

Prophecy

The more I stare into it, the uneasy I feel. I'm on the precipice, deep in the thicket of a jungle or perhaps wooded grove, and surrounded by trees taller than I am. The ground gives way into a gaping maw. I peer into it, feel the crunch of gravel and the texture of soft stone beneath my feet as it crumbles away into darkness. There's nowhere to set a rope, no path to climb down, no end in sight. I light a torch and hold it high, seeing embers flicker in the wind, and drop it into the abyss. The light is consumed before its time.

There's a rustling behind me. I whip around to face it, and...

The wind whistles past me. Did I fall? Was I pushed? Did I jump?

The sky closes all too soon. I struggle against force, and find my balance to land on my feet at the chasm's end.

I feel around in the darkness and find my fingers running over something thick and knotted, like the roots of a great tree. And there is a path. I can see a hazy green as my eyes adjust. And at the end of the tunnel, something dark and terrible, burning blisteringly hot.

I draw my blade.

"I will not let you take my world!"

It lunges at me, and I jolt awake.

Lula smacks her lips and turns over as I lay a gentle hand, tucking her in amidst the pillows and blankets we lavish ourselves with. The dawn is yet to break, and I cannot trouble her with such trifling matters as bad dreams.

But is it so trifling?

I am after my people after all. From fay creatures to the wickermen, we Drustvari are perhaps more superstitious than our forebears or our contemporaries. In most my sleeps I never dream; comfortingly drawn into silent slumber I merely drift atime before the morn. But the times I have dreamt I have dreamt strange omens, in signs and imagery concerningly close to what is soon to happen. It happened before the mists of Hel drew forth, when I dreamt of the Golden Gates of Valour crumbling under a deathly hand. It happened just before we heard tell of the disruption in the Titan's networks, and all the complications that came with solving the mystery of its affliction. As much as I dare to say it, seeing and remembering this dream so vividly... a tale of myself, facing down terrible burning darkness... I cannot help but believe it.

I stand up and gild myself in plate, energised to see it solved before the dawn, before my wife finds me missing and worries her dearest heart.

For as much as these omens might forebode a final battle, it is one I do not plan to lose.

When it comes to matters of the mystic, one must find an oracle.

And when one lacks an oracle, they go take whatever they can.

Erin spun in her chair around to me in the room at Halfhill's Lazy Turnip we had arranged to meet at, and did not hide her smirk as she knew I would be in her debt.

“Welcome, Valliant Knight,” she waxed lyrical, performatively, with a hint of jeer. “to this place where destiny is made.” She had put in some effort; that much I could admit. She drew starry curtains over the windows and rolled a thick velvet rug over the floor, yet perhaps making it look like the sort of parlour I would not wish to see Erin least of all in waiting for me dressed in a satin robe. I come over to the table by her and inspect the tools which she brought; a wand of some sort, refined Aether which I do recognise, and a crystal ball. I flick it with my finger, more to annoy her than anything.

Erin slaps my hand away. “Handling a woman’s orb? Shoo!”

“Oh, is that what we’re calling it? I thought it was a bowling ball.” I snark, playing her game all too easily.

“Since when have you ever gone bowling?” She flicks her hair away and prepares herself, dusting the Aether lightly over the crystal dome and casting some sort of queer spell with the wand, and then seems to take it more seriously.

“So.” She posits. “This sort of thing isn’t done by doing any magic words or weird finger movements, other than what I just did. Without an office I just had to quickly make sure we at least pretended to try to obfuscate anything looking back through this orb at us. Instead, it’s done by your mind. Considering you have the magical aptitude of a crusty sock even you can do it. But what you need to ask first is... what do you want to see?”

“I want to see the meaning of my dream.” I reply.

“You do realise you could just be making all this up, right? Some people are naturally clairvoyant... but I don’t think that’s you. No offence. You’re just too closed off. That’s why you don’t dream normally.”

“If I don’t dream normally,” I look at her and fold my arms. “Then surely that ratifies the significance of the few dreams I do have.”

“Okay, but scrying isn’t just some... easy stare into it thing, okay? It’s gonna be vague. Just trying to warn you.”

“I’m ready. If it doesn’t show me anything, we can put it to rest.”

Erin snuffed the candles in the room with a flick of her wrist, and in an instant we are plunged into darkness, only the thin light of the orb and my reflection staring back at me. The darkness consumes the orb, and images shift into blurry shapes. Golds and browns, an everburning flame, staunch and zealous, against clawing dark hands. But this symbolism, this imagery... why am I seeing it? I am not religious, yet it reminds me all too much of what other Knights say about their duties. Good and Evil perhaps? Yet then why the flame? Why the fingers? The orb goes cloudy.

“Focus!” Erin calls. “Think about your dream, imagine yourself back in it... where does it lead you?”

