play in the coming years; I do too. You need to take Elra somewhere safe, and I must go find answers. I will have Duntorah go pack your things for the trip you will be taking. Meanwhile, I must tell you the details of where you must go."

Larena pushed through the shock, "I... I don't understand. If the world is... oh god, there isn't anywhere that will be safe!" Tears were forming in her eyes as she began shaking uncontrollably. Trila attempted to put an arm around her, but was thrown off.

"NO!"

"Larena," her voice was calm, "you can not let despair keep you from fulfilling your duties."

"I have only one duty, and that is to keep Elra safe. Not to take part in your visions and prophecies."

"You will have a part in it whether you choose it or not. And your decision right here, right now, will decide the fate of us all."

Her voice was showing a hint of panic. She pleaded, “do as I say, or we will all suffer, including your daughter.”

The panicking women scrambled over to her daughter, who promptly backed away. Surprise showed on her face, hurt by this reaction. “Don’t you threaten my daughter, witch. You spin your illusions and cast your spells to try and manipulate us.” There was some uncertainty in her voice.

Duntorah chose this moment to intervene, locking eyes with her. His eyes were fierce and his voice stern as he talked down at her, “You saw what was in your daughter’s head. She has seen this many times before. And now Trila has brought it out. Don’t you dare call her a witch. She has done nothing but try to help you and Elra, and now you question her motives? Has what you’ve seen scared you so much that you can’t take care of your little girl?”

Larena lovingly at her daughter, noticing for the first time her eyes, now a bright green like her own. Larena’s voice began to mellow, “What did they mean when they said ‘she will sacrifice herself’? Who did they call the mother?” Trila closed her eyes, the answer weighing heavily on her mind. “You believe I was the one asking them questions.” She looked at Duntorah, a look of remorse on her face. “Duntorah was the one they spoke to. He asked them what my role would be, as well as yours, Elra’s, and his own.”

Lorena remained silent, fearing her misinterpretation had offended Trila. Duntorah stood up. His fists were clenched, and he walked aggressively to the small door, slamming it shut as he passed through. Trila looked back to the mother and daughter. She reluctantly began speaking again.

“Recall the three golden figures who stayed back to protect the crowd. I am one of them. In my quest to find the other nine, I will be forced to trade my life for another. Duntorah will be one of the seven, as will you and Elra. But it is your daughter, not you, that they said would be the mother. I am not sure what the rest of it means, but that is all I can know without making the trip to Aramontel.”

Holding Elra in her arms, the shocked woman contemplated the new information. So little said, but so much to take in. Finally she spoke, her voice calmer than before but now laced with regret, “You have done so much for us. Even as I fear and insult you. I don’t

know how I can ever repay your kindness and patience.”

“Take care of Duntorah for me, whenever you can. That will be enough. He and I have been through so much together.” A longing gaze pointed her beak towards the door. “He was the first person to come to me for knowledge, and the second, and the third. The young man was so thirsty for knowledge. I finally invited him to travel with me. It’s not even been a decade, but neither of us enjoys being away from the other.” The oracle took a deep breath, “now then, are you ready to leave?”

Larena looked at Elra with tearful eyes. “Yes, I’m ready.”

“Then let us make haste. I will send Duntorah to gather supplies, while I tell you where to go.”