The cliff... the cave... falling... the burning darkness... I force away visions of the other dreams I had in times past.. I stand against the burning darkness, silver against night, hold back its advance...

And then it clears.

The sun dawns, and I see amber trees in a mountain thicket, starkly contrasted by the rough waves below. And on that peninsula, I see in the distance, His high hall.

“Hey...”

“Hey!”

SMACK!

I reel as Erin slaps me on the back of my head with surprising force, though supposedly with a solid enough skull she didn't come out uninjured either.

“Sorry.” She scoffs, with a quick exhale from the nose that sounds a bit like ‘pfft’. She nurses her hand and betrays a bit of worry for me. “You got drawn into the orb. No matter what I did could snap you out of it. Well, other than that...”

“Drawn in?”

“Yeah, like you were there for a good half-hour. What the hell did you see?”

“I saw where we need to go. My vision was real. And now I have to follow it. It lead me back to Stormheim.”

“Why though? What’s so special about this vision?” Erin asks, intelligent but always unenlightened. I stand up to leave, and spare her the long answer.

“Because I am a Hero. And I believe I am once again being called to save the land.”

What the Old Stones Tell

Only upon her insistence, I followed Erin through a portal which led us to our destination. I scorn myself for only ever coming when the need is great. Though still dark, I feel that mountainous thrum from the cliffs above, the crash of the waves against the longship docks. It's powerful, it speaks to me. The ruggedness, unforgiving in its beauty, and I watch a streak of lightning carve viciously through the sky at the call of the Thorignir.

Erin bandages her hands in that strange runic spellcloth she was trying to practice with me the other day, and looks around sightlessly. "I hope I dropped us in the right place..." "Judging by the light of the late moon bouncing off those statues" I say, as I point to the great gilded monolith of a winged warrior, "you have placed us just where we need to be. I will speak to Faye. Are you coming?"

I walk, and Erin jogs along. "What's her deal? You and Lula went to go see her the other day but I didn't really get what was going on." She asks as she tries to keep pace, turning herself backwards to talk to me in the eyes from in front, falling over a stone before blinking back up to my side while trying to pretend it never happened.

The night draws to its end, but even still I can see shieldmaidens and smiths in their forges readying themselves for the challenges ahead. "Skold-Ashil is the home of the Ashildir, a clan of Vrykul women who are reverent to their goddess- Eyir. Every year they conduct the Tournament of Valour to determine who will be raised to Eyir's side as one of her Valkyra, championing the values of Valour and Glory."

Erin snorted and seemed to gauge the hue of my armour against the statues. "Sounds like something you'd fit right into then." There's a little snicker that comes out from her, like she's said something scandalous. But it rather wasn't funny at all.

"Lula and I did participate in the tournament once last year, about this time. And we were close to winning it too. 'Till there was a raid from a mist-shrouded longship, captained by a spirit calling himself King Håkon. I tried to stop him but... I couldn't. Not at that time. Skold-Ashil was razed in his lust for conquest." We passed by battered buildings still burned and butchered, in the old town where repairs hadn't or couldn't be made. A chilling aura of death still pervaded it.

Erin's tone changed. "And Faye is from here?"

"Aye. Faye's mother was the Queen of the Ashildir, or whatever they call their matriarchs. She has done her best to rebuild this place for all of us, and her faithfulness could do us well in deciphering why Stormheim appeared in that scrying. I must do better, than to only visit her under these means."

"So she's a queen then? Am I gonna have to bow to her or kneel?"

"You should. But only because she has earned that right."

The longhouse was where Faye took her seat, and it was a remarkably meagre domicile for someone who should be afforded far more respect and stature. She sat at the end of the table with some fish and bread, clearly bothered by something too at this early an hour. I would have worried about our intrusion had she not quite readily moved from her seat to find me in the flesh.

“Alaina”, she greets me with a smile. “It heartens me to see you. But you come so early in the morning.”

“I do, but only for dire circumstance. I had a vision of a great darkness that...”

Erin watches with disinterest as I explain to honourable Faye about my dream or vision, and mocks the tone of our voice or our manner of speaking. I ignored her from then on.

“Your vision concerns me, Alaina.” Faye says and walks with me to a small chapel to Eyir held in a side room adjacent to the hall. “Eyir seems concerned of late too, just as she was when the void’s sickness plagued her altar. I do not know what she wishes to do but... perhaps I can ask her? If there truly is something happening, she should tell us.”

“I trust your faith and intuition more than I do magical orbs and vague dreams. Please, let us speak with her.”

Faye knelt down, though as tall as she was her frame sat nearly at my height when she brought herself so low. The altar was made of a metallic stone, shining like bronze light, with strange shapes and carvings etched in. Lula understands it better than I, but she knows and tells me these things are not bound by faith at all- but by science. It is through technological means the Titans bring their gifts to us. But when I see people like Faye, I consider maybe it is not so simple.

She kneels in front of the altar as it spins to life, and begins to pray to Eyir, illuminated by the golden light of what Lula would have called a console. But Eyir’s words are for Faye and Faye alone, and I do not hear whatever it is they say. Soon after, all the lights fade. Faye stands before me.

“I am sorry Alaina. Eyir’s words... she says they are too important. Only those with... only her chosen may listen. It is not that she does not trust you, just...”

I wave my hand, perhaps hiding a tinge of disappointment knowing for all I had done for Stormheim it may amount to such little... “No matter. That she had anything to say at all proves me right. I shall continue looking. Thank you.”

I turn, and hear her call.

“Wait! Eyir is bound by her duty to not share this information, but there is one who likely knows. Do you remember Vydhar?”

The name rings a bell, but I do not remember.

“He is the one in the runewood, a mystic mind bound in oak. He knows what the old stones tell. Maybe he can help.”

Faye always does her best by us, even for what protocols she finds her Goddess bound to.

“Thank you, and thank you again. I promise next we meet, next time! It will be for friendship.”

The trek to the runewood is long. Not by means of distance by any circumstances, but by time. Erin demands we take a break for food, though rays of sun have begun to creep from beyond the Gates of Valour and I fear our time is short- I promised to be home before dawn, after all. I check my equipment while Erin insists on preparing some sort of noodle dish from a pre-cooked brick in a boiling pot. I travelled light, not wanting to wake Lula by rummaging through drawers and cupboards. Besides my armour and blade I brought with me a single potion- though it truly is all I could ever need. The Philter of Evened Odds, brewed from Gryphon's beak and briarthorn by combining two measures of liquid- one burning, and one ice cold. It grants me speed and reflexes enough to end a battle in a single strike no matter the opponent I face- and I hope I will not need it.

Erin drinks her noodles from the cup and prods me incessantly with questions.

"This vision means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

"Why would it not? This is what I dedicate my life to. The protection of others, the battles that decide the fate of the world."

Sluuuurp...

Erin is obnoxious, even at the best of times.

"Sho..." She asks with a half-full mouth. "You really believe that stuff?"

"I do. Is there a problem with that?"

"Not at all. Hell, half the time, you got me believing it too. It's easier for me to complain and say I'm not built for this shit when people like you go around saying that you actually enjoy it. But that's just it, isn't it? What's easier to believe? Like this vision. You already started calling it that instead of just a bad dream, like you're convinced.

What if it turns out to be nothing?"

I squint at her through the flames. "It won't."

"Riiight... but wouldn't it be better for everyone if there wasn't a cataclysmic battle for the fate of the world on the horizon? Trust me, me and the rest of the world hate that shit. We're tired of it. Lula is, too. Last thing she needs is you flinging yourself head first into the end times. Wouldn't it be easier to just ignore it?"

"I cannot ignore the truth, Erin. When..."

"If."

"When, this battle comes to pass, I intend to be the one defending people from its worst effects. And that includes you."

She looks at me scouringly.

Maybe she's more cunning than I consider.

"Do you want to save the world, or to be the one saving it?"

"If I do the first, then I shall not spurn the second."

The runewood sprawled with thick roots and mossy obelisks etched with so many symbols and glyphs I could not read. Erin pulls me over to some carved into the stump of a fallen oak. "I actually did study runes for a bit... the older they are, the less diverse the meanings get."

"You can read these?" I ask, a hint of surprise in my voice stemmed only by the fact i'd rather not give her credit for anything surely any middling mediocre mage could muster.

"Yeah, the older it is the closer it is to what I studied... thankfully you brought us to somewhere basically brimming with ancient magic.

They're all pretty basic concepts too."

She points to the symbols, one for each word.

"Old wise tree. Reckon that means Vydhar is close?"

"I hope so."

The largest oaks are always the oldest, and I presume Vydhar must be the oldest of the trees here. I do not know what to expect, until I smell the stench of dark magicks.

We watch from the thicket as two Vrykul, a robed one and one with axes, carve malign symbols into the bark of a tree with the face of an elderly man.

"That must be Vydhar... and he is being corrupted!" I grit my teeth. "A ritual... we can stop it."

Erin tugs at my arm. "Wait. If we give it a moment, maybe we can figure out what it is exactly they're doing!"

I charge forward. I don't care, there is no explanation that would make me face this like a coward.

"HARK!"

My voice rings through the woods, and they turn their attention to me.

I brandish an inch of silver from Valour's sheath.

"Stop whatever vile ritual you are conducting, or I will make you."

Vydhar groans as the glyphs bleeding his sap surely drain his strength. "They... came... to..."

The robed Vrykul pushes the ax-wielding one towards me and returns to his damnable work. *"I will have the answers I seek. See to it they do not interfere."*

"So it is to be a battle?" I stare a foot and a half above me, a mountain from the mountains with a sharpened carving steel in each.

He grins with delight.

I shake my head and draw.

"You shall find no valour in this battle.

My name is Lady Alaina Annabella-Brianne Tinkerbolt-Wyrther, **and you will not stand in my way!**"

Sparks dance in the dawnlight as his axes launch towards me, his movements fast and greedy, easily readable. I bat them aside with the turn of my blade and turn my stance high, but feint low, drawing my sword down aside my body to lay a cut that digs deep into his arm and scratches the bone. When I lay a strike like this on any other foe they reel and run with their tail between their legs, but bloodthirsty and battle-hungry followers of Odyn believe only glory waits for them in death and they can never be afraid of it. The next strike of his I parry hits harder than before and rattles me, crushing parts of my armour as I stumble to recover.

"Damn it... pain only makes you stronger? A berserker?"

He did not wait to answer my theory, as he brings both blades down onto my head with a mighty crash I can only barely avoid.

They smash into the ground and cause a quake that forces me ever further back, all the while the ritual on Vydhar continues. I look to my belt for my potion, but before I can drink it another strike comes that forces me to retreat, now taking a wound to my shoulder that makes it difficult to wield in a two-handed grip. Dark magicks begin to swirl around Vydhar. Can I stop this?

From a portal launched a thin band of runecloth, which coiled around the neck of the runemaster Vrykul and choked him! He fought and struggled against it as the dark magicks around Vydhar subsided, until he used his still-insurmountable strength to pull the cloth and with it bring Erin through the portal.

“Took you a while to help out!” I jibe her, and she grunts as she gets up. “At least I was trying to think of a plan!”

“No plan survives contact with the enemy, Erin. You must learn to think on your feet!” Now with another party at play, I find myself able to turn this around. The longer my battle with the berserker stretches onwards, the stronger he will become- and though trained I do not possess infinite stamina. I should end this quick!

Wielding Valour in one hand, I search my foe for his least armoured spot, and aim with vicious accuracy.

Erin, meanwhile, struggles with her foe. When she said she was untrained in battle, ‘not meant for this shit’, she certainly meant it. Her bindings do little to trap or ensnare her stronger opponent without the element of surprise- as I tried to tell her- and I see her already bleeding from her nose.

She plants her staff in the ground and turns serious, and in a series of flashes darts around the runemaster to bind him fully before he can release himself.

She calls an incantation.

*“Silence the song,
Tie the threads,
The spoken spell must go unsaid...!”*

She vomits blood from her mouth and nose, struck by that terrible affliction of her body failing her from casting too many spells at the worst moment as I still try to find my opening, and she crumbles to the floor.

The Runemaster kicks her away without care, and a flicker of doubt crosses my mind that we might fail here. But as the Runemaster raises his hands and cries his own incantation, surely one that could inflict death upon us all, nothing happens.

Maybe Erin’s spell had worked!

There’s a moment of hesitation in both Vrykul.

“Erin, I doubted you one too many times!”

Before the next swing comes, I down the philter.

The berserker’s axe slows and seems to freeze before my eyes. Rays of morning sun shine through autumn leaves as they stand motionless in the air, mid-fall. I spy the runemaster’s stone-face, as I lean my head to the side and know the potion’s effects have taken place. And I do not take any chances.

With one dancing slash, I carve through both foes at once, a trail of silvered steel sparkling where I had swung. And just as soon as they began, the potions effects end. A shallow cut on the berserker's skull ebbs blood from a flat-bladed strike that rung so forcefully it sent him unconscious in an instant. And as for the runemaster? I could not afford him threatening Vydhar or anyone again with such rituals. One aimed cleave was enough to bring both of his hands severed from the wrist.

I go to Erin as my foes lie behind me, and heft her over my shoulder.

"Wait..."

Vydhar has begun to recover from the spell, as his bark grows over and consumes the runes that bound him.

"What did they want?" I ask.

"They sought knowledge... just as you do. The knowledge to prevent calamity."

"Calamity? So I am right? I saw a dream, a vision, a blistering darkness which led me here." Vydhar's brows furrowed.

"You are not the only one who has experienced them."

"Tell me what they mean then, wise one. I ask of your knowledge honestly and openly. I will not bind you to tell me against your will."

"Yet you still earn this right not by kindness, but by conquest.

Here is your omen, if you must have it, as was written on the oldest stones, and felt by my deepest roots.

*In the Land of Briars,
A hero born, a child,
Who learned what it means to fight and flee.*

*In the Land of Storms,
A hero rises, a champion,
Who learned what it means to fight and fall.*

*In the Land of Steel,
A hero returns, a chieftain,
Who learned what it means to fight and fathom.*

*In the Land of Light and Dark
A hero resents, a chance,
Who must learn she need be no hero at all."*

I give him one reply.

"I will prove your prophecy wrong."